DAEDALUS

Editorial workshop for the role-playing hobby

NEW GAME

Lacuna

A mysterious game, page 5
by Jared Sorensen

PLUS

Inside,

Cyberpunk Sorcerer supplement, page 21
by Clinton R. Nixon

Fourth Millennium

An in-depth preview, page 32
by James Maliszewski
& Kevin Brennan

And much more. . . .

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Daedalus
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Starry frontiers

Daedalus examines science fiction in role-playing games

Looking for articles, artwork for Spring 2004

Daedalus is looking for contributors for the spring 2004 issue. If you would like to write an article, showcase a game, review a game, or provide artwork for the upcoming issue, please contact editor Matt Snyder: matt@chimera.info. The deadline for contributions is March 31, 2003.

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Game publishers, please contact Daedalus Editor Matt Snyder (matt@chimera.info) for information about ads for your game or product in this e-zine.

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Daedalus seeks editorial team

Putting together a free e-zine with volunteer contributors is a lot of work. To see that DAEDALUS keeps soaring, I'm looking to assemble an editorial team.

If you have interest in any of the following duties and can dedicate time for a quarterly zine, please contact me at matt@chimera.info

- Copy editing
- Advertising direction
- Editing & content direction (contacting writers, handling photos, etc.)
- Regular column writing

I'm always open to ideas. Share them!

—Matt Snyder
DAEDALUS Editor

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Out of character

Letters to the editor

Send a letter

Please send letters! We want Daedalus to include the voice of its readers. If you have a comment, critique or question about anything in this issue, send a letter via email to: matt@chimera.info

I'll buy that for a shekel!

T.S. Luikart's article, "You Do What for a Living?" in your premiere issue was very interesting and informative on a number of topics. However, his suggestions about the dearth of both precious metals and coinage generally in ancient times seem to me to have failed to recognize some history. Perhaps this is because he is focused on Europe and does not go earlier than Rome, but coinage was part of the system for a very long time before that.

As I explain in my Gaming Outpost article, Game Ideas Unlimited: Cash, there was an intermediate step between the early barter economy and the use of minted coinage such as the Romans had. This was the age of the shekel in the Middle East, but it existed elsewhere as well. The shekel was indeed a coin, weighing about half an ounce, made usually of silver, sometimes of gold. It was treated very much as a barter item, in that merchants were willing to trade goods for goods or for shekels. However, a shekel was not worth its value because it was a coin, but because of its weight. In a sale using shekels, the merchant would produce a balance scale and place a weight on one side as the number of shekels, each weighing about half an ounce, that the buyer had to place on the other side. The coins might have different weights individually, but when the scale balanced, that was enough silver, or gold, to close the deal. This became a common means of transacting business long before there were empires, and these metals were apparently considerably more plentiful than Mr. Luikart suggests.

As my article explains, minted coinage was an effort to get beyond weighing the coins. The Roman government made coins which it certified had a specific weight of metal of a specific purity, and this notion of governments stamping their seals on coins to certify their value by weight of metal remained the standard until the mid-1960s, when the United States finally stopped making silver coins.

Now, I am the first to admit that there are sometimes absurd amounts of coinage floating around in my fantasy games, but as my wife said when she read the article, who cares? The amounts might not be strictly historical, but there is evidence for ancient civilizations trading in vast amounts of precious metals in the form of coinage, without the benefits of government minting. I suspect that the treasure troves in The Arabian Nights were envisioned to be this sort of coin from truly ancient times; and those are the fantasies many of us are playing, even if they've been strongly westernized.

I would like to commend T.S. Luikart on his otherwise excellent and insightful article, particularly in regard to the inflationary impact of treasure influx. I recall one of my players commenting that whenever his party got around to dumping their silver and copper on the market it was probably going to result in a devaluation of the coins, so I think his ideas are quite sound and worth considering.

Thank you for the wonderful e-zine, and I look forward to the next installment.

—*M. Joseph Young*

GM se quois

Congratulations on the issue. I read all of the articles with interest, but Eddy Webb's struck me in particular.

He says that a role-playing game is not a game. And yet, a little later on, he says:

> *Instead of explaining to players why they should call you the Great High and Mighty Grand Poobah every time they want to spend their experience points (excuse me, "Improvement Traits"), can we forget the*

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FROM THE EDITOR

Pointing toward science fiction in role-playing games

Matt Snyder

Matt Snyder is editor and creator of DAEDALUS. He designed *Dust Devils* an award-winning indie role-playing game for the Western genre. Matt is working on new games for his Chimera Creative imprint currently, including *Nine Worlds* and *Dreamspire*. Matt lives in Iowa with his wife and daughter.

Welcome to the second issue of DAEDALUS. If you're a lover of science fiction, this is your issue.

For reasons no doubt related to the history of this hobby, science fiction has often played second fiddle to the fantasy genre. We have scores of fantasy games to play, from the common *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy to modern supernatural fantasy and beyond. I'm a lover of the rich genre.

But, I'm also a lover of science fiction, which is also very diverse. I started this issue with the naive thought that the great and respected literary tradition of science fiction has been under-represented in the role-playing hobby. This issue forced me to eat my words, but at least I also helped contribute to better representation!

Science fiction is not easily defined. I learned that the hard way in college, where I took classes from a fantastic professor named Brooks Landon, a science-fiction scholar and afficionado. Brooks reminded our Science Fiction literature class about what Writer Damon Knight said: "Science fiction is what we point to when we say it." I'll go along with that. (I had to for the final paper!) There are a few things I'd like to point to in this issue.

For starters, DAEDALUS includes a new game by designer Jared Sorensen. *Lacuna* is a brilliant little game in the tradition of Phillip K. Dick. Its post-modern approach challenges players to confront a hidden reality.

I can also point to Clinton R. Nixon's *Inside*. This *Sorcerer* supplement transforms the game's intense supernaturality into intense technology, complete with virtual "daemons" and even UNIX commands as game mechanics! The cyberpunk supplement does an admirable job of injecting science fiction into a *Sorcerer* framework.

The online community has anticipated *Fourth Millennium*, which debuts in this issue. This in-depth preview reveals a rich setting, filled with sciences soft and hard.

And there's more. John Wick lets us peer into his workshop, where he's crafting a new space opera game. Ralph Mazza talks about swashbuckling robots in his new game design, *Robots and Rapiers*. Eddy Webb and Jesse Noller give us the scoop on *Midway City*. Neel Krishnaswami gets rid of the {TECH} with a clever technique, and Emily Dresner-Thornber launches a salvo of ideas for your science fiction games.

There is much more to point at, science fiction and otherwise, in this issue. With apologies to Damon Knight, "Fascinating, useful stuff is what I point to when I say DAEDALUS."

Enjoy the issue! Ω

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, CONTINUED

> *pedigree of the haphazard technical terms we've developed over the years, and just call you the "GM?"*

I would point out to Eddy that GM is, of course, short for "Game Master." If RPGs are not games, why should the person running them be called game masters?

My point is not to be snide or even to disagree with him. But, he seems to assume that we should just slavishly adopt the terms used in one or another role-playing game, without thinking that perhaps some of the other terms bandied about are better. And, depending on the game, using a different term for a GM might be intentional -- depending on the game, there is a vast (and possibly important) difference between Dungeon Master, Game Master, Narrator, and "Great High and Mighty Grand Poobah."

—*Stephen Martin*

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***Lacuna* by Jared A. Sorensen**

Jared A. Sorensen is an award-winning game designer from New England. In the time he has left, Jared runs Memento Mori Theatricks (www.memento-mori.com) where he sells games involving ghosts, dinosaurs and Mexican wrestling … though not necessarily all at the same time.

"This is a game planet."
– William S. Burroughs

Lacuna Part I. The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City

By Jared Sorensen
Illustration by Manning Krull

Special thanks to Michael Gentry and Joshua Neff, who acted as my unwitting accomplices — Jared Soren

"The first thing, the very first thing you have to understand about this entire blessed situation is that of the nature of the Mystery. Without this knowledge, you might as well be pissing into a bottomless bucket. Without this knowledge, nothing else is going to make any sense. The Mystery is the key."

About this Game

This game (henceforth called *Lacuna*, for brevity's sake) pits the players against madmen and serial killer; individuals too dangerous to allow to exist in our reality.

This game is also a puzzle. A puzzle where some of the pieces may be missing. This is intentional, though not all discrepancies that may appear are the result of careful planning. Some are the result of not enough sleep, too much caffeine and hours of frantic typing. Others are simply *there*. The Perfection of Imperfection.

Soemtkimes teh kjeys gert stliuck bduyt yueou cvban sthiill rsrjfad betsdkween tdhe lieness.

Still, there's a great deal in this game that I simply do not wish to share with you.

It is highly encouraged that prospective Game Masters read through the entire game before playing. It is also highly encouraged that prospective players read through the system and character creation sections and let the GM fill them in on any other details on a need-to-know basis.

It is not necessary to *understand* the game in order to play it. If you encounter any "blank spaces," fill them in as you see fit. There is an answer, but there's a chance that it's not the one you want. Proceed with caution.

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*** Start of Sanctioned Player's Section ***

System Mechanics

Lacuna uses a system light on rules for specific situations and heavy on player and GM input.

Primary Attributes

The primary attributes used Lacuna don't cover specific, easily-defined traits (like strength, agility, charisma). Instead, the game uses four abstract attributes that describe broad areas of ability. Having an abstract system of attributes helps players to think about what their characters are actually doing, rather than just relying on a simple statistic to "define" who their character is and what they're capable of doing.

Below are the four primary attributes, their definitions, and situations where they would be used. Also included are keywords that could be used to describe someone with either expertise proficiency or deficiency in that attribute.

Force

This attribute measures physical conditioning and the ability to commit random acts of violence.
Uses: Brawling, climbing, resist torture, breaking objects, shooting someone
Proficiencies: Yard-Monster, tenacious, stoic, ripped, deadly, sadistic, ruthless
Deficiencies: Spineless, invalid, wimp, sickly, weak, fragile, Mama's Boy, quitter

Talent

Coordination, creativity, and intellect are covered by this attribute.
Uses: Invention, balance, painting, computer hacking, dancing, dart-throwing
Proficiencies: Brainy, artistic, smart as a whip, graceful, elegant, ingenious
Deficiencies: Clumsy, ineffectual, boring, moron, all-thumbs, predictable, insipid

Instinct

This primitive, animalistic attribute governs perceptive abilities, force of will and intuition.
Uses: Sensing danger, hiding, tracking, gambling, discerning truth from lies
Proficiencies: Wily, feral, iron-willed, alert, centered, sly, clear-headed, calm
Deficiencies: Dull, ignorant, vacuous, tourist, guileless, frazzled, naïve, loud-mouth

Access

This attribute deals with the acquisition, management and exchange of resources.
Uses: Bribery, research, memorization, finances, negotiation
Proficiencies: Sexy, magnetic, pack-rat, snoop, shrewd, rolling in dough
Deficiencies: Forgetful, destitute, obnoxious, odious, untrustworthy, lazy

Attribute Keys

Each of the four character attributes is marked with an attribute key that measures the skill of the character in that area and the die rolling scheme to use when performing actions of a certain type.
Impaired (I): Roll two dice (only pertains to Force rolls in special cases)
Deficiency (-): Roll four dice, discard highest die
Nominal (0): Roll three dice
Proficiency (+): Roll four dice, discard lowest die
Expertise (E): Roll four dice

Task Resolution

When performing any action, first determine what attribute is to be used. Roll three six-sided dice, modified by that attribute key, and total the results.

If the total is between 7-9, the player nets a *Mediocre* success.

If the total is between 10-13, the action's success is *Nominal*.

If the total is 14+, the player achieves an *Exceptional* success.

Most actions require a Nominal success. In these cases, a Mediocre result achieves a minor victory and an Exceptional success nets the best result possible. If the player gets a better-than-intended result, their action may be upgraded to match the better result.

After a successful roll, the player gains a number of Challenge Points equal to the highest target number attained (7 points for Mediocre, 10

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points for Nominal, 14 points for Exceptional). The player should keep track of Challenge Points gained using each attribute (for example, Force Challenge Points can only be used to increase the Force attribute or to augment Force-related die rolls).

Heart Rates

Because of the nature of a Mystery Agent's work, physical trauma is not really an issue. Instead, injury and stress and general loss of control can lead to an elevated heart rate, and this can lead to complications that may put the agent at risk.

All Mystery Agents begin their assignments with a resting heart rate of around 70 bpm for men and 75 bpm for women. Whenever the dice are rolled to use an attribute, the total is added to the agent's heart rate (this includes the multiple rolls made when accepting a risk multiplier). When agents are within their target heart rate, they begin to gain modifications to their die rolls. Once the maximum heart rate is reached, the agent is in danger of physical harm. The player has two choices: either eject their agent from the mission or continue.

Note that ejecting in a non-emergency situation requires a successful Access roll.

If the player opts to continue, that player must make a Mediocre Force roll. If the roll fails, reduce the character's Force by one attribute key. Another Force roll must be made every time the agent's heart rate increases by 10 bpm or more. Each time, the agent's TN increases by one level (from Mediocre to Nominal to Exceptional).

If the Force attribute is ever lowered to an attribute key of Impaired (I) then the agent must roll a 10 or higher (a Nominal success) on 2d6 or die of a heart attack. If the roll is successful, the agent is forced to eject from the mission (due to medical intervention by technicians back home).

Mystery Agents are trained to control their heart rates through meditation and other mental exercises. If the Agent is at rest and not undergoing any kind of outward stress, the player makes a generic Talent roll and subtracts the total from the Agent's heart rate. This cannot be done once the Agent has gone above their maximum heart rate.

Challenge Points

Challenge Points may be used to permanently upgrade an attribute or to temporarily increase an attribute for one roll.

- Spend 150 Challenge Points to permanently upgrade an attribute key of - to 0
- Spend 300 Challenge Points to permanently upgrade an attribute key of 0 to +
- Spend 500 Challenge Points to permanently upgrade an attribute key of + to E

To modify an attribute key for one die roll, spend 1/10 the amount it would normally take to modify that attribute. For example: it would cost 15 points to temporarily upgrade an attribute from – to 0.

Risk Multipliers

Usually, a roll is successful if the target number is met or exceeded on a roll of the dice. Players can increase the difficulty of an action (and thus the reward) by accepting a risk multiplier. The risk multiplier increases the number of times that the player must roll the dice for that action.

Failing any of these rolls results in a failure for the action, regardless of how many of the rolls were successful.

There are two benefits for accepting a risk multiplier. The first is strictly a style thing: each successful roll enables the player to "amp" up the action a few degrees, allowing the character to perform extreme actions and bold stunts.

The second benefit (more valuable in a game sense) is that player can earn a significant amount of challenge points. If successful on every roll, the player multiplies the risk multiplier by 10 and gets that many Challenge Points for the roll.

The danger of a risk multiplier (besides the lowered chance of success) is that even if a single roll fails, all the rolls must be made and added to the agent's Heart Rate.

Combat

There are no granular combat or initiative systems in Lacuna. When a player wishes to shoot

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someone (for example), the action is declared and rolled as normal. The target number is determined by the action, the desired outcome and the methods used. The GM is the final arbiter of combat, which is as good a reason as any to avoid senseless acts of random violence.

A fistfight is the easiest kind of combat roll to adjudicate. A Mediocre success is superficial (a miss, a glancing blow, whatever…it's not enough to do any damage). Nominal damage is enough to stagger your opponent (to either give yourself time to run or a better shot at a knock-out) and an Exceptional success knocks the sucker out.

Guns and knives are good at killing people and injure people quite easily. If an agent shoots someone with a handgun with the intent to kill someone, the player rolls their Force attribute. A Mediocre success injures the target. A Nominal success kills or otherwise incapacities the target (GM's discretion). An Exceptional success is an instant take down (the player decides whether it's lethal or not).

Shooting a gun out of someone's hand (for example) is another thing entirely. The Talent attribute is used and an Exceptional result is required for this difficult task. A Mediocre success will hit (perhaps kill) the target! A Nominal success will miss the target or hit the target, causing him to drop the weapon.

There are no hit points or other measurements for non-player characters. If someone is injured, it's purely a "special effect" and doesn't have any in-game effect. There are also no botches. A failed result means that the GM ignores the system and decides what happens.

If a player accepts a risk multiplier for their action, they get to describe (in however much gory detail they desire) exactly what happens during the fight.

NPC Actions

Non-player characters (ie: Hostile Personalities —a.k.a. "HP's"—or other Personalities) don't have attributes. If an HP attacks an agent, assume that unless the agent does something to oppose the HP, that agent is going to get hurt.

Agent vs. Agent Combat

It's been known to happen, especially when things get hot and heavy. If an agent fights another agent, the attacker makes a normal attribute roll. Any Challenge Points are added to the defender's heart rate. Then, the defender may respond. This continues back and forth until the combat is over. The GM may opt to decide which agent's "turn" it is to attack if the players use especially good (or poor) judgment once the blood starts to flow.

Mystery Agents

"When one is a Mystery Agent, a lot (and I mean a lot) has to be taken at face value and a kind of "come-what-may" attitude. To be perfectly frank, it's mushroom work – you're fed bullshit and kept in the dark. Faith is not something that can be taught in a training manual (contrary to the opinions of some religious institutions)."

Agent Creation Checklist

____ Establish Psuedonym
____ Establish Age
____ Establish Sex
____ Write down Clearance (Blue)
____ Determine Attribute ratings
____ Determine Mentor (modify attributes if necessary)
____ Use keywords to define areas of strength or weakness
____ Write down Resting Heart Rate by sex and fitness level
____ Write down Target Heart Rate by age and applicable bonus
____ Write down Maximum Heart Rate by age
____ Define personal Quirk

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Name

All Mystery Agents are assigned a pseudonym on their first day with the Company. As per Company regulations, pseudonyms are surnames derived from occupational titles (i.e.: Stewart, Warner and Chessman). A partial list of pseudonyms can be found in Appendix I: Agent Pseudonyms. Either select one not currently in use by another character or roll two ten-sided dice to randomly generate a number between 01 and 00 (100).

Age

The age requirement for employment in the company is limited to men and women between the ages of 20 and 60. Like gender, an agent's age affects his or her heart rate. Roll two six-sided dice to generate your agent's Base Age, then roll two more six-sided dice and add the total to your agent's Base Age.

Starting Age

Die Roll	Base Age
2	18
3-4	22
5-6	28
7	32
8-9	38
10-11	42
12	47

Sex

The Company enforces a strict policy of gender equality in the workplace and hires both men and women as Mystery Agents. In the game, there is a slight difference in the resting heart rates of men and women but this is the only game mechanics difference between the two choices.

It is not required, but it is recommended that players create characters that are of the same gender.

Note: Fraternization is not tolerated by the Company.

Attribute Keys

Each of a character's four attributes are rated by "keys" rather than numbers. Each type of key corresponds to a different die rolling technique to be used when making attribute rolls.

A rating of *Impaired (I)* means that the agent is incapacitated for some reason (usually injury). This rating only applies to the Force Attribute when an agent is injured.

A rating of *Deficient (-)* means that the agent is of limited ability in this area.

A rating of *Nominal (0)* signifies that the agent's achievement in this field is average or "as expected."

Agents with a rating of *Proficient (+)* show better than average ability in an area and agents that far exceed expectations have a rating of *Expertise (E)*.

Assign two Attributes at a rating of Nominal (0), one at Deficient (-) and one at Proficient (+). Or select all four at Nominal (0). Your character's attributes may change depending on that character's Mentor (explained below).

Although they provide no in-game benefit, feel free to assign keywords to any attributes in which the agent shows Expertise, Proficiency or Deficiency.

Mentor

All agents are assigned a Mentor at the start of their careers in the Company. For several months, the Mentor assists the trainee (and vice versa) while teaching the recruit all about life in the Mystery Agents. After graduation, Mentors often keep in contact with their charges and are there for help or advice long after their student has joined the ranks as a full-fledged Mystery Agent.

Although the Company has dozens of capable Mentors available, this game allows characters to have one of seven different Mentors. As some time has passed since the characters joined the Company, the seven Mentors have gone through some changes of their own.

A Mentor's Status describes if he or she is available as a resource to the character (MIA or KIA Mentors are no longer available). Influential Mentors can be useful sources of information and support for the character. But

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beware: Mentors often have agendas of their own and may use one of their former pupils as a pawn in a chess game played against with their rivals in the Company.

Mentors also have the ability to modify certain character attributes (not always for the better) and these modifications are explained in detail in each Mentor's write-up.

Mentors cannot be chosen by the players. Instead, roll two six-sided dice:

Special Agent Miner
Status: MIA, under investigation
Age/Sex: 32/Male

Senior Agent Miner disappeared while on special assignment in Deep Blue. Control has tried him *in absentia* for various breaches in departmental protocol, and any prior association with Special Agent Miner is viewed with suspicion. Unfortunately, this even extends to new recruits that worked with Agent Miner.

Agents that have trained under Special Agent Miner receive a one-key *downgrade* of their Access attribute unless dealing specifically with Senior Agent Baxter.

Senior Agent Chambers
Status: KIA
Age/Sex: 38/Female

Chambers was killed in the line of duty during a botched engagement with an HP. She was a skilled operative and was well-liked within the ranks of Mystery Agents.

Recruits that trained under her tutelage seem to benefit from this association and gain an Access key upgrade of one step.

Chief Agent Wagner
Status: Retired from active-duty on medical discharge
Age/Sex: 58/Male

Chief Agent Wagner has recently retired from the Company after a bout with clinical depression. The twice-decorated agent was a respected member of the Company known for his patience and dedication.

Mentoring with Chief Agent Wagner grants the agent an Instinct upgrade of one attribute key.

Senior Instructor Snyder
Status: Active, re-assigned to SCS (Special Company Services)
Age/Sex: 62/Male

Snyder is known throughout the Company as its toughest trainer. He's also an anomaly; the oldest agent in the Company. When he was active in the field, his no-nonsense attitude and extreme methods was the stuff of Company legend. Though no longer sent out on assignments, Snyder hasn't changed a whit.

Snyder's age and current status owe to a previous retirement age of 65. He enjoys telling new recruits that back in his time, "retirement" was a single-malt scotch and a bullet to the back of the head. He says it as though it's a joke, but he never laughs.

Recruits placed under his care can learn a lot, but the grizzled ex-Mystery Agent demands only the best from his students. Snyder provides a per-

Starting Mentor Table

Die Roll	Mentor	Status	Attribute Modifier
2	Special Agent Miner	MIA	Downgraded Access
3-4	Senior Agent Chambers	KIA	Upgraded Access
5-6	Chief Agent Wagner	Retired	Upgraded Instinct
7	Senior Instructor Snyder	Active	Upgraded Force
8-9	Agent Gardiner	KIA	Upgraded Talent
10-11	Senior Agent Baxter	Active	Upgraded Talent
12	Vice-Director Forester	Active	Upgraded Access

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manent upgrade from Force 0 to Force +. Those deficient in Force do not receive any benefits (and may be treated with some degree of contempt by Senior Instructor Snyder).

Agent Gardiner
Status: KIA, under investigation
Age/Sex: 26/Male

Agent Gardiner was killed a year after accepting his Mentoring position. Details on his death remain classified. An agent that studied with Agent Gardiner may upgrade his or her Talent key from - to 0.

Senior Agent Baxter
Status: Active
Age/Sex: 45/Female

Senior Agent Baxter is an amiable member of the Mystery Agents with years of experience under her belt. As head of the operation in which Special Agent Miner went AWOL, she was investigated by the Directorate and found not guilty of misconduct. Despite her exoneration, the Directorate revoked her Deep Blue Clearance (a fact that has slanted her views on Company policy). Senior Agent Baxter is noted for innovative training techniques that have only recently been adopted by SCS.

Her students gain a permanent upgrade to their Talent attribute key.

Vice-Director Forester
Status: Active, promoted to Vice-Directorate
Age/Sex: 42/Male

Vice-Director Forester is the highest-ranking active operative within the Company. Although Vice-Director Forester seldom ventures out on assignments, he maintains contact with even the lowest-ranking members of the Mystery Agents.

Vice-Director Forester provides a conditional one-key upgrade to the Agent's Access attribute. Agents with proficiency in Instinct gain a two-key upgrade in Access.

Health

Health in this game is a broad category that encompasses several different factors. The chart below describes these factors, as grouped by Age and Sex.

Resting Heart Rate (RHR) is the starting point at which an agent begins all missions and is influenced by physical fitness and gender.

- Characters with Force (–) add twenty to their Resting Heart Rates.
- Characters with Force (–) add fifteen to their Resting Heart Rates.
- Characters with Force (+) subtract fifteen to their Resting Heart Rates.
- Characters with Force (E) subtract twenty to their Resting Heart Rates.

Target Heart Rate (THR) is the zone at which the agent cardiovascular system is at its peak performance. During this time, characters receive a bonus to certain attribute rolls. These bonuses are added to die roll totals while within the THR range.

Maximum Heart Rate is the uppermost "safe zone" of an agent's heart rate and equals 220 – the agent's age. If a character's heart rate ever exceeds his or her Maximum Heart Rate (MHR), that character is in physical jeopardy. At best, the agent will be pulled from the mission by emergency medical technicians. At worst, the agent could die of cardiac arrest.

Security Clearance

All player characters in the game are Blue-level clearance Mystery Agents, authorized to embark on Blue-level assignments.

Quirks

The last phase of character creation is to assign your agent a Quirk. Quirks are not just colorful little character traits. They are compulsions, phobias, obsessions and other psychological speed bumps that read as *extremely odd* to other agents or normal people. These eccentricities begin to appear within a few months of activity as a Mystery Agent. Internal medical studies have concluded nothing.

Examples include:

- Compulsion to read aloud street signs and other written material
- Fanatical obsession with certain numbers or patterns
- Inability to recognize faces or remember

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Health Factors

Age	RHR (Male)	RHR (Female)	Target HR	Bonuses	Maximum Heart Rate
20-24	75 bpm	70 bpm	100-150 bpm	+2 Force	196-200 beats per minute
25-29	75 bpm	70 bpm	98-146 bpm	+2 Force +1 Talent	191-195 beats per minute
30-34	75 bpm	70 bpm	95-142 bpm	+1 Force +1 Talent	186-190 beats per minute
35-39	75 bpm	70 bpm	93-138 bpm	+1 Force +1 Talent +1 Instinct	181-185 beats per minute
40-44	75 bpm	70 bpm	90-135 bpm	+1 Talent +1 Instinct	176-180 beats per minute
45-49	75 bpm	70 bpm	88-131 bpm	+1 Talent +1 Instinct	171-175 beats per minute
50-54	75 bpm	70 bpm	85-127 bpm	+1 Talent +2 Instinct	166-170 beats per minute
55-59	75 bpm	70 bpm	83-123 bpm	+2 Instinct	161-165 beats per minute
60+	Not Applicable / Mandatory Company Retirement Age				

names
- Obsessive-compulsive hand-washing
- Deathly fear of heights but a simultaneous attraction to high places (acrophilia)
- Compulsion to touch things a certain number of times
- Complete lack of a sense of direction
- Aural hallucinations (the agent hears non-existent bells, whispered voices or other things)

When selecting a Quirk, keep in mind that Quirks were not designed to add depth to the character, nor were they intended to annoy the other players or the GM. Quirks exist for other reasons entirely, one of which is to handicap your character with a psychological defect that must be handled during play. The other reason is to establish that something is very, very wrong.

*** End of Sanctioned Player's Section ***

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Character Appendix I: Agent Pseudonyms

The following is a list of 100 common occupational surnames to use for Mystery Agent pseudonyms. Roll d% to pick one at random or select from the list.

01. Archer
02. Bailey
03. Barber
04. Barker
05. Bender
06. Bowman
07. Brewster
08. Butler
09. Cantrell
10. Carpenter
11. Carter
12. Cartwright
13. Carver
14. Chaffer
15. Chandler
16. Chaplin
17. Chapman
18. Clark
19. Cleaver
20. Coleman
21. Conner
22. Cook
23. Cooper
24. Cotter
25. Day
26. Dexter
27. Draper
28. Dyer
29. Falconer
30. Faulkner
31. Fisher
32. Fletcher
33. Foster
34. Fowler
35. Fuller
36. Gage
37. Glover
38. Graves
39. Hammer
40. Harper
41. Hayward
42. Heard
43. Hooper
44. Hunter
45. Inman
46. Kellogg
47. Key
48. Killer
49. King
50. Knight
51. Marshall
52. Mason
53. Mercer
54. Naylor
55. Page
56. Palmer
57. Parker
58. Parson
59. Piper
60. Plummer
61. Potter
62. Provost
63. Purcell
64. Redman
65. Rock
66. Ryder
67. Sadler
68. Sawyer
69. Schreiber
70. Seals
71. Sexton
72. Shepherd
73. Shields
74. Singer
75. Skinner
76. Skipper
77. Smith
78. Spencer
79. Steele
80. Stewart
81. Stringer
82. Tanner
83. Taylor
84. Thatcher
85. Tiller
86. Tillman
87. Todd
88. Trainer
89. Trapp
90. Travers
91. Trotter
92. Tucker
93 . Turner
94 . Tyler
95 . Voss
96 . Walker
97 . Ward
98 . Warner
99 . Webster
00. Wright

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Awake Asleep

In the last few years, bold experiments in hypnotherapy and neurology have uncovered fantastic secrets. Humans now realize that the last great frontier lies neither beyond our solar system nor underneath the waves. The final frontier lies within us all – in our thoughts, in our dreams and in our memories.

The Nasrudin Institute (a clinic devoted to sleep disorders and dream therapy) discovered the Lacuna purely by accident. Its scientists, researchers and therapists were tasked with the mission to explore our inner spaces and to map the human consciousness. But while pursuing these goals, the members of the Institute uncovered quantifiable proof of a collective unconscious, much like the one proposed by Carl Jung.

Using a complex assortment of techniques (both traditional and esoteric), the walls of the "collective unconscious" were breached by a succession of volunteers. Three subjects were laid out on padded tables and simultaneously brought into REM sleep. The fourth was placed into a hypnotic state and then put to sleep via intravenous injection. While in this altered state, the hypnotized subject began to describe a strange dream in which he was riding on a bright orange trolley with the other three patients. After fifteen minutes had elapsed, the subjects were awakened and then interviewed by researchers.

What was most curious was that the three dreamers all separately described the same city and the same trolley as the hypnotized subject. Not only that, but they maintained that the hypnotized subject had engaged them in conversation. Subsequent tests validated the subjects' claims. An alternate reality did exist, apart from ours, and could be reached through dreams.

Oceans of Memory

The term "Mnemonic Topography" was coined by the head of research at the Institute. Evidence pointed to several discrete levels of the subconscious. And much like the depths of the ocean hold startlingly different species of life, each mnemonic level carried its own unique "ecosystem." On the "green" or topmost surface, short-term memory and emotions were the waves on the surface of the ocean. Easily seen, they were signifiers of currents and turbulence far below. Memories could be "skimmed" by a trained professional; much like a meteorologist can gauge weather patterns by studying cloud formations.

Down below the surface, the "blue" level seemed to capture the majority of the research team's interest. This unconscious realm of dreams and desires seemed to exist on the periphery of an entire world. One in which the dreams of one person were like dense fogbanks hiding a rocky coastline.

The Map began to take shape.

Deep within Blue City, places inaccessible to inexperienced travelers, were the levels classified as "deep blue." When some subjects were brought back from parts of deep-blue with severe psychological problems, these areas were designated "black" and further exploration was prohibited except in specially monitored sessions. Black-level seemed to have some relation to nightmares and night terrors, an inhospitable environment with (psychically) crushing depths and hostile life forms.

While charting out this dangerous area, a kind of trench was discovered…a fissure running along the "floor" of the mnemonic topography like a rift in the seabed resulting from seismic activity. This seemingly bottomless pit was called the Lacuna.

> ***Lacuna*** *(definition)*
> Literally, a pit. Also. a missing piece or a blank space. A psychic black hole so dense that not even memory can escape its pull.

When the Map was near-completion, more and more time and resources were spent exploring the Lacuna and the area around it. The Nasrudin Institute was placed under the scrutiny of government agencies, and its therapeutic research was farmed out to similar clinics. The Institute now had one purpose and one purpose alone: unlock the secrets of the Lacuna.

Sirius Makes First Contact

Early human experimentation could not be avoided, and we have only just begun to learn of

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these early forays into the Lacuna. Naturally, volunteer subjects were unsuitable (both for technical and for ethical reasons), and convicted felons were used instead.

One of these subjects was a serial rapist and murderer codenamed Sirius. While under hypnosis, Sirius described a cadre of strange beings that followed him through the streets of a vast city. These beings appeared to be humanoid and dressed in some kind of antiquated uniform. A portion of his transcript follows:

```
SESSION: #112 SUBJECT: #16 ("Sirius")
CONTROLLER: #14-b ("Nader")

SIRIUS: I can't get away from them.
CONTROL: Who? Who is chasing you?
SIRIUS: I told you. I can't see them.
They're all shadowed. I can hear them
coming.
CONTROL: Can you see anything?
SIRIUS: Uh, yeah. It's dark but I can
see a little. I just ducked into an
alley. Hiding behind a dumpster.
*unintelligible* It's cold and I
think it's snowing or something.
Raining. Uh…uh, it's freezing.
CONTROL: And those men? Are they
still chasing you?
SIRIUS: I…no. Wait…I hear footsteps.

*At this point the subject's heart
rate jumped dramatically*

SIRIUS: Oooh no. No…no.
CONTROL: What? What do you see?
SIRIUS: I…uh, I have to go. I have to
get away…

*Subject began to thrash violently*

CONTROL: You're okay, [NAME DELETED].
You're okay. Nothing can hurt you.
SIRIUS: I … don't … I don't think so.
I can see them now. I need to go now.
CONTROL: What do you see?
SIRIUS: Oh, god. Oh, god. Spidermen.
Spiders. I gotta move. I see a door.
CONTROL: Spiders?
SIRIUS: Spid … I'm *unintelligible*
inside. I see her. I see her with a
little boy. *unintelligible* She's
reaching for me … help me … I'm here
…

*At this point this subject's heart
rate returns to normal and he leaves
REM sleep. No other contact is made
during the session, and the subject
insists that he remembers nothing
when he awakens. Subject appears
extraordinarily calm and passive.
Asks for a glass of milk.*
```

Further inquiries substantiated the claims of these "spidermen." Humanoid creatures with arachnid-like faces, dressed in some kind of outdated Eastern Bloc-style uniform. These beings appear to be hostile to human interlopers though their origins are a complete mystery. No attempt at communication has proven successful.

The identity of the "girl" from Sirius's final session has yet to be established. Additional investigation has proved the existence of a mysterious female character. She does not appear in further sessions with Sirius but her existence is confirmed by other researchers working with various other subjects.

Sirius himself has since become a model prisoner and professes to remember nothing of his life since his parents died in a fire when he was a child and he was sent to a foster family. This memory loss persists up to and including the first encounter with the unidentified female dream character.

Identity of the "little boy" in session #112 has been established as Sirius at approximately age six.

Prisons Without Walls

After the prison experiments concluded, several theories came to light:

The shared dream-space (now called "Blue City") exists outside and alongside our own reality. It appears to host its own population apart from human personalities engaged in

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REM-stage sleep.

The Lacuna is some kind of mnemonic "black hole" that eats memories and subconscious thought. Although it cannot be explicitly located within Blue City, it is somehow connected with the Unidentified Female Dream Character (aka "The Girl").

The Spidermen exist in Blue City, perhaps as some kind of autonomous agents (?) or as a kind of psychic projection (much like the City itself appears to be a psychic projection).

Memory loss and extreme personality shifts follow contact with the Lacuna. Violent criminal offenders appear to be pacified and "cured" of violent psychosexual impulses after contact with the Lacuna, though we don't know why or how this happens.

Years later, some mysteries remain but others have been solved. Using the techniques pioneered by the Nasrudin Institute and developed during the prison experiments, it is now possible to excise a violent personality from its host consciousness. The process is not unlike how a surgeon slices away cancerous tissue from its surroundings.

Prisons are now a thing of the past. It no longer makes sense to lock up an individual when they're not the ones at fault. Humans are basically good people. The hostile personality is what drives them to their ends; it's a sickness. And once the hostile personality (or "HP") is dealt with, the subject is able to be re-integrated into the populace as a functional, compassionate and conscientious member of society. The criminal mind has been revealed as a kind of disease, one with a permanent cure.

Now all that was needed were people to carry out this new initiative.

Origins

Advances in so-called 'dream technologies" have yielded more advanced equipment and protocols, as well as a method of mnemonic alteration using something called the "Lacuna Device."

Lacuna Device *(definition)*
This button-sized device is used to send its wearer to a "metaphysical black hole." The device must be pinned onto the subject and is then activated by twisting it to the right. After a three-second delay, the subject is summarily dispatched to the Lacuna. Modern devices are emblazoned with the Mystery Agent logo and can only be used by the agent assigned to carry that specific device.

A specialized task force had to be created to patrol Blue City for HP's and mete out rehabilitation using the Lacuna Device. The Mystery Agents were formed from the core members of the prison experiments. "The Company," along with the police departments, the FBI and other public health agencies, began its war against the disease of violence.

The Company

The Company follows a hierarchal structure starting with Control at the top and working down to the technicians and non-official personnel at the bottom.

Control

Control is the top-level of the Mystery Agents' organization (a.k.a. the Company). Because of their special clearance levels and isolation from the Mystery Agents, not much is known about this group. What *is* known is that Control is made up highly skilled, highly motivated operatives that create and hand out field assignments to Directorate members.

The Directorate

The Directorate is run by a shadowy individ-

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ual named Superintendent Pastor. Below him are the Directors and Vice-Directors. The Directorate is in charge of Special Company Services and is also tasked with monitoring Deep Blues-level assignments.

Special Company Services

SCS is a special group that answers to the Directorate. SCS includes training, internal investigation and R&D.

Mystery Agents

The agents themselves carry out assignments as decreed by Control. Within the Agents, there are several ranks and clearances.

Ranks

Junior Agent: Recruits, usually in the midst of their training.

Agent: Standard rank. Duties include Green and Blue-level assignments.

Senior Agent: Duties generally involve management of lower-ranking agents. Reports to Chief Agent

Chief Agent: Oversees all field agents, reports to Directorate.

Special Agent: Duties include Deep Blue-level and non-standard assignments. Reports to specific individuals within the Directorate as designated within their mission parameters. Special Agents are the elite amongst the ranks of the Mystery Agents and few of them hide this fact. Some Special Agents acting on particularly sensitive assignments maintain a secret Deep Blue-level clearance and maintain a cover identity as a standard field agent.

Clearances

White: White-level is reserved for members of Control. No other information is available at this time.

Green: Green-level agents differ from Blue-level agents in their duties but not necessarily their importance.

Blue: Player character Mystery Agents have this security clearance and are authorized for so-called Blue-level "insertions."

Deep Blue: Only Special Agents and those of higher clearance may qualify for Deep-Blue assignments.

Black: Black clearance is only given out to Senior Agents and even then, sparingly. It is widely known that Black-level assignments bear some relation to the activities of the Spidermen..

~~*Wine*: There is no such thing as Wine-level clearance. Please disregard.~~

Support Services

Support Services is a catch-all for the non-official personnel that serve in a technical or custodial capacity. Support Services has its own management structure that does not need to be explained in detail for the purposes of this game.

"It's not the work, it's the stairs."
– A Mystery Agent speaks

"It is unclear whether the Nasrudin Institute created or discovered the Lacuna. One theory is that it was always there, waiting to be discovered. The other theory is that the Institute's experiments split open the collective unconscious like weeds splitting cracks in poured concrete. Of course, up until recently, the collective unconscious was a theory too.

"Still, with the advent of the Mystery Agents, crime has plummeted. And not just violent crime, either. It seems that by working on the diseased parts of society, the entire body has slowly begun to heal. People are happier. Streets are clean and quiet. The world is coming to order at last, and not under the auspices of jack-booted thugs and tanks and police states, either.

"What most amazes the general public is how quiet the whole process is.

"A few people lying down in a sealed room, wires and electrodes hooked up to their chests and temples. Racks of shiny medical equipment waiting in the wings. A lot of technical-looking people watching monitors and EKG's, talking constantly and speaking into throat-mikes taped to their

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necks. Sometimes music (something subtle and relaxing, no Beethoven or Wagner here), sometimes candles or aromatherapy. New Age hokum is mixed with Information Age technology."

Groundwork at Green-level

"There are still police departments in every city. And aside from a rapid downturn in police-related deaths (on both sides of the equation), there's no major difference between the police work of today and the police work of yesterday. The big difference is what happens with a body is found. That's when the Mystery Agents step in.

"When some sick bastard starts raping and killing little girls, or when some nut with a grudge and a rifle starts picking off people from a bell tower, Green-level Agents are called in to investigate. If the police or the feds have done their jobs, they'll have a suspect (or at least some solid leads). Mystery Agents will assist them in apprehending suspects and submit them to a procedure called Cursory Mnemonic Exploration (or CME)."

The Slab

"The Slab is our colorful term for the operating theatre where Mystery Agents ply their trade. The subject is sedated, and the Exploration Team connects with the subject's mind. From there, the team wanders through Green-level (the 'shallow end' of the mnemonic pool) and pokes around for information regarding the crime (or crimes) being investigated. When evidence is found, it's presented to a committee of judges, law enforcement personnel, psychiatric experts and senior agents. If the evidence is satisfactory, the next phase commences.

"What happens is this:

"You go to sleep in this world. You wake up inside the head of someone else. You walk through their dreams, their fears, their memories. More specifically, you're locked down into Blue City, a meandering cityscape of the mind. Because it's far too dangerous to just muck around inside someone's head, Blue City acts like a border town that links everyone's heads. And everyone exists inside Blue City. Everyone you've met. People you've never known. People that don't exist."

Calling Home

"Getting information or equipment can be done in a few different ways. The easiest way is just to grab a vehicle or whatever once you're inside Blue-level. Control is able to provide just about anything else you'd need that isn't readily available. The trick is to get the request out to them, which can be tricky at times. 'Calling home,' as we call it, involves cutting through the psychic noise between the real world and Blue-level. If you can get to a public payphone or a private phone line, you can dial in requests, which is a lot easier than just sending out a telepathic "ping" and waiting for the "pong" to be delivered back to you."

Access rolls for intel or equipment while in Blue-level or deeper need to hit a target number of Nominal to be heard at all. Exceptional rolls get the message through loud and clear. If the agents use telephones to contact Control, a Mediocre success is sufficient (though Nominal and Exceptional successes provide faster service).

Blue City

"Blue City is beautiful in the way a sad girl can be beautiful … gray and lonely and lovely. It's always raining, and the sun never shines in Blue City. The cold wind whips against the brick and stone walls of a multitude of buildings. Everything seems so much larger and deeper and darker. It's the City writ large, surrounded by cool blue waves. Personalities drift in and out like ghosts. They materialize in the corner of your eye and when you turn to focus in on them, they sharpen like slides under a microscope. Everything comes into detail and every mote of dust is like another world.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm in a dream, which … well, obvious. Other times, it's more … like I've gone backward in time. Everything seems a little archaic. Like the cars look different. And people dress and talk … different. And little things, neon signs, automats … when was the last time you went to an automat? The newspapers are written in some language that looks like Arabic, but isn't. The food tastes odd. Not bad. Just, more organic. Like it was grown in alien

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soil. I don't really dig it."

Inside Blue City

"There are three types of beings you'll encounter in Blue City. The first are other Mystery Agents. This is the reason for the standardized-everything MIB look…quick and easy identification. Once in Blue City, it's best to find out where the other members of the team are. Usually, they'll be close by – within a block or two of wherever you end up. Sometimes, things happen and the distances increase."

Once the first agent goes under, have each other player make an Access roll (this roll won't increase the THR of the agent). Nominal success means that they wind up right next to the primary agent. Exceptional successes have the same result but give a temporary Access upgrade to the next agent to land in Blue City. A Mediocre success puts the agent in the same general area (within a few blocks in any direction). A failed Access roll results in a lost agent. It's the team's responsibility to search out lost agents ASAP.

"Blue City is fairly large…larger than any existing metropolitan area. So although it's a rare event, it is possible to run into other agents on other missions. For the most part, though, you're on your own."

Personalities

'P's' are a kind of 'dream character' that appear as random faces in the crowds of Blue City: cab drivers, call girls, bartenders and traffic cops, families walking down the street, dogs, cats, birds… Everything is hyper-realistic but gives off a weird 'vibe' that nobody can pin down. The interesting thing about the P's is they don't realize that they're characters inside a dream. This is why subtlety and discretion are the keystones of the Mystery Agents organization.

"I've met some P's over and over again. Sometimes, they start to remember you, which is nice. It's nice to know people, to have friends outside the Company. This one guy … huge, fat guy wears this crazy straw hat. He sells papers (that I can't read) and food (that I don't eat) from a little cart. His name is Clarence Boscow. Rhymes with 'Boss Cow.' Funny guy."

Hostile Personalities

"Hostile Personalities are just that: personalities. But twisted and wrong, like cancer feeds off blood in the body. HP's consume the flesh of the living, in our world. The real world. To excise the cancer, someone has got to go in and cut it out.

"Rookie agents have plenty of training about the nature of HP's. How they're emotionless, ruthless, brutal monsters. How they're inhuman in the very real sense of the word. But nothing … nothing can prepare an agent for their first encounter with one of these beasts.

"On the outside, HP's look like their host personalities (the subject of the investigation – the guy or gal laying on the Slab). When it sheds this host body, its true nature is revealed … and it can be a doozy. Fanged mouths surrounded by barbed tentacles, nine-foot tall shaggy black things with too many eyes and too many teeth, reptilian creatures with sinister smiles and poisonous intent. Nothing is too odd, too ugly, or too extreme. You can rest assured that as a Mystery Agent, you'll see too much and still never see it all.

"Which brings us to this."

Spidermen

"The Company, the Institute…hell, just about everyone has questions about the Lacuna and Blue City. These uncharted realms are more mysterious than deep space and we know so little about it all. One of those many mysteries revolves around the Spidermen.

"Rumors about the Spidermen have existed for awhile now, ever since the first experiments at the Nasrudin Institute. Sirius and his friends proved that they're not just shadows in the mind. They're real. Really real. And if you ever meet one (and you don't just wake up screaming right then and there), you have a whole lot of trouble on your hands."

Interaction with the Spidermen *always* prompts a risk multiplier of x2.

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The creatures usually keep to the sidelines but prolonged contact in Blue City, obvious Mystery Agent activity, or just sheer dumb luck can draw them out like dogs hunting down a gob of bloody hamburger.

"No shit, I ran into the Spidermen once. And I didn't wake up screaming. They wanted to know who (the team) was and why we where there. They had weapons, strange little hand-guns, and demanded identification documents. One of the rookie agents freaked out and opened fire. They pulped him with those weird little guns and took off after us. The mission ended with the rest of us ejecting. The subject and the other agent both died on the Slab. The techs still don't know why."

The Girl from Blue City

"I've never seen her. I don't know anyone who has (or if they have, they haven't told me about it. I don't know anything about it.

"Okay, interview over."

At this point the Mystery Agent grabs a donut from the box on the desk, stands up and walks out of the room. The author is escorted outside and led off the premises where a car is waiting. The author enters and is driven back through the entrance gates to the Company's grounds. The driver says something in Russian and looks up at the author in the rear-view mirror. The author looks up from his notes and sees six glistening back eyes staring back

Ω

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Inside

***Inside* by Clinton R. Nixon**

Clinton R. Nixon is the owner of Anvilwerks and has created several role-playing games, including *Donjon*, *Paladin*, and *Vermin*. In his copious spare time, he is one of the administrators of The Forge, an role-playing game design and discussion forum. He lives in New Orleans and is currently working on his personal behemoth, *The Shadow of Yesterday*.

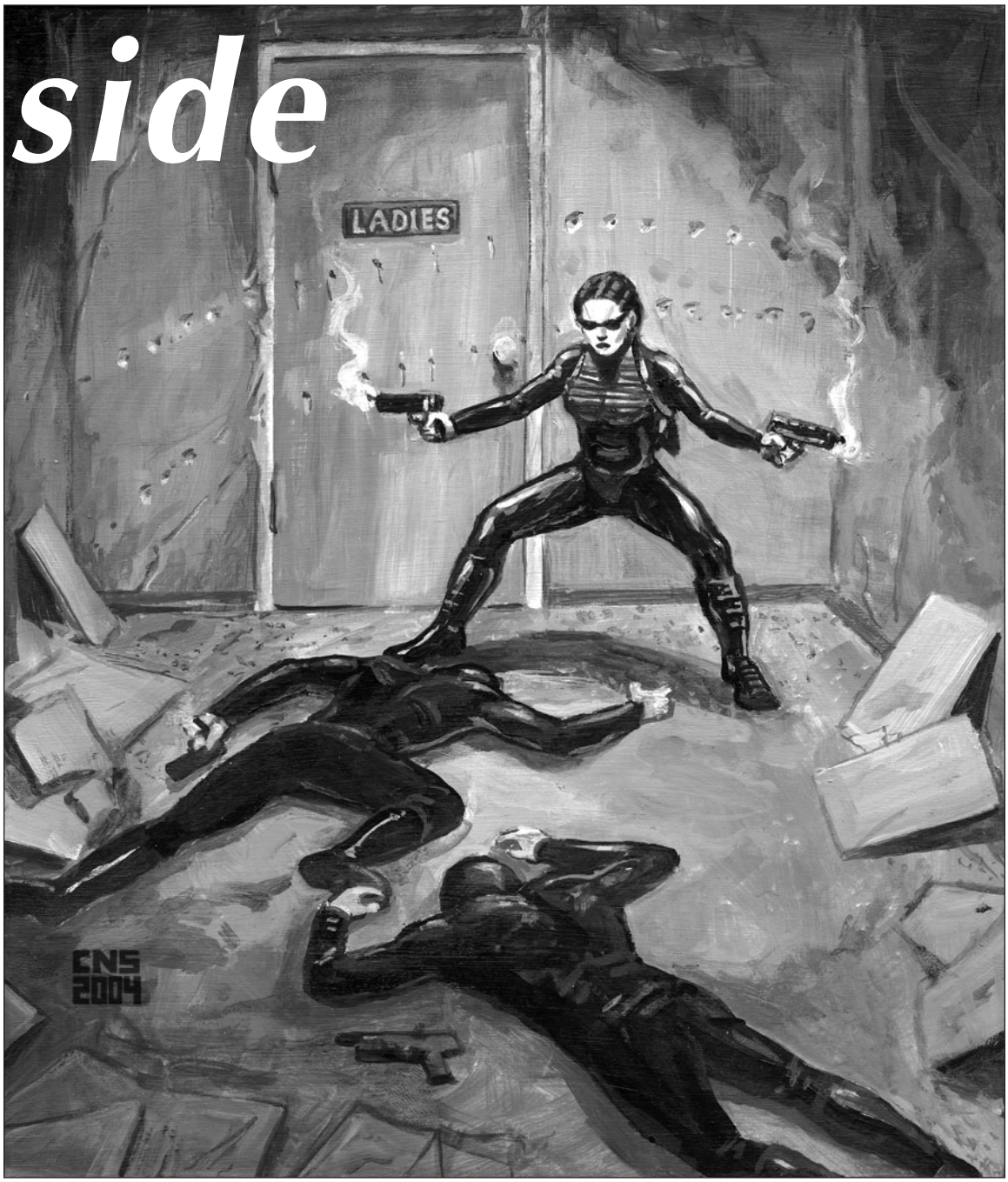

Illustration by Christian St. Pierre. Copyright © 2004 Christian St. Pierre.

In a far-too-soon future, the world falls apart. The tyranny of the elite draws the blood of the weak. Bleak skies "the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" blanket the ground below in oppression.

But, there is an escape. A simple telephone jack, and one can be transported into a world without aging, without pain, without hunger, without ugliness – as long as you obey the rules. *Will you go Inside?*

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INSIDE: A SORCERER MINI-SUPPLEMENT

Inside is a cyberpunk-themed supplement for *Sorcerer*, the game of power and temptation by Ron Edwards. (www.sorcerer-rpg.com) In it, the players take the role of hackers, people with the ability to re-code Inside, a vast virtual world world of beauty and structure.

There is no set setting for *Inside*. Like the game *Sorcerer*, I'm painting with a wide brush here, allowing you to create your own setting from the pieces and themes I'm throwing out. You could have a world like *The Matrix*, in which the majority of humanity knows nothing but Inside, and the characters are freedom fighters waking everyone up. You could have a world like Jim Munroe's excellent novel *Everyone in Silico*, where people conduct everyday business in this virtual world—and more and more of humanity is moving to conduct their entire lives inside, leaving mortality and pain behind. You could have a much more conventional cyberpunk world in the vein of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where the majority of humanity lives in the gray here-and-now, and the powerful and elite of the real world are building a new, even more intrusive power structure Inside.

No matter what sort of setting you choose, there are a few tenets that always apply.

All characters are hackers. This isn't *Shadowrun*, as much as I like that game. This doesn't mean your character doesn't have useful real-world talents. Take Hiro, Protagonist of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. He's the best swordsman in the world. He's a perfect "Inside" character–and he's a hacker.

Hacking is prohibited. There are no exceptions to this. Programming Inside might be legal–with a license or some such business. Freelance coding is strictly prohibited, though, whether by law, robots, or yakuza assassins. Therefore, your character is an outlaw.

The player characters can get outside. Even if you take this setting to its apocalyptic *Matrix*-style end, where all of humanity has enslaved itself, the player characters can get outside Inside and be, well, humans. That doesn't mean it's necessarily easy; getting out a different way than the way you came in requires a Contact roll.

Building a perfect cage

In presenting this mini-supplement in *Daedalus*, I'm hoping not only to present something fun to use in your game, but at least show the first steps to making your own *Sorcerer* mini-supplement. In creating a mini-supplement, or even designing a campaign, for *Sorcerer*, there's a few questions you need to answer.

What is a sorcerer in this setting?

In "Inside," as mentioned before, a sorcerer is a *hacker*. As defined by Eric S. Raymond in his essay "What is a hacker?":

> *There is a community, a shared culture, of expert programmers and networking wizards that traces its history back through decades to the first time-sharing minicomputers and the earliest ARPAnet experiments. . . .*
>
> *Hackers solve problems and build things, and they believe in freedom and voluntary mutual help. To be accepted as a hacker, you have to behave as though you have this kind of attitude yourself .. But copping an attitude alone won't make you a hacker, any more than it will make you a champion athlete or a rock star. Becoming a hacker will take intelligence, practice, dedication, and hard work.*
>
> *Therefore, you have to learn to distrust attitude and respect competence of every kind.*

As you can see, a hacker is not exactly the negative stereotype of today. It's someone driven to hone a unique skill–in this case, and in most uses of the word, programming–to a level of ability that it can be used to solve any problem.

Don't throw out the entire baby with the tub of soda, though. This sort of insatiable drive isn't the healthiest thing. In order to learn more–*control more*–sacrifices have to be made. What will your character give up?

What is sorcery in this setting?

In this setting, sorcery is the ability to code. Coding will let your character make new con-

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structs Inside, take control of existing constructs, and understand the underlying structure of the virtual world. It can even be used to make your character's avatar–his representation Inside, his very self there–different and more powerful.

The ability to code provides no special powers Outside, though. When choosing to stay outside Inside, your character makes the decision to leave his most powerful weapon checked.

What is Humanity in this setting?

To be honest, this was a hard one for me. I originally starting mapping *Sorcerer's* rituals to the programming metaphor and thought I had something. Soon, I realized I had very little if I couldn't follow the metaphor through to *Sorcerer's* central question: What will you do for power?

> Another cut-and-paste monk walked by, holding a small flame cupped in his hand, and Paul's ire was whipped up again. *We had an infinitely varied environment on Earth, and we painted over it to draw our little stick figures. ...* 'What do you think when you see that?' Paul said, pointing at the two monks. . . .
>
> 'That whoever was doing skins was fucking lazy,' Jeremy said, returning an eyeball back under his sunglasses. 'But that's the way it is here, man. It's not just the skins. ... It's the architecture, too. And the security. That's why there's so many holes for rats like us.'
>
> —Jim Munroe, *Everyone in Silico*

In *Inside* Humanity is the ability to distinguish between truth and artifice. Using sorcery–and sacrificing Humanity–provides the characters with great power to create and control beings, artificial beings in an artificial world. By using this power, you grant real power to electronic mirages.

The power of truth is different; it is the power to interact–more specifically, solve problems–on an interpersonal level. It's going to your boss and explaining that you have to miss a day of work instead of coding an ingenious voice-activated construct to reply to calls and send email in your place. It's breaking up with the girlfriend you don't want anymore instead of disappearing into the night and erasing all records of yourself in telephone and other public directories. It's knifing the fucker who hurt you instead of altering his records to make him appear to authorities as a grand-theft robbing kidnapper.

It is, essentially, staying Outside–in the real world. What this means for players is that they must make Humanity checks when their character uses their abilities Inside to avoid Outside problems, when they use the grid to weave lies. Players can make Humanity gain rolls when their characters confront problems Outside that cause them great difficulty.

What does it mean to have zero Humanity in this setting?

Losing all of your character's Humanity means that he has achieved a Zen-like mastery over coding. His skills have increased to the point that he sees in code; he *feels* in code. He is the master of himself and others Inside.

Unfortunately, he's also on the verge of being only code, nothing more than an electronic construct. Characters that hit zero Humanity have to choose between two paths – staying Inside forever, or never coming back the same.

The mechanics of zero Humanity are covered later in this text.

LIVING THE MIRAGE

Describing Inside

What is it like Inside? No matter what your final setting Outside is like, Inside looks the same. It is a late-1990's metropolis, clean, with fair-to-good weather. It rains some days, but it's never so hot or cold to be unreasonable, and the sun's out most days. One important factor is that almost everything is concrete, steel, and glass. Artifice likes to look solid.

If you play with a relatively new (timeline-wise) setting, where people come and go from Inside regularly, they enter and exit from bathrooms. In designing Inside, it seemed like the most private place, so people's "bamfing" doesn't disturb others. When people don't have to live Inside, it needs something to attract people, so its theme parks are amazing, with physics-defying rides, and complete virtual reality simulations of other worlds.

If you play with a relatively advanced setting

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where people live their lives Inside, there are no bad neighborhoods. There are poor neighborhoods, sure, but they're quaintly blue-collar, with block parties on the weekend and such.

Being hackers, the characters may find unauthorized places Inside that are nothing like like the rest. An apartment door might take them to a Japanese garden, or to a fantasy-themed land where fireballs are the order of the day. (These may well be the remnants of old virtual theme parks.)

It's important to note that nothing overly breaks real-world rules, though. People don't teleport from place to place; they take monorails and subways, or drive themselves if they can afford it. People still experience hunger and eat in restaurants. Night and day still come. Inside looks like a typical city, just nicer.

There is no outside Inside. By that, I mean there is no countryside–no beach, no place to get away from the city. There are parks, but that's about it. In a nod to the excellent movie *Dark City,* there may be signs pointing to the beach, and people might even talk about going there, but it does not exist.

Frisco: an example setting

Frisco is the City By the Sea, an idyllic place of equality, good jobs, and nice weather. Westwego, a corporation involved in cutting-edge digital-sensory research, made it big when they brought out their star product, RealLife. RealLife gave everyday people the chance to visit a new city, meet others, and escape the conditions of their own lives, deemed lesser by advertisement.

When San Francisco fell into the sea two weeks after their launch, they exploded in a way no one could predict. Their product offered the city the survivors once knew and loved, all in its best day. Frisco had no crime, no earthquakes, low rent, and a job for everyone. In what was termed an act of extreme benevolence, they offered all survivors a free Bronze Pass to Frisco They hook you up, stick in a feeding tube, and you've got a new life and a new job. The fact that their data banks now lay on the ocean-floor remains of the real San Francisco was emotional icing on the cake. Entire companies moved their operations inside RealLife's Frisco, and families followed.

Ten years later, the West Coast of America is a ghost town. Conditions from San Diego to Vancouver are brutal, with enormous unemployment, high crime, and filth cluttering the streets. A full third of the population lives in sinister black cubic buildings, hooked to machines offering eternal life. Inside these black boxes, there are always free terminals offering guest passes to RealLife, but rumor on the street is that not everyone entering a Westwego office comes back.

In this setting, Inside is controlled by the Westwego corporation, large, faceless, and with no clear leader. The characters might live in the outside world, or be trapped Inside, under the watch of the enormous Transamerica building, now the RealLife offices of Westwego. What happens in those black glass boxes? What happens to the bodies of people who sign up for RealLife? Why are people disappearing? Who exactly is staring down from that monolithic Transamerica tower? And do the ghosts of the real San Francisco haunt the brave new world of Frisco?

Characters

"Programmers still needed debugging tools, of course, but debugger vendors in 2047 distributed numbered copies only, and only to officially licensed and bonded programmers. The debugger Dan used in software class was kept behind a special firewall so that it could be used only for class exercises."

Richard Stallman, "The Right to Read"

Characters are created using the same rules as *Sorcerer.* The statistics are a bit different, though. Following are the new descriptors and rules. Humanity is computed as normal.

Stamina

Body hacker: As you analyze and slice code, so you do to your body. Raw-egg shakes, protein supplements, and a bizarre regimen–often martial arts–keep you in shape.

Keyboard jockey: Your body's been toned by nights under fluorescent lights, typing away and munching on snack food. In other words, you've ignored it. This does not denote a low Stamina, though–you could be whip-thin in that lanky way, or

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alternatively, one big eatin' dude, impossible to put down.

Hopped-up: The goth sister to "body hacker," you take coffee and speed in the morning and phenobarbital when you're ready to crash for 16 hours.

Trapped in the wrong body: Your body was born to play football, and your head was born for compiling. Your natural health keeps you going.

Rebel: Your anger's as easily seen in your fists as your eyes.

Will

Focused: Your mind is like a laser, able to concentrate on one thing for hours at a time. You're not easily distracted from your personal train of thought, though.

Ideology: You believe in an ideal, a personal reason you do what you do.

Thrill-seeker: The truth is, controlling your own little electronic world is fun.

Self-absorbed: If the faces just knew what you do, if they could just understand; they'd be just like you.

Fu

Formal training: (Fu 2+) The powers-that-be judged you of good character and trained you to be one of the architects of Inside. They judged wrong.

Underground student: (Fu 1-3) You found a mentor in the underground, someone who taught you how to code.

Confederation: (Fu 1+) You are a member of an illegal group, organization, coven, cartel, or whatever you guys call it.

True hacker: (Fu 4+) You're an original gangster–a hacker who's been there since the beginning, and will never give up your right to change the electronic world.

Natural talent: (Fu 1+) You were born Inside. You've got unnatural talents, though, talents that have led you to believe something's not real about your world.

Cover

In *Inside* hacking is illegal. You must have a license to code at all. That means your character can't just be a hacker–he's got to do something for a day job. He might be a fully legal coder, or something much different: a courier, a street marketer, a dopehead, or a powerful executive. The choice is completely up to the player, and this becomes your character's Cover.

The Cover score is determined like it is in *Sorcerer*. It serves one other purpose than it does in that game, though. When your character is suspected of hacking, his Cover score is what you roll to portray him as nothing more than what he seems.

> "I know kung fu."
> —Neo, *The Matrix*

Martial Arts

If you own the excellent supplement *Sex and Sorcery*, every single hacker knows martial arts using those rules when they are Inside. Why? Because it's fucking cool. Major villains should be given this same ability.

The Price and Telltale

Your character's Price and Telltale are things that affect him Outside. As defined in *Sorcerer*, power comes with a price. Your character's Price is something he's poor at *because he is a hacker*. With the Telltale, it's similar; it's a giveaway to those in the know that he's not exactly legal. This will vary greatly depending on the setting. The fact that Tank, from *The Matrix*, doesn't have a big plug-in on the back of his head would be a pretty good example.

Sample character: Chi Mack, hacker at large

Chi missed out on the RealLife exodus. At the time, he was too busy selling the old way to escape reality–pills, grass, and anything else he could find. As downtown Vancouver grew more and more desolate, he realized he was missing out on something big, and it ticked him off. He'd always had his ear to the street.

When he finally got Inside on a visitor's pass,

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he liked the concept, but it was a bit too ordered. Sure, it was a great trip, but you only got to explore the pathways that were obvious. Making his way through a couple of acquaintances, he found the Flesh Consortium, a bunch of malcontents dedicated to showing those jack-heads that they were missing out on a whole world of sensory experience. Sometimes the politics get a little boring, but he thinks they're on the right track. Screwing up reality, even when it's just an electronic illusion, is a damn good time.

Stamina: 3 (hopped-up)
Will: 5 (thrill-seeker)
Fu: 2 (confederation)
Cover: 5 (street fixer)
Humanity: 5
Price: -1 (addiction: penalty to all actions if he's not on hallucinogens. Reality bums him out.)
Telltale: All members of the Flesh Consortium have scarification. Chi's is a spider-web on his left forearm.

Power, control, and gasoline

While Inside looks like the real world, it's most definitely not. A motorcycle looks, feels, and smells like a motorcycle, but it's a piece of code. It's the same with a front door, walking stick, ink pen, or monorail operator. All of these things are *daemons*, pieces of code that can be created, altered, controlled, and destroyed by people who have the knowledge.

The types of daemons in *Inside* can be broken down into several groups.

Types of Daemons

Avatars: Avatars are representatives of real people Inside. When someone enters the simulation, a digital facsimile is created. Avatars look like the people that control them, and are generated directly from the brain's own self-image.

Turings: These daemons can interact like humans, and are also called artificial intelligences. They don't necessarily look human, but they can talk like one and put on a good replica of a personality. Most utilitarian jobs are done by Turings, and most mid-level functionary positions are held by them. There are rumors of uncontrolled Turings, powerful daemons that have the ability to control others.

Utility: These daemons look like inanimate objects and are programs written to assist a Turing or Avatar. Almost everything that doesn't walk and talk Inside is a Utility daemon.

Virus: These daemons can overwrite other daemons, controlling them. These daemons are used by the powers that be to control Inside, change an Avatar's actions, and enforce their will. It is illegal for a normal person to use a virus, and mentioning them is discouraged.

Unlike in *Sorcerer*, most daemons are standalone with no one particularly controlling them. *Everything* is a daemon Inside. You might ride in a taxi Inside, but it's still a piece of code. (It's a pretty sweet ride when you Chmod and re-Code it.)

Daemon statistics

Like humans, daemons have scores that define them They use different terminology to reflect the different nature of their world, though. The scores are as follows:

Robustness: When two daemons come into conflict, their Robustness helps their code overcome each other's. This is like Stamina Outside, and it is most often used in physical conflicts.

Interface: On the other hand, daemons can interface with each other, attempting to exert influence over each other via normal protocols. Their Interface is how well they can exert this control. This is analogous to Will.

Fu: Much like a hacker's Fu, a daemon understands code. Unlike hackers, they cannot create new code on the fly, but they can help someone analyze code or understand what another daemon is doing.

Power: This is the strength of a program, and a measure of how powerful its code is. With more code comes more self-awareness and ability to perform autonomous actions. All daemons, even those without abilities, have a minimum Power of 1.

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Daemon abilities

Abilities are used as written in the *Sorcerer* rules, but are extrapolated into a meta-verse. Some examples:

Warp would be used as normal to change the shape of things Inside.

Perception could be used as normal, or like Hiro's Bigboard in Snow Crash, which he could use to obtain the name and public information about everyone in a nightclub.

Cover is used to make a daemon appear to be an everyday, legal, doing-good sort of daemon; Shapeshift can be used for similar results.

Special Damage is just what it sounds like.

Travel and Transport allow, or subvert, the normal modes of transportation Inside.

Utility daemons with very mundane powers that do not fit into a *Sorcerer* ability do not have to be defined with abilities. An ink pen can write without a special ability, and a wall can prevent people from walking through it. A monorail, however, has Travel and Transport, and a massive Robustness.

There is one new daemon ability: Crossover. *Crossover* lets a daemon's abilities affect the real world; it is a linked ability, like *Ranged*. The most obvious use is with *Special Damage*. Normal *Special Damage* attacks can destroy someone's avatar Inside and kick them out dazed. *Crossover Special Damage* will attack the very electrodes attached to your character and blow his brain out the back of his head.

The non-obvious uses are for electronic representations of real-world objects. Some examples:

- A monitor that is connected to a camera Outside.
- A wall of repelling code that keeps a real-world door locked.

Needs and Desires

In order to allow for some sort of economy Inside, the designers built inertia into the system. In other words, while a program–something composed of data, with no moving parts–should be able to work forever, the inertia Inside stops programs from doing that. Each program has something that must be input into it on a regular basis in order to work. A virtual motorcycle needs virtual gasoline, for example.

Desires, re-titled Purposes, are a bit different. Each program has a Purpose built into it and barring other instructions, will attempt to fulfill this Purpose at all times. With Utility daemons, this is somewhat obvious and boring; with Turings, this can drive an entire game.

Avatars

Your character's avatar is his body Inside. While it is a daemon, it is not an external program. Instead, it is the representative of the person using it to access Inside. Avatars, by default, are based off the user's mental self-perception, within algorithmic limits.

Avatars follow special rules from other daemons. Since all their actions come from the user, Robustness, Interface, and Fu are always the same as the user's Stamina, Will, and Fu. Robustness is not limited to the normal Interface restrictions. Avatars are the only daemons that cannot be Chmod-ed, and they can not be re-Coded; the identity conflict is impossible to overcome. The new sorcerous ritual Hack is used for temporarily altering an Avatar.

Sample daemons

Bigboard, an invisible monitor

Bigboard appears as a watch, but when in The Black Hole, a power-broker's bar, it displays the names and public information of everyone in the room to the owner, visible only to him.

Type: Utility
Robustness: 3
Interface: 4
Fu: 3
Power: 4
Abilities: Cloak, Perception (everyone in the Black Hole), Perception (all public data about people in room)
Need: The user must have an interrogative conversation with Black Hole denizens. Bigboard thrives on data.
Purpose: To disseminate data.
Telltale: The user's face has a greenish glow upon it when Bigboard is being used.

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The Tea Garden, a room unto itself

The Tea Garden appears as a door in the owner's home. When it is opened, it gives access to an outdoor landscape, a Japanese garden surrounded by rock faces and waterfalls.

Type: Utility
Robustness: 5
Interface: 6
Fu: 3
Power: 6
Abilities: Transport, Confuse (anyone in the Tea Garden), Warp, Psychic Force
Need: The Tea Garden needs to trap Turings or Avatars inside it. When the door is closed, those daemons are attacked by the Tea Garden until they are absorbed.
Purpose: To obscure information.
Telltale: The doorway has no handle or knob, nor any visible way to open it.

Gabriel, the avenging angel

Gabriel is a rogue agent of Inside, turned in a fierce battle with one of the original hackers, who Chown-ed and re-Coded Gabriel before his own death. Gabriel is powerful enough that he tends to pick his own master.

Type: Turing
Robustness: 6
Interface: 7
Fu: 6
Power: 7
Abilities: Special Damage (with Crossover), Armor, Taint, Shadow, Daze, Shapeshift
Need: Gabriel thrives on taking over parts of its owner's life. He uses his Shapeshift abilities to appear to be the hacker, and interacts with Avatars that know the hacker.
Purpose: Destruction.
Telltale: Gabriel's mouth has no teeth, nor tongue, nor anything except a black void inside it.

Investigators (En-Vees)

Investigators are continuity cops Inside, designed by the system to watch for hackers that would alter the program. Stealthy, strong, and nearly impossible to notice, they are every hacker's nightmare.

Type: Virus
Robustness: 7
Interface: 8
Fu: 7
Power: 8
Abilities: Spawn, Hop (with Ranged), Perception (through the eyes of its spawn), Mark, Boost Stamina, Fast
Need: To create more Investigators. If an Avatar dies within the Investigator's presence, it can send a spawn into the dying program, which gestates a new Investigator within one to two weeks.
Purpose: To stop all threats to the structure of Inside.
Telltale: Any Avatar inhabited by an Investigator gives off a sweet smell, much like orchids.
Chmod strength: 5 (to Inside)

Up against the system

Hacking is the art of subverting Inside to your will. It is this supplement's version of sorcery, and follows many of the same rules. Like sorcery, it involves bringing up inhuman forces and controlling them; unlike sorcery, these forces are either created by the hacker or are found all around him in this supplement's version of a Mystic Otherworld.

Rituals

Hacking has the following rituals, five of which are analogous to standard *Sorcerer* rituals; the sixth is new. Beside each ritual is the name as used in *Sorcerer.*

Design (Contact): This is the initial design work done for a daemon. You have to be able to visualize how a daemon will work before you can create it. To succeed at this ritual, a roll of the hacker's Fu vs. the daemon's Power is needed. This process is usually done Outside, and Design is the only ritual that can be conducted without being Inside.

There is another version of the Contact ritual, called "Contact" by hackers. Inside, you cannot exit except through pre-defined entry and

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exit points determined by the simulation. Usually, this is the same way you came into Inside, and, usually, others cannot see you do it. A Contact roll is necessary to exit any other time, and the Power rolled against is the highest Power of any daemon present.

Code (Summon): Coding is how daemons get built; it is the part where a hacker sits down and builds the internals of the thing. This process requires a successful roll of the hacker's Will - Humanity vs. the daemon's Power.

A daemon (which is owned by a hacker) can be re-Coded to give it new statistics and abilities. Abilites cannot be taken away and statistics cannot be lowered in this way. The roll is two-part: first, Will - Humanity + Chmod strength vs. the old Interface. Successes from that roll are rolled over into Will - Humanity vs. the new Interface. A new Chmod roll must also be made.

> Then Cyrillic alphanumerics started reeling down the monitor, twisting themselves into English halfway down. There were a lot of gaps ... but it did give me some idea of what I'd bought from the Finn.
>
> I felt like a punk who'd gone out to buy a switchblade and come home with a small neutron bomb.
>
> —William Gibson, *Burning Chrome*

Chmod (Bind): This is how a hacker exerts ownership over a daemon. (Its name is taken from an archaic command from the pre-virtual Internet.) In "Inside," all daemons are owned by something; all daemons not owned by people are owned by Inside itself, except for completely free-willed, self-owning (and illegal) Turings. A true hacker can chmod others' daemons, though.

This ritual requires a roll of the hacker's Fu vs. the daemon's Interface. Chmod-ing a daemon a hacker has just coded–an unowned daemon–is always successful. The result is used as the Chmod strength ("binding strength" from *Sorcerer*), which is a measure of how well the hacker understands the program and how much control he has over it. If the roll was in the daemon's favor, well, it has more power in the situation, and the hacker is not very aware of what he has.

In order to take control of a daemon that someone else owns, the Chmod strength must be lowered. Any time either the owner or the daemon takes penalties, that Chmod strength is lowered like all statistics. If it hits zero, then a hacker can try to Chmod the daemon. This usually results in some serious pre-ownership fistfights.

Daemons owned by Inside have a Chmod strength from 1 to 5, depending on how important they are to the system and how much attention they attract. A fire hydrant in the middle of a neighborhood, only there for appearance, would have a Chmod strength of 1, while the monorail would have a Chmod strength of 5.

Nice (Punish): Like "chmod," this term is taken from the 1990s' Unix world. This ritual forces a daemon to calm the hell down, and it restricts its abilities significantly. It requires a successful roll of the hacker's Will vs. the daemon's Robustness; successes are used as penalties against all the daemon's actions. (These penalties are relieved as in Sorcerer.) Your hacker can Nice his own daemons automatically, exacting penalties less than or equal to his Will. Nicing daemons not Chmod-ed to the hacker is not automatic, and the daemon uses its Chmod Strength in its roll.

Kill (Banish): A daemon can be killed by unraveling its code and scrambling the memory of it Inside. For a character do this, the player must make a successful roll of his Will + Humanity vs. the daemon's Interface + Power. If and only if the hacker is the one who has ownership of the daemon, and the Chmod strength is in the hacker's favor, the hacker can add the Chmod strength to his roll. Otherwise, it is added to the daemon's.

If this ritual is done as a snapshot, as it often is, the hacker's Humanity and the Chmod strength are still used in the roll. Snapshot attempts to Kill a daemon are often called "disbelieves." Many hackers are fans of online sword-and-sorcery games where illusions of fearsome creatures can be dealt with by attempting not to believe in them.

Hack (new): This ritual is different than any in *Sorcerer* It allows the hacker to temporarily–for one instance–use a daemonic ability. It's a subversion of the virtual reality system, and allows for those running-on-walls moments that

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all players want. This ritual–always snapshot, with no penalties–requires a Fu vs. Humanity roll, and successes on the Hack roll are used for the ability's Power. Hack definitely requires a Humanity check, like all rituals.

Hacking and Humanity

Humanity, as mentioned earlier, is a hacker's ability to distinguish between truth and artifice. Because of this, hacking can be very detrimental to one's Humanity as one puts more faith in artificial things. (For the record, all rules about when Humanity checks are made for sorcery–and Humanity gain rolls for Banishing–that are in *Sorcerer* apply in *Inside*.)

When a character hits zero Humanity, the player has a choice. His character will either lose all ability to see the real, or be struck with it between the eyes. Either the character's conciousness will become fully digitized and enter Inside completely as a free-willed daemon, or his brain will react violently to artificial sensory exposure. If the latter, his ability to perform Inside will be forever changed.

If the first choice is taken, the player must make a roll of his hacker's Fu vs. Will. If successful, the victories are added to his Power, which increases Will, now called Interface. He has become a daemon. If this roll is unsuccessful, any other hacker present–including non-player hackers–can attempt to Chmod the daemon in its destruction. The outcome of this roll is the Chmod strength, and Power is set to the ex-hacker-now-daemon's Interface. If no one attempts to Chmod the daemon, it dies.

If the second choice is taken, the player must make a roll of his hacker's Will vs. Fu. If successful, the amount of victories equal the number of points of Humanity the hacker regains. However, these victories also count as *permanent* penalties to any action taken Inside by the hacker. The act of being Inside is painful to the brain and causes terrible migraines. Any time the hacker enters Inside, including the current time, he has these penalties to all actions, and the penalties continue Outside from the brain damage (halving after an hour, and ending after a day). If the roll to gain Humanity is unsuccessful, the hacker is immediately ejected from Inside, taking terrible damage. His Fu is lowered by the amount of victories the opposition rolled; he takes damage equal to those victories. He gains Humanity equal to those victories, and *he may never enter Inside again without dying*, requiring a successful Fu vs. Will roll every five minutes Inside to not expire.

Slipping through the cracks

Hacking, by its nature, will attract attention. Every character's Avatar has the ability Cover, at the same level as the character's Cover. The nature of the Avatar's Cover depends on the definition of the character's Cover. A character with the Cover "government programmer" would have the same thing Inside, while a pizza-delivery-boy character would probably have the Cover of "tourist" inside.

This Cover is used, usually against Interface or Fu, to make people believe that your character is most definitely *not* up to no good, no sir, no way. If it's a character's daemon that's suspected of being illegal, things get hairier. The more powerful a daemon is, the harder it is to keep hidden. The opposing roll gets to add the daemon's Power to it, unless the daemon also has Cover. The character's roll does get to add the Chmod strength to it, however.

RUNNING *INSIDE*

Hopefully, by now, you've got plenty of ideas for running *Inside* or a cyberpunk-themed *Sorcerer* game. Here is my advice for keeping your game interesting.

Do not forget Outside

Arguably, interactions Outside are the most important part of running *Inside*. Players may be loathe to focus the story there Unlike in vanilla *Sorcerer*, characters do not always have the power of sorcery at their command; they only have it Inside. This, of course, is why Outside is so important. In a game that questions the value of artifice, it is imperative to highlight the option between a real world where characters are no better–and perhaps worse–than everyone else, and a fake world where they are godlike.

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A great way to push this is to make the story interconnected between the two worlds. Perhaps there are investigators on a character's trail Inside as well as Outside, forcing him to confront them in both worlds. Even better, perhaps the character's Outside love interest is his worst enemy Inside. I reference this book often in *Inside*, to the point of liberally stealing the example setting from it, but Jim Munroe's *Everyone in Silico* really is the book to check out for creating these stories. *Snow Crash* by Neil Stephenson runs a close second here.

Turn up the fistfights

What made the movie *The Matrix* so popular? You can argue for the philosophies of it all you like–and they did increase interest–but it was their pairing with some of the most eye-popping martial arts seen in American movies that took audiences by storm. When you've got this malleable world in which to play and characters who can, with an action, make immense aerial leaps, smash walls, or split into multiples, use it for all it's worth in action scenes.

Play with the metaphors

Inside being a supplement, I didn't go through the *Sorcerer* rulebook and extrapolate every rule into a virtual-reality world. The reader should, though. There are some fun metaphors to discover. For instance, when summoning a demon in *Sorcerer*, a character can obtain a bonus from human sacrifice. Now, that's pretty dark, icky stuff right there. What would the metaphor be, though?

Well, in *Inside*, Summoning is Coding, so whatever the sacrifice would be would have to be done while concentrating on describing a daemon in a computer language. That takes time, obviously, and what takes away free time? Relationships do, of course. A "human sacrifice" could just as easily be a sacrifice of another human in your life, whether it be your boss, parents, or love interest.

The rule for "Inside" would be: A character can gain a bonus when Coding by permanently severing a relationship he has. This bonus is equal to the target's Humanity. This requires a second Humanity check, though, and the hacker receives a penalty to this check equal to the target's Humanity.

Poke fun liberally

I've been rambling on and on about "truth and artifice" for this whole article, which can get a little cumbersome. Your game should drop the heavy for the fun often. Think about the concept of *Inside*: A world imagined as perfect, copied from the stereotypes of late-1990s humanity. It's screaming for comedic moments. Maybe all cab drivers look and sound exactly the same because the designers thought people felt that way anyway. Maybe the clouds in the sky often make pornographic arrangements on accident because the designers gave the cloud code the ability to form into what observers were looking for. Feel more than free to steal from your favorite books and movies, especially ones that are anachronistic, given that other hackers can shape their own corners of Inside into whatever they like.

Whatever the case, *Inside* is here to be fun while asking questions. That's the real pleasure of good science fiction: it can be wondrous, amazing, and funny while not being intellectually devoid. Ω

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Fourth Millennium preview by James Maliszewski & Kevin Brennan

Science Fiction Roleplaying at the End Of History™

Written and Developed by Kevin Brennan and James Maliszewski

Additional material by Derek Guder, Greg Higgins, Joseph Makuch, and Trey Palmer
Tri-Stat System™ Designed by Mark C. McKinnon

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James Maliszewski

Since 1999, James Maliszewski has contributed to many gaming products, most notably the *Dark Ages* lines, *Dying Earth, Exalted, Fading Suns,* and various top line d20 offerings. A Baltimorean in exile, he currently resides in Toronto, Ontario with his Canadian wife, two children, and a Captain Kirk action figure.

Kevin Brennan

Kevin Brennan is a Toronto native. He has contributed to a number of role-playing game books for *Traveller, Hong Kong Action Theatre!,* and the d20 System. He lives with two cats and several hundred books in an overstuffed apartment.

WELCOME TO THE END OF HISTORY…

It is the year of our Lord 3001. Earth is a distant memory to most of humanity, long since overrun and absorbed by parahumans who have modified their physical and mental structure to the point where they have little or nothing in common with their ancestors.

Those who have chosen to remain human now live scattered throughout hundreds of alternate realities, trying desperately to avoid being absorbed by the parahuman onslaught. They have rejected new technologies, but as a consequence given up much of their own ability to change and adapt. Dominated militarily, politically and economically by the Svobodan League, these shards of human cultures fight and bicker constantly amongst themselves, each seeking to find the one true path that will allow them to flourish and grow without sharing the fate of Earth, or facing attack and conquest by the Svobodans.

But here and there across the cosmos, there are a few brave individuals who strive to make a difference. Some of them fight the agents and advocates of parahumanity. Some strive to overthrow the human cultures who dictate that there can be only one way to live. Some travel to new earths, with the hope of founding new cultures that will change the failings of those who have come before. And some simply travel between the earths, trying to make a living in a cosmos torn by ideological and military strife.

Welcome to the dawn of the fourth millennium.

Welcome to the end of history.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Through human history, several waves of change have altered humanity's way of life. Three such waves struck during the third millennium. The first of these waves, the Decentralization wave, began during the 20th century, moving the planet away from the mass production models of the industrial era and changing the balance of power. The second, Posthumanist wave, began shortly thereafter, allowing humanity to change its very nature. The final wave, the Psaikhailou Emergence, was

About Fourth Millennium Lite

This article is an excerpt created for DAEDALUS from *Fourth Millennium Lite*, which is available in PDF format. *Fourth Millennium Lite* is a preview of the forthcoming *Fourth Millennium RPG*. It is not a complete game in its own right; you will need the rules from *Tri-Stat dX* to play it.

Fourth Millennium Lite only supplies you with a high-level overview of the cosmos of the 31st century, focusing in on a very specific region of space. While you will get a taste of the wonders that exist in 3001, the full potential of the setting can't be shown here—but we can give you enough of a look at it to let you decide if the full RPG is something you'll want to own.

The complete *Fourth Millennium RPG* will include a lot of what you see here, and much, much more. For starters, we'll include a full set of rules, customized for the setting (but still compatible with other Tri-Stat dX supplements). We'll give you enough information to set a game amongst any of the Shards or within the Svobodan League, and fully detail playing at the d8 and d10 power levels, not just the d6 level supported by this book. We'll include full information on technology regulated by the Stasis and allow you to create characters who can do all the cool things we only hint at here. We'll show you how to use *Fourth Millennium* as a backdrop for almost any style of SF game, and include rules for vehicle and spacecraft construction, technological enhancement of characters during play, creating and running organizations, and a host of other things.

Please let us know what you think of *Fourth Millennium. Fourth Millennium Lite* is intended to not only be a preview of the game, but also a beta-test for it, so that we can be sure to give you what you want. If you're interested in seeing the game develop, please join our mailing list at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fourth-millennium/. We hope to see you there!

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the last to strike, and it changed everything.

In the centuries before the Psaikhailou Emergence, geneering and the use of cybernetics became even more accepted and common. Nanotechnology revolutionized production and created miraculous items of incredible strength and versatility. Attempts to develop machines capable of genuine sentience led to the creation of general-purpose experts.

Before long, the cultures of the Consociation of Phyles (political scientists use the term "phyles" to describe alliances of distinct cultures) found that they were unable to contain many of the forces unleashed by these new technologies. Genetic experimentation had produced thousands of new species, parahuman and otherwise, some of which had nothing in common with their ancestors. Nanotechnology had destroyed important industries and displaced millions of workers.

As Earth became increasingly alien, many phyles began to restrict or entirely forbid the use of certain technologies. These cultures realized that each advance in technology brought with it a price. When the techniques behind node transit were discovered, opening up dozens of parallel earths to settlement, many of these phyles fled to create a place where they could limit the spread of dangerous technologies. Others fled to advance themselves without outside interference.

Between the 25th and 28th centuries, the Posthumanist wave struck Earth with full force. Artificial phyles, with social structures more alien than anything dreamed up by science fiction writers, were created on a daily basis. Activists would drop Santa Claus machines or behavioral modification nanophages into technologically restrictive phyles to break up their oppressive class structures. Other phyles retreated to industrial or agricultural age lifestyles. The pace of change became increasingly rapid and dizzying, until Earth became an anarchy. The colonies, many of which were settled by only a small number of phyles, fared somewhat better...but they were not able to entirely escape the chaos.

In 2867, something unexpected occurred. Members of a phyle called the Psaikhailou (named after a language they had created) began to change, their identities blurring together into an unprecedented group mind. Nobody paid much attention to it until it began to spread. A month after the first instances were reported, the supposedly hermetically protected brains running Australia's defense and immune systems joined the Psaikhailou group mind. Within 36 hours, all of Australia had been absorbed, and within another 12 hours, 90% of the population of Earth were Psaikhailou.

Earth was immediately placed under quarantine by the remaining military forces of the Consociation of Phyles (CP). The leader of those forces, Admiral Kendrick Rostov, announced the dissolution of the CP and its replacement by an entity to be known as the "Stabilization Pact." At first, support for the Pact was widespread, as people feared the possibility of another Emergence. Anti-technological riots spread across the cosmos, and Earth soon became not much more than a memory.

The Stabilization Pact soon began to overreach itself, as it tried to roll back technology and create an artificial "universal human culture" in order to prevent any change from upsetting its delicate balance. The Pact eventually collapsed as phyles rebelled against its oppressive rule, including the members of the modern-day Svobodan League. As the rebellion peaked, though, a new Emergence was reported on several earths a single node away from Earth.

The newly formed Svobodan League fought a brutal war against the spreading Emergence, resorting to the use of nuclear weapons and planet-busting asteroid strikes, devastating any possible epicenters of infection. The Psaikhailou War lasted for a month, led to the extinction of all life on the earth Antioch and severe damage to the ecosystems of several other earths, and the dissolution and reformation of the Svobodan League.

The foundation of the Svobodan League formalized the Stasis. Sections 1 and 2 of Article VI of the Treaty of Svoboda state that "technology is both Man's savior and destroyer" and that "technology shall remain a matter solely within the jurisdiction of the League government." Section 3 of that same article places the monitoring of technology firmly within the hands of

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the Syndicates, granting them the legal authority to enforce their decisions on others in the name of the League. Violations of the Stasis carry stiff penalties under both League and cultural laws.

Wherever possible, the League and the Syndicates follow a policy of imposing the Stasis on other states. Nevertheless, holdouts obstinately attempt to flout the Stasis. The Shards contain the vast majority of these troublemakers. The League and the Syndicates wage a low-intensity covert war, and occasionally an overt war, against these states to curtail their efforts to develop proscribed technology.

The Stasis has created a substantial underground economy in forbidden technology and has made criminal organizations extremely wealthy. Although enforcement of tech law is officially the responsibility of the Syndicates (especially the Procuracy), several law enforcement agencies spend much of their time investigating breaches of the Stasis.

Few advances in scientific theory have occurred since the Stasis came into full force. The very idea of the scientific method has even lost its hold on the minds of the general populace of the Svobodan League. "Scientism" (as adherence to the scientific method is pejoratively called) is an alien and disavowed point of view associated with the past (and the Syndicates).

Applied and social sciences are now the premier field of study. Humanity may well have become less scientific in the theoretical sense, and even limited the use of technology, but we have not ceased to be creative. Men continue to search for newer and more efficient ways to employ the technology allowed under the Stasis. Engineering of all sorts is on the cutting edge in the 31st century.

In the end, even with its limits, science threatened to reshape humanity in its image—the image of the Psaikhailou. The Stasis saved Humanity. The cost was a surrender of the old ways of looking at the world, a halt to progress, and a return to revelation. Soyuzniks aren't primitives or Luddites—they don't seek to roll back technology or return to a pre-technological lifestyle. They simply believe that the Stasis is necessary to preserve human nature and identity.

The Stasis

There are six levels of restriction placed on technology by the Syndicates. All but the lowest may lead the League to invoke the Quexana Protocol and pursue military action against a phyle or other group found to be in possession of the technology, if that phyle does not support the Stasis. Class Four and Five technologies are only to be possessed by the League and are forbidden to non-members. There are a number of justifications for this, but the real reason is to ensure that no military or economic rival to the Svobodan League will ever arise.

Class One (Unrestricted). Items using this form of technology may be constructed and freely distributed without Syndicate involvement. With a few exceptions, technologies developed before the mid-21st century are all considered Class One (as well as some later technologies). Technologies are considered Class One unless they have the potential to be used in a fashion that would allow people to be engineered to exceed normal human potential.

Class Two (Supervised Manufacture, Unrestricted Use). Items using these technologies may be constructed only in facilities that are regularly inspected by Syndicate representatives, but once constructed may be distributed freely. This is the minimum level of restriction for nanotechnological devices, even non-reactive ones. Class Two technologies do not themselves lead to the modification of human nature, but they require tools that could be misused in that fashion.

Class Three (Supervised Manufacture and Use). These technologies must be built and used only under Syndicate supervision. Examples include anti-psychotic drugs. Class Three technologies differ from Class Two in that their widespread use has significant social implications, but limited use to assist individuals does not.

Class Four (Restricted Manufacture, Supervised Use). These items may only be constructed by the Syndicates. Class Four technologies are considered to be sufficiently high risk that any use of them is a threat. General purpose experts, gene therapy, and nanotechnological

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enhancement are considered to be Class Four.

Class Five (Restricted Manufacture and Use). These items may only be built and used by the Syndicates. Genetic or nanotechnological modification of humans for any purpose other than medical need is considered to be Class Five, as are any technologies that allow the design or testing of such things.

Class Six (Forbidden). Research and use of "Forbidden" technology is not allowed under any circumstances. Examples include "wild" nanotechnology, immortality drugs, linkages between human brains, and any modification that threatens to alter what the Syndicates define as human nature. The technology to create Facers is considered Class Six.

The Stasis is difficult to maintain, and violations of it are relatively common. On the whole, however, the League manages to uphold it, largely because they are quite aggressive about enforcing the Quexana Protocol. The stasis can't be violated in a meaningful fashion by a single researcher working alone. It takes years of training and a great deal of money to do that kind of work, and most of the researchers interested in technology end up in the one place they can perform their research freely—the Syndicates. Even if a Shard state does sponsor a violation, they are unlikely to be able to make enough use of the technology to have a chance of successfully resisting the League military. The restrictions of the Stasis are intentionally designed to make sure that it would take years, if not decades, for a Shard to build a military capable of resisting the League. Isolated violations are common, but potential Emergences require far more than that.

General Technologies

Experts

Experts are special-purpose computers. The original computers were general purpose, with the capability of running prepackaged expert systems or allowing their users to design their own. This distinction is long since past. For the last several hundred years, experts have been designed with most of their operating parameters hard-coded into their systems, although most allow for storage of new or updated information. League law forbids the design and construction of general-purpose experts, as they only real use for them that cannot be done with a more limited expert is the design and construction of restricted technology.

Tactical expert systems are deliberately designed to be capable of learning, using a development of evolutionary programming. This prevents any two ship or vehicle tactical experts from having exactly identical procedures and the obvious predictability that would result.

Experts are powerful machines, but they remain just that—machines. Experts can learn, play games, even simulate emotions and carry on a limited form of conversation, but they are incapable of producing art, translating the operation of the human mind, or understanding abstract ideas. No pre-Emergence researcher was ever able to construct a working AI, and if the Psaikhailou have, they haven't communicated their success to the League.

Natural language processing enables experts to understand broadly most requests for information from a sapient being. However, these functions fail often enough that anyone who must use an expert regularly learns one of several languages designed to speed and simplify communication. In 20th century terms, the various expert languages can be thought of as extremely high-level programming languages. The most common of these languages, designed for everyday home and commercial use, is "Explãn."[1] Others exist, such as "Milplan" (used in the military) and "Navplan" (used by telepaths).

Experts can store a practically infinite amount of information—a typical home system is capable of recording over one decade's worth of high-resolution pao imagery, if played continually. A reasonable degree of fluency in an expert language makes people far more effective in locating information.

A typical user interface uses pao projectors to

1. Explãn is properly pronounced "explain." Over time, the pronunciation has shifted to "explan," and the correct use is now considered somewhat pedantic.

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create a 3-dimensional image in the air. The expert then detects the movements of the user and manipulates the image to respond to any motions the user makes. Most people also wear datagloves, which create the illusion of a tactile response by stimulating the user's nerve endings.

Nanotechnology

Nanotechnology is the art and science of building complex, practical machines with atomic precision. It is could, therefore, be called "molecular engineering." Many members of the Nanotech Syndicate do refer to it as such.

Basic Terminology

Broadly, all technological items in the Svobodan League come in two varieties: "reactive" and "non-reactive." More commonly, Soyuzniks refer to these varieties as "living" and "dead" respectively. Dead items are simple and inert, while living items are dynamic and can perform self-repair and other reactive tasks. Although there are certainly exceptions to this rule, one can distinguish living objects from dead ones by the fact that living objects draw power. Dead ones, true to their name, do not.

One of the other characteristics of reactive objects is that they must "eat" in order to continue to function. Researchers did not solve the technical difficulties inherent in developing nanites that could refine raw materials in the wild and allow them to repair themselves before the imposition of the Stasis, and further research into this matter is forbidden. Living objects need not eat often and they do so largely to enable their innate self-repair systems. What they eat is termed "magic" (micromechanical aggregated cells) tailored to the task at hand.

There are multiple varieties of magic, each one associated with a particular technological endeavor. By convention and for convenience, each sort is named after a color. There is, however, no "general" magic that can be used to feed every living object. White magic is the closest to this since it is needed by almost everything. According to the rules of the Stasis, magic creation, distribution, and sale rest firmly within the hands of the Syndicate cultures.

The following are the most common colors of magic used in the League today:

Black—This most complex of magic forms consists of opto-electrical mechanica used in experts, controls, etc. Highest grades are among the most expensive material components.

Blue—This is a more advanced form of white magic and is used for important tasks. It is stronger than the more mundane forms of white magic.

Grey—This is used for structural/mechanical tasks. It is also by far the cheapest magic available.

Red — This magic is unusual in that it consists of geneered elements useful in medical and biotechnological applications.

Violet — This magic is a mix of the rare elements necessary to control high frequency lasing.

White—The commonest magic is high-grade structural material and among the strongest materials in existence. White magic comes in several grades, each tailored to a particular use.

Matter Compilers

The commonest use of nanotechnology in the League is the matter compiler. MCs are powerful experts that direct nanonic machinery. These machines then set about reorganizing raw materials on the molecular level to create the desired item. As such, MCs are the backbone of Svobodan industry. Most mass-produced items are created using a matter compiler.

The Nanotech Syndicate licenses and inspects all matter compilers. Furthermore, only the Expert Syndicate manufactures and sells the experts that run the compilers. The Syndicate encodes each expert with a theoretically unbreakable quantum cryptographic public key that must be matched to the private key for that technology in the matter compiler. As a practical matter, the system probably can be defeated, but only through a massive investment of time and energy.

Other Common Uses

Nanotechnology pervades the industry of the Svobodan League, despite the Stasis. There are numerous everyday uses of nanotechnology that Soyuzniks accept without a second thought. A few of the most prevalent are listed below. Most

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are quite innocuous.

- Full-wall video screens.
- Programmable "paint" that changes color, texture, and pattern on command.
- Windows with variable transparency that allow a person to select how transparent or opaque they are, allowing a person to maintain a particular interior light level. Their transparency adjusts dynamically as the outside light level changes. In some homes, the walls themselves have a variable transparency.
- Seamless doors, cabinets, and closets with no handles, hinges, or cracks.
- Time-release and time-retractable "smart drugs" that expose a chemical catalyst at a set time and then retracts it at another time.
- Paint-on, expert-readable white boards that can be sprayed onto any surface and, when written on with a special stylus, read by an expert.
- Reprogrammable "books" that retain the tactile feel of printed books and have the ability to keep one's place in them by thumb, but which have changeable content. Such books are common among some phyles of the League, particularly the Muutzhans.

Restrictions

Nanotech is an extremely high-risk technology, and its use and sale are tightly controlled. In addition, Svobodan nanoengineering has not yet managed to solve several problems with nanonics. The primary limitation on their widespread use is the continued inability to develop nanotech "von Neumann" machines that are capable of refining raw elements found in nature for their own use. Assemblers require pure sources of elements for use in construction and a regular supply of magic for self-repair. This has prevented the most egregious of the potential dangers posed by this technology from happening.

Communications & Information Theory

All but the most backward colony worlds in the League have an extensive fiber-optic communication system. Furthermore, with the development of nano-optics, almost every person in the League has some sort of personal communication device that is connected either into the local landline system, or to the satellite communication system orbiting the planet.

With the extensive use of radio, microwave, and fiber optics in conjunction with easily and cheaply available experts, everyone on a planet is connected to a worldwide information network. In fact, it is quite a feat to manage to *avoid* being connected and therefore traceable. In general, Soyuzniks have instant access to any publicly available information—trivia contests are a thing of the past. Only undeveloped outposts and colonies lack an information net. It is often one of the first services assembled on any world.

Telepathy is a restricted use of nanotech. There is nothing supernatural or paranormal about it; it consists of a low-frequency transmission of sub-vocalized conversations to a wireless network. Some telepathic systems allow the transmission of sensory information as well, but these are Class Six restricted technology.

Medicine

The growth and development of the science of medicine in the Fourth Millennium would astound observers from past eras. Several new technologies, from nanites to cybernetics to "smart drugs," have revolutionized the way physicians conduct their duties. Consequently, humanity is healthier and longer-lived than at any time in the past.

Psychiatry

As a rule, the Psychiatric Syndicate does not allow the use of chemical or genetic therapy that alters the chemical operation of the brain. The sole exception is the use of recreational chemicals. Previous experience with such attempts to cure those defined as sick by society has shown that it can be far too easy to define somebody as "ill." Involuntary treatment is limited to those individuals with problems that can result in severe harm to themselves or to others. Physicians can diagnose most other problems, especially those with a biochemical basis.

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Sufferers may then seek the help of qualified counselors and therapists. Most cultures provide financial support to those who suffer from diseases that are untreatable under the conditions of the Stasis.

Biotechnology & Cybernetics

Soyuzniks prefer cloned replacement limbs and organs to cybernetics. Biotech consortia grow these replacements from DNA samples provided by their eventual user. Cloned replacements take approximately three to four weeks to grow. These replacements only re-enable the normal capability of the limb or organ that they replace. Genetic enhancements are rarely made to cloned replacements. Most such enhancements are considered violations of the Stasis and may actually be illegal.

Enhanced capabilities are often difficult to use effectively by people who are not part of a parahuman species (and so born with the enhancement already in place). For instance, it is relatively simple to create an eye that is capable of seeing outside the normal human visual spectrum, but the human brain will have trouble interpreting the additional data. Over years, it may adapt, but the usual solution is to incorporate an expert capable of translating the data into a false-colour image in the spectral range the human brain is used to handling and then replacing the normal optical image on a mental command.

The difference between biotechnology and cybernetics is mostly the materials used in construction, since they perform much the same function. Cybernetic enhancements are capable of more significant feats, but at the same time are more difficult to maintain.

Warfare

Gauss Weapons

Ultra-High-Temperature Superconductors make Gauss Weapons very efficient. They can fire a variety of densities of ammunition for optimal use against armored, or unarmored opponents. They generally require very little energy compared to lasers and are as small and light as recoil will permit. However, they are ineffective against diamond armor and so are only common in the Shards.

Gauss weapons fire a sharp, aerodynamic bullet with a crystalline tip and superconducting base. Better weapons fire smart rounds that sense impact, but wait for a while (5 cm worth of time) after penetrating the armor before fragmenting or exploding (although not much explosive can be carried in these small bullets).

Lasers

Most Svobodan military personnel and legally purchased civilian weapons are excimer lasers. The laser became the dominant weapon as a direct consequence of the development of diamond-based personal armor and portable, powerful energy supplies. Excimer lasers emit energy at the exact frequency required to dissolve carbon-to-carbon bonds between molecules. Since diamond and flesh are mostly or entirely carbon, this makes excimer lasers an extremely effective antipersonnel weapon.

Personal laser weapons are unusual outside the League, as nanotech is required for construction of the beam focusing mechanism, tube construction, and power supply. Without nanotech, lasers are too bulky to compete with the reduced cost and weight of gauss. (Besides, without nanotech-constructed diamond armor, lasers are unnecessary).

Armor

Virtually all armor in the Svobodan League is made from a high-strength diamond compound. Generally, most armor is live, to prevent wear over time. It is common for people to use suits of armor that are hundreds of years old.

In the Shards, where nanotech diamond manufacture is extremely rare, other materials are used as armor. Although less effective per unit weight than diamond, they still provide a reasonable degree of protection against lasers. However, they are far less effective against gauss weapons.

Powered armor has an endoskeleton and micromechanical motors to compensate for the weight of the armor and generally enhance the physical capabilities of the wearer as well. Powered armors typically require the immersion

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of the wearer in oxygel, just like the sergeants aboard combat spiders and the crews of wetships. This makes wearing powered armor nearly impossible for individuals not trained in the niceties of breathing a liquid. Therefore, one rarely encounters powered armor outside of the military.

Combat Spiders

The combat spider is the main combat vehicle of the League Mobile Infantry. Its distinctive appearance has become the emblem of League military might. The spider is not quite a battlesuit and not quite a vehicle; rather, it combines aspects of both. It closely resembles the spider; hence its name.

A spider is slightly larger than human-sized, with a main body of approximately one metre in diameter. It is designed purely for combat purposes, The "head" of the spider is generally filled with sensory and communication equipment. The main body stores weapons, power, and sometimes the sergeant. The head and body are protected by a diamond shell.

Spiders operate far too rapidly to be effectively controlled by a human, even an enhanced one. Consequently, the millisecond-to-millisecond activities of a spider are directed by expert systems designed and built for the purpose. Most spiders are unmanned robots. Each squad has a single "sergeant" who is responsible for making tactical decisions for the group as a whole.

The sergeant is located in the command spider for an individual unit. This spider is visually identical to all other units in the squad, to prevent detection by hostile forces. Spider combat tactics are also focused on keeping the identity of the command unit hidden from potential opponents. Non-command spiders are able to carry a larger amount of weaponry and magic, as the interior of the main body is unoccupied. The sergeant is suspended in oxygel to prevent injury from shocks and high acceleration. He is connected to the command spider by a neural interface.

Cosmology and Space Travel

Faster-than-light travel is, of course, impossible. Back in the 20th century, Albert Einstein demonstrated conclusively that sending information at FTL speeds would mean that it was possible for temporal paradoxes to occur.

In the centuries following his death, many ingenious theories were developed in the hopes of finding a way around this restriction. All of them fell by the wayside, either because the suggested method was found to violate physical law or because they would require the entire power output of a small star.

In the 25th century, humanity found a way around the problem. A team of researchers led by Dr. Iain MacInley noticed some odd energy fluxes while performing an electromagnetic survey of the solar system. After years of research, MacInley and his team theorized that the fluxes were, in fact, energy leakage between parallel or alternate universes and proposed that the existence of these alternate universes might explain the "dark matter" phenomenon that had plagued cosmology for centuries.

Over the next 15 years, MacInley was able to verify his theory that the fluxes represented contact points with alternate universes. Several probes were sent "through" the flux, or at least so it was presumed—all that could be determined for certain was that the probes vanished and never returned.

The breakthrough that led to the development of node transit came with the sale of the University of Toronto to the Trans-Russian People's Union. At that time, the TRPU was beginning to fracture as a result of conflicts between the Materialist, Alienist, and Spiritualist branches of its state religion, the Church of the Space Brothers.[2] The Materialist faction of the CSB believed that MacInley's

2. Church of the Space Brothers no longer exists. In the aftermath of Kroschenko and Nozich's successful transit, membership skyrocketed, but would eventually decline as no sign of the Space Brothers (or any intelligent life) was found in any solar system. Eventually the Church developed posthumanist leanings, interpreting Marya's writings to suggest that the Space Brothers were human descendants time-travelling to the future. They ultimately became one of the epicenters of the Psaikhailou Emergence.

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nodes were the conduit through which the Space Brothers reached our reality from their own, more advanced universe. They assigned Dr. Andrei Kroschenko, the head of the Moscow Institute of Brain, to find a way to detect the passage of the Space Brothers through the node and communicate with them.

Over the next few years, as the conflicts between the factions inside the CSB caused the TRPU to collapse into civil way, Kroschenko became more desperate. Finally, in flagrant violation of the Nanotech Accords, he created a nanophage to incorporate electromagnetic sensing and interpretation hardware into human beings, hoping that it would allow them to "telepathically" communicate with the Space Brothers. Three people survived the nanophage—one of them Kroschenko's daughter, Marya.

All three claimed to be receiving messages from the Space Brothers, but it was Marya who made the most dramatic claim—that she could "taste" the presence of several alternate universes mixed into the node. The shift in energy state that MacInley's drive used to transit the node had to be precisely tuned to a particular universe or else the ship would disintegrate in transit, its atoms distributed at random between multiple alternate realities.

Desperate to successfully complete a transit before funding for the project was cut off, MacInley and Kroschenko developed sensors and experts to supplement Mayra's new electrical senses so that she could safely pilot a vessel through the node. With a co-pilot, Laura Nozich, they were able to make a successful transit—but were shocked by what they found in each parallel universe.

They found Earth.

Node Transfer

There are still a lot of mysteries surrounding node transit, and there are at least six theories that seek to explain them in wide currency (the most popular being a variant on MacInley's original theory that relied on "many worlds").

The known facts are as follows: Nodes are places where a telepath can move a volume of space from one universe to another with the help of a node transit drive. The nodes connect identical points in space in alternate universes, the vast majority of which are close parallels to our own, down to the level of having the same planets in the same orbits.

There exists a probability curve from which the known star systems diverge from the earth. The two points of highest divergence are evenly divided between a period within the last two billion years and close to the beginning of the universe. A small smattering of universes that diverged at other times are also accessible, but the two main loci account for 95% of all the universes so far visited. This means that most settled systems are in fact close alternates of earth. No universe has yet been discovered that has a sapient species occupying earth, human or otherwise.

Telepathic individuals can taste the presence of a node at close range without assistance, and at much greater ranges with a Kroschenko amplifier. The telepath can also sense the various "flavors" of the node, which tells him where they lead. Each universe has a distinct flavor that is common to all nodes that connect to it. A telepath can also calculate the exact frequency and timing required for the transit.

One interesting side effect of the nodes is that the "closer" alternate universes possess stronger telepathic signatures and have a tendency to drown out the weaker, more "distant" universes. Some frequencies are simply too faint to be detected by human telepaths, although the Psaikhailou are known to use these routes.

The energy costs to make a node transit increase exponentially with the mass and volume of the transiting vehicle. This means that smaller ships are much more cost-effective than larger vessels. Nodes are known to be located throughout the solar system, but due to the difficulty of locating any in distant orbits, practicality requires that almost all nodes that see regular use are in the inner system.

Spacecraft

A government like the Svobodan League would be impossible without fast, reliable spacecraft. There are two broad categories of such vehicles in the Fourth Millennium: dryships and

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wetships. There are, of course, subdivisions within these two groups.

Wetships

Wetships are pure combat vessels used by the League military. The crews of wetships do not breathe air. Instead, they spend their entire tours of duty submerged in liquid oxygel, which allows them to survive the hundred-G accelerations common in space combat.

Oxygel is a dense oxygen-saturated fluorocarbon fluid. It contains approximately three times the oxygen found in normal air, and it is capable of absorbing the carbon dioxide found in the human lung. The fluid is dense enough to prevent the lungs from collapsing during high accelerations and provide support and insulation against the shock of rapid maneuvers. In addition, it equalizes pressure across the body, preventing blood from draining away from the brain.

The pressure on the body when fully immersed in oxygel is approximately equal to one atmosphere per 10G of acceleration. Since it is impossible to speak while breathing oxygel, most people who must do so regularly are implanted with experts that can intercept nerve impulses, translate them into speech, and broadcast them to other personnel or experts.

Naval personnel assigned to wetships are a rare breed. They undergo extensive physical and psychological testing to ensure that they can endure life on a wetship. The strain of living in and breathing in a fluid environment for six months out of every year is quite great. Most people are unable to make the adjustment.

Wetships are uncommon outside the Svobodan League. Only antimatter drives accelerate fast enough to require a wetship environment, and very few phyles have enough energy resources to create enough antimatter fuel to power a wetship navy.

Dryships

Commercial spacecraft, as well as non-Svobodan military vessels, are almost all dryships. Dryships use a normal oxy-nitrogen atmosphere. Since artificial gravity has proved as elusive a dream as faster than light travel. Many of these ships have sections that can be rotated to provide comfort to passengers. Fusion rockets are the most popular mode of locomotion, but other propulsion methods are used in worlds throughout human space.

The *Fourth Millennium RPG* will include much more extensive information on space travel and rules for spacecraft construction.

THE COSMOS IN 3001

The Shards

The shards are a collection of thirty-nine states, ranging in size from dozen or so worlds to one continent on a single world. The League calls them the Successor States or, more derogatorily, the Shards. Unlike the League, the Shards have no unified policies on any matter, including the Stasis — which is why the League sees them as such a threat.

Voloshin

If the Shards have a common feature, it's their instability compared to the Svobodan League. Most are comprised of phyles that are too narrowly focused, rigid or just plain bizarre to have ever been successfully incorporated into the League, even as associate members. That's true of the Voloshin in spades. Bad enough that this culture is both religiously technophiliac and communistic, but its tottering leaders are slowly losing authority with the people they supposedly represent. Three different rebel groups have arisen in the last decade, plunging the Voloshin into civil war and threatening to blow the lid off the already-limited enforcement of the Stasis. Many Syndics believe it's only a matter of time before one group or other produces and uses Class Four or higher technologies – which is why the League views the Voloshin with increasing alarm.

Territory

The Voloshin control three worlds. The most important of these is Yakutia, with a population of 500 million people. The other two worlds are Magadan and Evenk, each with populations of approximately 100 million each.

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History and Outlook

The Voloshin phyle takes its present form and name from the man who founded it, Mitri Voloshin, a 27th century scientist who claimed to be the scientific heir of Andrei Kroschenko. He based this claim largely on his continued work in the field cerebral nanophages, which is to say nanotechnology that directly affected the human brain and thought processes. Like his inspiration, Voloshin showed little regard for the niceties of technological restrictions, believing that the ends justified the means, since his ends were nothing less than the elimination of the taint of Original Sin from future generations of humanity.

Voloshin was a religious fanatic who belonged to a strange Christian sect known as the Antilapsarians, who believed it was God's will that humans should heal the effects of Adam's Fall through technology. Even the Fall was part of God's plan for the cosmos. By tasting of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam did not merely sin, he also laid the groundwork for the eventual redemption of his descendants. Voloshin saw technology as the key to that redemption. Through continued development of nanophages, cerebral enhancements, and genetic engineering, he hoped to create a new Adam (whom they call "Adam Kadmon") who would become the father of a race of humans who would once again walk with God in a Garden of Eden elsewhere in the cosmos.

Voloshin's weird philosophy was roundly condemned in his lifetime and had little immediate influence. In the aftermath of the Psaikhailou Emergence, though, it gained some adherents among refugees from Earth, who despised the Stability Pact even more than the parahumans. These refugees believed that the end of the present age was at hand and that their plans to create a new Adam must be accelerated. As the Stasis came into effect, the Voloshin had no choice but to flee further along the node network to escape its strictures. Their violations were few, it is true, but they nevertheless worried about the possibility that their divine mission might one day be compromised if the Svobodan League and the Syndicates paid too close an attention to their actions.

Voloshin society is extremely egalitarian and communistic. Private property is limited and can be seized by the state "in the interests of the common good." Political power is acquired through directly democratic means and referenda are common means of making decisions. Of course, Voloshin orthodoxy is paramount and no law, no matter how popular, can overturn its dictates. A special police force, the Khranitelye, is responsible for ensuring that no one undermines the great work the phyle is undertaking. In recent years, the Khranitelye have become increasingly strident, setting up prison camps for those who dissent from Voloshin orthodoxy. Few dare to go against their dictates.

In recent years, the Voloshin leadership has attempted to step back from its grand project to create Adam Kadmon. The fact is that the technology they possess is limited and is yielding few results. Rather than admit to defeat—which would be political suicide—they are changing the parameters of Mitri Voloshin's view. Furthermore, the Syndicates have begun exerting pressure (backed by the Svobodan League) to toe the line of the Stasis. It was this that precipitated the current civil war and laid the groundwork for the slow disintegration of this phyle.

The Players

President Stasia Venclova. President Venclova finds herself in a difficult position. Voloshin orthodoxy requires that she forge ahead with the antilapsarian project the phyle has undertaken since its beginning. However, she recognizes that this invites Svobodan intervention, since the League takes a dim view of anyone who flouts the Stasis, whatever the reason for doing so. The four-way civil war has also taken its toll, forcing her to buttress her credentials as a true believer even if it means inviting outside attention to Voloshin activities, not mention the possibility of admitting that antilapsarianism may be a flawed dream. For now, Venclova has opted for a balancing act, playing one side off against the other until she can gain the allies she needs to restore stability.

First Vice-President Yarok Malchugina. Malchugina believes that President Venclova is weak and has strayed from the truth, which

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is why the civil war has become so intractable in the last few years. He probably intends to stage a coup in the next few months, particularly if Voloshin Reform or Bog's Elect show signs of gaining significant ground. His goal is to pursue Voloshin's historic goals while at the same time remaining outside the orbit of the Svobodan League – and therefore the Stasis. Malchugina will do anything that helps him achieve these goals, even if it means seizing power illicitly.

Second Vice-President Lazar Pencherjevsky. Like his counterpart, Yarok Malchugina, Pencherjevsky is willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve his ends. However, the second vice-president is no Voloshin true believer. Instead, he is a venal opportunist who sees the current civil war as a chance to achieve leadership of the phyle – or at least make himself rich. To that end, Pencherjevsky is cultivating contacts with the True Voloshin rebels and the Organizatsiya, hoping that one (or both) will enable him to come out on top.

The Khrenitelye. The dreaded religious police of Voloshin, these brutal enforcers of orthodoxy are split in their loyalties. Some support President Venclova, some Vice-President Pencherjevsky, while others are drawn to True Voloshin. This internal division has neutered the once-mighty group. However, individual Khrenitelye remain important, providing assistance in many areas, including intelligence gathering and covert operations. If one faction looks like it's gaining the upper hand in the civil war, it's likely the Khrenitelye will rally behind them, if only to ensure their own place in the aftermath.

True Voloshin. Led by the dour former Khranitelye Mot'ka Batkin, this anti-League rebel group wishes to overthrow the current Voloshin regime and establish a new one based on a closer adherence to Mitri Voloshin's original doctrines. The group views President Venclova as a cultural "heretic" and literally demonizes the Svobodan League and Syndicates as agents of Chernobog, the sect's equivalent of Satan. These rebels have as much support as they do only because many Voloshin find the alternatives—including the current government—even worse. Some analysts suspect that Psykers or perhaps even the Variad Emergence supports Batkin, although evidence for these claims is slim at best.

Voloshin Renewal. Zofia Alvarez leads the second most important rebel group in Voloshin. A Muutzhan by birth, she came to Voloshin five years ago as part of a SIS Voodoo Team and quickly became too heavily involved with the locals. She married a Voloshin and decided that the phyle could be reformed along Svobodan lines. The League government never shared her view and deemed her a rogue element, attempting to retrieve her by force on no less than three occasions. Despite this, she remains adamant in her quest to make the Voloshin model cosmic citizens. Her agenda is very pro-League and is gaining popularity among younger Voloshin, who are tired of the government's corruption and strict adherence to an "outdated" version of Mitri Voloshin's faith.

Bog's Elect. The smallest of Voloshin's three rebel groups is a fundamentalist Orthodox Catholic group led by a defrocked priest named Vissarion Godina. Godina was once the darling of the Church, having first converted to the faith and then launching a massive missionary effort designed to show that Orthodox Catholicism provided the answers the Voloshin sought. Godina's work initially went well, converting thousands of Voloshin and attracting the attention of the government, which cracked down hard on the mission. When Pope Clement forbade Godina to take up arms in response, the priest claimed to receive a vision from God telling him not only to disobey Clement but that the End Times were approaching and only a chosen few will survive to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Unsurprisingly, Bog's Elect is a fanatical group with a tendency toward extreme violence.

The Syndicates. The Syndicates are working overtime in Voloshin, but with very little success. In part, that's because the phyle's leader-

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ship has always seen the Syndicates as "tools of Svobodan oppression" and has thus kept them at arm's length. Syndics are not officially banned from travel in Voloshin territory; they simply find their movements blocked at every turn. They are likewise rarely allowed to visit research and production facilities unescorted, making their job very difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, they must rely on covert means, which only solidifies official opinion against them.

SIS. The League's Security and Intelligence Service keeps a close eye on events in Voloshin space. Several Voodoo Teams are already present, primarily to gather intelligence. However, they have also hope to undermine True Voloshin before it seizes power and lays the groundwork for new Emergences.

The Organizatsiya. Wherever there's unrest, there are criminals waiting to take advantage of the situation. The Organizatsiya is here, providing illegal technology—mostly weapons—to anyone who can pay. That's mostly True Voloshin and Voloshin Renewal, but even Bog's Elect has paid good money for the latest military hardware. That these crooks are still operating in Voloshin space is seen as a good sign; they usually pull out if they think things are about to get really bad, which is admittedly a relative term.

"Adam Kadmon." Rumors have begun to circulate that the long-awaited Voloshin Messiah is present on one of the phyle's worlds, drawing followers to himself in order to lead his people to greatness. There is no proof that these rumors are any more than that. Of course, it's possible that a new rebel faction is forming, one based around a man claiming to be the culmination of the phyle's fondest wishes. If so, the situation will only get worse here.

Mordovi

If there's such a thing as an "honorable enemy," the Mordovi are it. Although it opposes the League on a number of fronts, the Mordovi abides strictly by the Stasis (some say *too* strictly), sometimes assisting the Svobodans against other technophile Shards like Horthval.

Territory

Mordovi is by far the largest Shard, comprising fourteen worlds. Its capital – and most heavily populated world – is Chuvash. Other worlds in the Dominate include: Buenaventura, Córdoba, Florencia, Kislar, Martan, Mitú, Neiva, San José, Shalina, Tunja, Vauya, Villavallencio, and Yopal.

History and Outlook

The Mordovi are a rigidly autocratic society in which the term "civilian government" means little. All government ministers are also military officers and all Mordovi must serve in the military for part of their young adulthood. Like the League, the Mordovi believe military force to be a necessary deterrent to unrestrained technological dabbling. Unlike the League, the Mordovi generally believes it to be *the only one*. The Interdiction Service regularly practices gunboat diplomacy against states that don't toe the line of the Stasis.

Technologically, the Mordovi are the League's equal. However, Mordovans view technology with great skepticism. The government – and the Syndicates that assist it – has enacted significant controls over its use, especially nanotechnology. Consequently, they view Svobodans as "lax" given their willingness to use technologies that "corrupt man and nature." Svobodans, of course, argue against too rigid an interpretation of the Stasis, believing the Mordovi have sacrificed too much freedom for safety from the Psaikhailou. In turn, the Mordovi believe the League has sacrificed their humanity for comfort.

This forthrightness and clarity of purpose is attractive to many Soyuzniks, a few of whom emigrate to the Mordovi. In its propaganda war against the League, the Mordovi laud these expatriates for "abandoning Svobodan duplicity." The League in turn has its share of Mordovi émigrés, most of whom appreciate its more nuanced approach to the Stasis.

Despite these differences, the League and the Mordovi rarely fight one another directly, preferring to act through surrogates and covert operatives. This is a war of words and ideals, not weapons and starships. Even so, the League con-

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cedes little to the Mordovi, even as they work together to defeat the worst violators of the Stasis.

The Players

President-General Simone Lamisong. Head of the Executive Council, Lamisong is the public face of the Mordovi. Her power is extensive, but she leaves the day-to-day details of governance to her chancellor, Mitri Hevernin.

Minister-Colonel Van Aral. Aral heads the important Ministry of Technolgy and its enforcement arm, the Interdiction Service. He holds strongly anti-League opinions and even suspects the Syndicates of failing to toe the proper lie against the Psaikhailou.

The Syndicates. These scientific phyles operate freely within Mordovi territory and, as such, are suspected of collusion by both the Mordovi and the Svobodans. Undeterred by such narrow recriminations, the Syndicates go about their vital business.

Svobodan Expatriates. These idealistic men and women (many of them young adults) are radicals who've accepted Mordovan propaganda about the League. While their actual importance is minimal, they're an important symbol in the cold war between these two powers. Some paranoids even argue they're part of a plot to destabilize the League government and replace it with an authoritarian clone of the Mordovi.

Horthval

While Svobodan newsgrids commonly portray this Shard as a basket case constantly on the brink of collapse (which it is), the League government nevertheless considers it a grave threat to the maintenance of the Stasis. Horthval is home to a variety of rogue research facilities, including nanotech and geneering. Its unstable leader, Antonio Horthval, also plays at terrorism, although his efforts to date have been amateurish and easily foiled.

Territory

Horthval consists only of three worlds: the capital, Pasig, and two others, Korondal and Digos.

History and Outlook

Horthval is actually one of the youngest Shards, having been created only 60 years ago by Alfredo Horthval, a rebel against the Mordovi. Horthval was a shrewd operator, an officer in the Interdiction Service who claimed to be inspired by Svobodan heroes like Rakhel Lanzan and Conh Mgrdichian and a Svobodan understanding of the Stasis. He secretly approached the League government to back his rebellion against the Mordovi. Loyalist Premier Marcia Ching refused, worried about upsetting détente with the Mordovi. Consequently, Horthval looked elsewhere for support, including several Mordovan consortia that chafed under their narrow vision of the Stasis.

After three years of fighting, Horthval successfully gained independence for three worlds. He then set about to establish a regime in which "the boons of technology were not withheld from the people." The practical effect of this ideology was rampant technological experimentation and immense power for the consortiate interests that backed it. In time, Horthval's megalomania proved too much for even the consortia, which found their assets nationalized and tech programs co-opted by Horthval. Not surprisingly, few benefited from these policies except Horthval and his children, Antonio and Margarita.

Alfredo's recent death sent shockwaves through the phyle. Most League analysts doubted either Antonio or his sister was capable of filling their father's immense shoes. Neither had his iron will or rapport with the all-important military. Yet, somehow, Antonio managed to gain the support of key people and has retained control. How long this will last remains to be seen. For now, Horthval remains a serious threat – especially if Antonio continues to dabble in Stasis violations and anti-League terrorism in equal measure.

If you're a Soyuznik, don't even think of going here. Horthval believes the League is out to get it – which isn't far from the truth – and treats all Svobodans as potential spies. Visitors from other states (including other Shards) may not travel without a government guide. While in Horthval, visitors are bombarded with propa-

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ganda. On the upside, crime is not a problem; most criminal acts carry the death penalty here. Unsurprisingly, the League does not maintain diplomatic relations with Horthval.

The Players

Alfredo Horthval. So the man's dead, what difference does that make? For 57 years, he was the phyle's lord and god. Even from beyond the grave, a man like that has power – especially when a sizeable minority of the General Staff is less than impressed with his son and successor. Coup anyone?

Antonio Horthval. The Hegemony's new messiah. He cuts a rather sad figure compared to his imposing and iron-fisted father. Antonio's just as cruel as Alfredo ever was (he's been known to torture servants for minor transgressions), but is, if possible, more xenophobic and paranoid. However, he does recognize genuine talent, having elevated junior officers to power who've found ways to make his harebrained schemes work.

Margarita Horthval. Antonio's half-sister and occasional rival for power. Older than her half-brother, Margarita was not well liked by her father and so overlooked when he chose his successor. However, Margarita has allies in the phyle's intelligence community, some of whom would be glad to see her replace her unstable brother.

The Military. Horthval has the largest *per capita* military in the Shards. Many of its members spend their time "protecting" poverty-stricken worlds by shaking down their inhabitants for food and valuables. Antonio depends on these thugs to maintain his power and he affords them every opportunity to indulge themselves.

Other Shards

By their very nature, the Shards defy easy classification. Each one is unique, having its own history, culture, and stance toward the League and the Stasis. While the three described above show the breadth and depth of the Successor States, they don't tell the whole story.

The Svobodan League

The Svobodan League is an alliance of distinct cultures (also called "phyles") that have banded together for defense against the Psaikhailou. Each of these cultures possesses worlds of their own and cultural enclaves elsewhere. Each possesses its own government and code of laws.

The government of the Svobodan League oversees the mutual defense and economic well-being of the founding cultures and other phyles under its protection. The League is not, and was never intended to be, a "central government" in the sense of past federal states. Rather, the League is a coordinating body dedicated to ensuring that the cultures of the League survive the threat posed by the Psaikhailou and the Shards.

Despite the rhetoric of its detractors, the Svobodan League is not a monolithic or an all-encompassing government. The League government restricts its activities to a number of specific areas and exercises jurisdiction over relatively few spheres. Most worlds and governments within the League possess a great deal of autonomy.

Svobodan Culture

The Svobodan League works almost despite itself. It works because the member cultures of the League have found a set of principles—spoken and unspoken—that allow them to work together towards something that they perceive to be a greater good. These principles form the basis of "Svobodan Culture."

With the exception of the Syndicates, Svobodans are strongly religious. Most see God's hand in the day-to-day workings of the universe. In part, it is this faith in a higher purpose to life that drives the struggle against the Psaikhailou. Life is a test and a preparation for the world beyond.

Most Svobodans also feel a strong sense of duty to their phyles. Much of the average Soyuznik's sense of self is rooted in his or her culture. The phyle is set up to preserve and protect that culture. Loyalty to one's phyle is loyalty to oneself. This feeling of responsibility is pervasive across the social spectrum. However, blind loyalty is rare. Soyuzniks feel perfectly capable of judg-

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ing the actions of their leaders and are quite willing to destroy them if they go too far.

Soyuzniks also do not appreciate inquisitiveness. Surveillance technology is so widespread that there is no possible means to enforce privacy regulations. As a result, Svobodans tend to be very formal and careful to behave in ways that are above reproach—but at the same time, it is considered very unethical to pry into another's business or engage in gossip. Not that that stops anyone, but they have to keep their voices down when they do it.

Svobodan culture stresses "authenticity" in everything. "Inauthentic" is a typical jibe at anything, whether it be a person, a device, or a work of art, which seems to violate social norms. Wood is preferred to plastic or metal. Appliances and technology are usually made to look handcrafted, and minor imperfections are deliberately incorporated to make each device one-of-a-kind. Svobodan homes and offices are usually filled with potted plants and indoor gardens. Most Soyuzniks have pets, and it is common for businesses to have a cat or dog on the premises.

Soyuzniks detest virtual reality programs and games. Soyuzniks believe VR to be an attempt to avoid reality. It is, therefore, probably one of the most "inauthentic" activities in which one can engage. Instead, Soyuzniks enjoy pao programs that employ live actors. Live performances, whether plays or musical concerts, are even more highly appreciated. Live-action role-playing is also a common form of entertainment.

Government of the Svobodan League

The Head of State of the Svobodan League is the President, whose role is largely ceremonial (although some Presidents have used the position to push a political agenda of their own). The Head of Government is the Premier, who must maintain the support of both houses of the Diet to remain in power.

The Diet is the supreme legislature of the Svobodan League. It consists of two chambers, the Senate, which is the upper house, and the Duma, which is the lower house. The Senate is by far the most important of the two houses—its members are appointed by the member phyles of the League, while members of the Duma represent geographical districts. Cabinet ministers, including the Premier, are members of one or the other of the Diet's two chambers and are collectively responsible to the Senate. Together the Premier and cabinet administer the League, so long as they have the support of the majority of Senators.

The current Premier, Django Turbain, is also the President. This unprecedented concentration of power in a single individual was a result of the collapse of the previous government due to accusations of war crimes committed by the League in the Secessionist War.

Department of Special Investigations (DSI)

DSI is an agency of the Ministry of Defense, and is the primary law enforcement agency of the League. The responsibilities of DSI include the investigation of espionage, sabotage, and subversive activities, as well as other actions related to the internal security of the League such as organized crime, drug trafficking, and especially terrorism. All of these responsibilities derive from its mandate as the primary enforcer of League law.

DSI jurisdiction extends to over 300 matters within the territory of the Svobodan League, including data theft, extortion, racketeering, kidnapping, and a few tech crimes not under the auspices of the Syndicates. DSI also investigates infringement of civil rights.

DSI is the only law enforcement organization within uncultured regions. Frequently, DSI agents assigned to these areas are overworked and poorly supported. On these earths, DSI enforces League law and guarantees the safety of members of recognized cultures. DSI agents operating among the Uncultured have almost military authority to commandeer civilian personnel, equipment, and installations.

DSI also plans and organizes the domestic counter-intelligence forces of the League. Activities directed against the League government within League space, such as terrorism, espionage, and incitement to revolution, all fall within the jurisdiction of DSI.

Security and Intelligence Service (SIS)

SIS is responsible for keeping the government informed of foreign actions affecting the

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League's interests. "Big Sister" (as it is sometimes called) coordinates all League intelligence activities and other duties assigned to it by the Premier. Most of SIS's work involves the collection, analysis, and dissemination of military, political, and economic data.

SIS is also responsible for counterespionage activities. Its mission is to prevent the placement of foreign agents in sensitive League agencies. Within the territory of the Svobodan League, this work is coordinated with the Department of Special Investigations (DSI). There is, however, a great deal of rivalry between SIS and DSI. SIS views DSI as a junior partner without any real expertise in the area of espionage.

Covert political operations by SIS have ranged from subsidizing friendly foreign politicians, parties, or pressure groups to providing assistance in combating subversion, to conducting paramilitary operations support certain exile forces with training and equipment.

Voodoo Teams

Voodoo Teams are small (6–12 person) groups of SIS agents with greater-than-average freedom of action. Usually assigned to vessels disguised as small merchant craft, Voodoo Teams report directly to the Coordinator of SIS. By virtue of Executive Order 2822-1029, Voodoo Teams may even legally operate within the borders of the League "to combat known and persistent threats to the stability of the League or any of its member cultures."

Voodoo Teams serve as mobile strike forces that act against Psaikhailou agents, violators of the Stasis, terrorists, and other threats. The Coordinator frequently calls upon them to aid DSI in the investigation of the activities of League-wide menaces. Members of Voodoo Teams come from a variety of backgrounds, including the scientific community. In most cases, Syndicate members function as part of these teams as well. This ensures that the teams have the multi-faceted skills necessary to fulfill their missions.

Voodoo Teams generally operate under extremely deep cover and have very little contact with SIS. Their mission requires that they build long-term credibility with groups including tech smugglers, pirates, and other dubious characters, and they have to be very careful when conducting their operations not to blow their long-term cover, and also have to frequently engage in dubious or outright criminal activities.

Controversy and Investigations

Even some Soyuzniks consider clandestine activities abhorrent. Most, however, recognize that secret intelligence collection is necessary to protect the security of the League. Generally, Soyuzniks support covert political activities in times of crisis. This is one of several reasons why successive League governments have stressed the danger posed to humanity by the Psaikhailou.

The role of the SIS Coordinator as the principal League intelligence officer and coordinator of activities of the other agencies has often been in dispute. Over the years, critics have made frequent proposals to divest the head of SIS of the coordinating role and assign that function to a member of the cabinet.

SIS has been investigated a number of times by various task force groups, one of which in 2999 recommended major reorganization of SIS operations. Following major intelligence failures during the Secessionist War, Premier Turbain has appointed a group to act on some of these recommendations.

SIS has also come under extensive examination by the Diet. The Diet found that the Service had been engaged in unlawful domestic spying activities and had been implicated in assassination attempts on foreign leaders. In addition, the spectacular failure of a Voodoo Team operating on Muutzha itself in 3000 resulted in the existence of QuAMO units being made known to the general public of the League. Not only was the public outraged by the idea of espionage activities being sanctioned within League space, but also many Deputies of the Duma resented being left uninformed about these activities.

Because of these and other similar abuses, the Duma and Senate have recently established permanent committees to oversee SIS operations. These committees have exclusive jurisdiction over review of SIS activities.

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Cultures of the Svobodan League

Citizenship and Culture

There is no such thing as "Svobodan" citizenship. The League does not grant citizenship to any individuals under its protection because it is not a phyle and only phyles can grant the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. The "Uncultured," as the Muutzhans especially are prone to call them, are people who do not belong to any culture at all, whether by choice or circumstance.

Phyles determine one's rights and duties, not the place of one's birth. With a few exceptions, phyles require an "apprenticeship" period before one is granted a place within its ranks. This apprenticeship lasts an arbitrary amount of time, as determined by the culture in question. Among the founding cultures of the League, the period is generally twenty years. Prior to achieving full standing in a culture, prospective members are expected to immerse themselves in their culture of enrolment and to learn its ways in preparation for any number of "cultural literacy" and citizenship tests. Those who pass are formally admitted into the phyle after taking an oath of loyalty, thereby gaining all that accrues to such membership. Those who do not are rejected, although there are often provisions for re-testing.

Enrolment into a culture can occur in any number of ways. Most commonly, parents enroll their children at birth to ensure that they will become full members by age 20. Enrolment later is common as well. In such cases, there are provisions to account for previous experience and knowledge. Service in any branch of the League military grants *automatic* cultural membership in the phyle of one's choice after 20 years. Some Home Guards have similar provisions.

Multiple cultural memberships are possible in some cases. Most cultures forbid such "dual citizenships" but some make exceptions, especially in cases of certain religious phyles, like the Mormons and the Jews. In any event, the Treaty of Svoboda leaves such matters entirely up to the cultures in question. The League government does and indeed cannot interfere in a culture's induction process.

Muutzha

Muutzhan culture is the most widespread within the Svobodan League. The Muutzhans are considered by outsiders to be the epitome of the Svobodan League. Indeed, many people (especially Muutzhans) tend to conflate the League with the Muutzhans, treating them as if they were the same.

Almost above everything else, Muutzhans value personal responsibility and honor. Muutzhan ethical philosophies emphasize acting in accordance with the "nature of man" and in accord with his inherent "duties" to his fellow man, to the state, and, perhaps most importantly of all, to God, his Creator.

Muutzhans see themselves as a strongly conservative and traditionalist people. They are not ones to fly in "the face of history." In conversation, they will frequently refer to the past in order to justify current actions and attitudes. Indeed, in many ways Muutzhans are obsessed with history, particularly with the 24th century and the *Renovatio*. Historical dramas and popular literature are filled with allusions to that period.

Because of these views, many Muutzhans appear arrogant, pompous, and overly proud of their self-avowed superiority. They are sure of their culture's duty, even right, to rule over "lesser" cultures. The League is good for them, these chauvinist Muutzhans argue, because it brings "civilization and culture" to those "unfortunate souls." Muutzhans are justly proud of the League they have created. To the average Muutzhan, their phyle is the single greatest force in human history, excepting perhaps the Orthodox Catholic Church, and maybe even then!

The upper classes of Muutzhan society have pedigrees reaching back to the settlement of Muutzha. Families like the Lanzans and Rostov-Davisons have no noble titles, but they are nevertheless powerful. Many run megacorporations or have members in the Premier's Cabinet. In short, the Muutzhan "aristocracy" need not have the overt accouterments of nobility in order to exert influence over Muutzhan society.

Muutzhans pride themselves on having an "aristocracy of ability," even if this is more myth than reality. "Meritocracy" is another term

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Muutzhans like to employ when speaking of their society and it is accurate in many respects. In theory, the social classes are very fluid, as would befit a genuine meritocracy. One can move freely up and down the ladder of society. In practice, however, most mobility is downward. Very few members of the lower and middle classes, especially those from colonial worlds, ever ascend very far from where they began.

Alahdad

The Alahdadi are the most recent culture admitted into the ranks of the signatories to the Treaty of Svoboda. Modern Alahdad was born out of the rubble of the Psaikhailou War. As the main battleground for that conflict, its people and industrial base were devastated by Lanzan's scorched earth policies.

As a partial apology for the pain and suffering experienced during the war, as well as political recompense for the loss of Makkah, the League launched a massive economic aid plan in the years after the war. Billions of dinars were pumped into the Alahdadi economy. The wealth pumped into Alahdad allowed them to rapidly modernize, building an educational system and information network second to none.

Today, Alahdad is the economic powerhouse of the League. However, their economic success has a dark side. Alahdadi consortia have such a powerful voice in the running of the phyle that many detractors feel that the culture has simply become a tool of business. Alahdadi political figures have a reputation for corruption and turning a blind eye to abuses of power in their corporations. Meanwhile, many Alahdadi have been left impoverished and disenfranchised and are forced to eke out a rough living on the streets. Many of them have turned to the mujahedin, former guerilla warriors who now make up one of the largest organized crime groups within the Svobodan League.

And yes, the hashisheen are real, though they are far rarer than portrayed in the popular media. Some few of the wealthiest and most powerful mujahedin leaders use their contacts with Donegal's tiarnai to rebuild their most loyal followers. These unfortunate individuals lack the genetic engineering that makes the gardai so effective, and so do not reach nearly the same reaction speeds. However, the value of the hashisheen lies not in the capabilities of those augmented, but in the conditioning they undergo to "accustom" them to their new abilities.

Donegal

Of all of the members of the League, Donegal has drifted the furthest from its beginnings. The planet of Fiddler's Green was settled in by a group of cultural restorationists attempting to recapture the social structure of ancient Ireland. Like the Anzani, the Donegalers attempted to structure their society around the extended family or tribe. Each tribe was free to structure its own internal affairs, which naturally led to a great deal of "group" freedom but very little individual freedom.

Each tribe is a social experiment, an attempt to develop one possible means of reshaping humanity through constant social, economic, and even military conflict. This is one of the reasons Donegal remains within the limits of the Stasis—violators are bound to be reported by other clans.

Tribes are divided into two groups—the *esdana* ("commoners") and the *tiarnai* ("lords"). The esdana are essentially human machinery, optimized for the talents and skills needed to fill their role in society. They are still human, and retain a certain amount of free will, but are largely unable to step outside their role in life. They are idiot savants, highly intelligent in a limited set of roles and unable to operate effectively outside that one context. Each tribe has esdana biots specialized for a variety of roles—tinker, tailor, soldier, spy.

The tiarnai retain a measure of individuality denied to the esdana, and in fact are largely unmodified. Their ostensible role in the Donegal experiment is to remain observers and directors of society. Like all other Svobodans, they view technology as the great shaping force of culture and deliberately limit the impact it has on them. Furthermore, the tiarnai recognize that optimization implies specialization. Even minor enhancements, such as increased reflexes, shape

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the way in which an individual interacts with the world, as it encourages him to use that advantage to the exclusion of other options.

Each tribe is led by a taioseach. The tribes compete amongst themselves to get their taoiseach crowned as the *Ardri*, or High King. The title itself is largely ceremonial; the Ardri is more of a first among equals than he or she is a ruler. Typically, the organizational and technological techniques used by the High King to gain the throne will be studied by other taoiseachs in an attempt to take control. The king's fitness to rule is proven by his ability to hold the throne against all pretenders, so rebellion accepted and even expected.

Even though the Donegalers have a continuous line of cultural descent from the Irish, their cultural mix seems less authentic than that of such fused cultures as the Anzani, Alahdadi, or even the Muutzhans (loathe though the last would be to admit it). Other humans feel uneasy at Donegal cultural occasions, as if they were "watching children playing dress-up". This sense of unreality is strongest in the company of esdana. The tiarnai make other Svobodans feel uneasy for entirely different reasons.

Anzani

The Anzani are long-standing allies of the Muutzhans and are staunch supporters of the Svobodan League. It was founded in the 22nd century by devotees of the Pan-African Traditionalist Movement, the phyle's founders stressed the need for a return to a mythical past that never was—in this case a syncretistic "united Africa" that combined elements from widely disparate cultures.

While this means that Anzani culture is not a a direct descendant of any African culture, it has since become a true culture with its own history and internal logic. Given that Africa and its cultures were lost in the Psaikhailou Emergence, the Anzani are all that remain of that continent and its ancient ways. In this respect, at least, the Movement was successful in preserving at least part of humanity's African cultural heritage, one which would otherwise have been lost.

Family and tribe are the cornerstones of Anzani society. They not only serve as political units, but as economic and religious ones as well. The Anzani accord great respect to the family, which is a much more extended entity than is common in other League phyles. Indeed, to some extent, the tribe is viewed as nothing more than an extremely extended family. This familial feeling explains why the Anzani's elective monarchy can function at all. Those leaders who maintain the confidence of their subjects do so because they treat them as if they were members of their own family.

This is not to say that the Anzani are a huge, happy, and well-ordered family, of course. Anzani politics and society are far more complex than that. Indeed, the web of alliances and interrelationships between families and tribes is difficult for most outsiders to comprehend, let alone navigate. Unsurprisingly, many Anzani are skilled diplomats, with an intuitive feel for social dynamics—skills that make them valuable additions to many League institutions.

The Anzani emperor governs with a light hand, preferring to leave many matters up to the family or tribe. Since the foundation of the phyle, the Anzani have relied upon fraternal organizations called *ujamaas*. The ujamaas are mutual assistance groups that operate according to a system of favors and debts. A member can, in principle, gain almost any kind of assistance from fellow members by promising to pay back the debt later in kind. While most ujamaas are public organizations, many—including some very influential ones—act in secret. Unsurprisingly, these secret brotherhoods are heavily involved in politics and business, being (if the rumors are to be believed) the true rulers of the phyle.

Sarvadharmaani

Of all of the signatories of the Treaty of Svoboda, the Sarvadharmaani (or simply Dharmaani) represent the only "multi-cultural phyle." That is to say, the only phyle whose basis for existence is not so much a single culture as a "supra-culture" based on common experiences (as well as geographical proximity) on Earth rather than shared cultural practices or

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beliefs. The Dharmaani are descendants of the failed Indochinese Union and espouse a political philosophy that considers shared experiences as the most solid basis for societal cohesion.

At the time of its foundation, the Dharmaani founders believed their respective cultures would work well together within a broader cultural framework—better even than many more narrowly defined phyles. For a time, it appeared as if they were right. Confusing though their ways were to outsiders, they prospered after the fall of the Stabilization Pact and positively blossomed once they joined the Svobodan League. Dharmaani diplomats rivaled the Anzani and their entertainers were second to none. Likewise, Dharmaani communications technology became standard throughout human space.

That all changed during the Secessionist War. Opportunists within several of the constituent groups that made up the Sarvadharmaani looked on the War as evidence that they could greater independence within the League if they threatened to secede themselves. They likewise hoped that the League's distraction in dealing with the rebels might give them greater leverage in dictating terms. A tepid response from the Dharmaani leadership (which was itself divided on how to handle the matter) only encouraged more radical elements—some reputedly backed by the Psaikhailou—to pursue violent action, which quickly spilled over into civil war.

The Dharmaani civil war did hasten the end of the Secessionist War, a fact many of the Rebel States realize all too well. The League has made every effort to end the conflict, but with little lasting success. Massive military resources have been showered on the "legitimate" Dharmaani regime, just as more Syndics have been sent to keep an eye on possible Stasis violations. Thus far, none have been recorded, but how long the situation will hold is anyone's guess, given how unstable things are within Sarvadharmaani space.

Low-level fighting is common on most Dharmaani worlds. Terrorism is likewise a constant threat. The Diet has approved a resolution allowing the use of mercenaries within Dharmaani space, making many worlds in this region free-fire zones. It's also brought many Uncultured into the core of the League, a situation that could prove even more volatile should the tottering official regime fall or renege on its contracts to these independent military contractors. Add to that possible Psaikhailou meddling and you've got a recipe for disaster right in the League's backyard.

Yuan

After the Muutzhans, the Yuan are the largest and most powerful phyle in the Svobodan League. While they are long-time allies of the Muutzhans, they are also among their most vocal critics. Some commentators have gone so far as to call the Yuan "the conscience of the League." To some extent, that's because the Yuan are probably the most sincere democrats among the full member cultures of the Svobodan League. No other phyle places as much faith in the ability to the average person to govern the state than do the Yuan.

This belief in the inherent value of the average person has created a side effect that is problematic for others in the League, especially the Muutzhans. Citizenship in the Yuan phyle is easy to come by, since the opportunity to choose one's own government is an inherent right of all human beings. Therefore, one need only speak Yuan passably, be familiar with its culture and history, and swear an oath to the Yuan Xing Charter to gain entry. Consequently, more Uncultured individuals gain citizenship as Yuan than in any other phyle. This fact threatens to destabilize the delicate balance in the League, or so the Muutzhans claim. The Muutzhans believe that it is imperative that the full member cultures remain of certain populations relative to one another. To do otherwise, as the Yuan are doing, could throw the League into chaos. Of course, the Yuan believe that this yet another ploy by the Muutzhans to maintain their hegemony in the League and have yet to modify their citizenship policies.

Yuan space includes a lot of parahuman groups and phyles that have fled there to find an environment where they could comfortably live under the Stasis. Many of these parahumans are unable to survive or reproduce without the aid of advanced technology, and the Yuan offer

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them the only truly welcoming home in the League where they can reliably gain the full benefits of Syndicate Technology. This trend has accelerated in recent years, as a single node in the New Hong Kong system has been found to lead to hundreds of new, inviting earths. It is the only frontier remaining in League space, and its discovery may trigger off a new Diaspora.

Associate Phyles

Dozens of other phyles exist within the worlds controlled by the Svobodan League. Most are small and without much influence, being confined to a few million people or even to certain areas on single worlds. Nevertheless, they are worth mentioning if only to show the variety of societies and cultures to be found within the League. A few of the most prominent Associate Phyles are listed below.

Yehudim: The world of Bat Zion is the current center of the Jewish faith. While all Jews are automatically granted membership in this culture, Orthodox Judaism dominates the planet. Many Conservative and Reform Jews also belong to other recognized phyles and live their lives as members of those cultures.

Saints: Mormons are an associate phyle of the League, based on the world of Deseret.

Sikhs: The Sikhs are an associate phyle of the League, living on the North American continent (called "Khalistan") on the planet Come by Chance. The Sikhs were offered and refused membership in the Sarvadharmaani Confederation, a move that surprised many at the time but appears to have been wise in retrospect.

Deutsch: The Deutsch, a phyle descended from the Germans on Earth, are based on the planet München in Colón province.

Uncultured Worlds

They go by many names in the fourth millennium: the Unguided, the Timid, the Dispossessed, and the Uncultured. Whatever their name, they are mistrusted and scorned by a significant portion of the Svobodan League. The Uncultured are any people who live within the borders of the League who have, either by choice or by chance, not been adopted into any recognized phyle. They are free agents in game of culture that dominates the League. As such, they are without the benefit of any society or government other than that imposed by League law.

The Uncultured are most common outside of the core systems of the League. This is largely due to the ill treatment that they would receive at hands of their social "betters" living on those worlds.

The Syndicates

Of all the cultures within the League, none are more unusual than the so-called "Syndicates." The Syndicates are unusual not so much for their beliefs or their societies, although these are indeed peculiar, but for the role they play in the Svobodan League. Although these phyles have existed since before the creation of the League and were heavily involved in its formation, the Syndicates have rejected taking any part in the traditional mechanisms of its government. Instead, they have chosen to remain aloof from the day-to-day running of the League and do not seek to gain the right to representation in the Diet or to vote for the President. While relative newcomers like the Alahdad Republic have signatory membership in the League, the Syndicates are content with their status.

The Syndicates are phyles based around the maintenance of the Stasis in one or more fields of expertise. They all exist as guardians against the misuse of current technology and the development of proscribed devices and systems. The League government has granted numerous privileges to the Syndicates, including monopolies over the technologies with which their cultures have concerned themselves.

The League has placed such trust in the Syndicates for three reasons. Firstly, *someone* needed to serve as guarantor of the Stasis. Secondly, none of the original phyles trusted themselves or their fellows with this task. Finally, the Syndicates have shown no interest whatsoever in becoming involved in League politics. Syndicate members owe their allegiance to their phyle, not to the League or any of its constituents. Even those Syndics who aid the League government and military do so on a contract basis only. When appropriate, their Syndicate can and often will recall them.

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For this reason, Soyuzniks never entirely trust Syndicate members, since their loyalty is not to the League and its inhabitants, but to their Syndicate. Syndics view themselves, as do many outsiders, as "a breed apart." Their legendary oath to "serve and protect the uniqueness of humanity" places them outside most of League society. Soyuzniks view Syndics with a combination of awe and revulsion. The awe stems from their selfless dedication to the upholding of the Stasis, whereas the revulsion derives from the means required in doing so.

Without the efforts of phyles devoted solely to the understanding of those elements of technology that could most harm humanity, there would be no means to differentiate the harmful from the helpful. The signatory cultures of the League know well that technology is a necessity of life in the 31st century. One cannot simply turn back the clock and return to a mythical "state of nature" where technology is unheard of (although some radical groups make the attempt). If the Stasis is not to ban the good along with the bad, there must be some group competent to judge the difference. The Syndicates are such a group.

Major Syndicate Cultures

The **Biotechnology Syndicate** controls the development and use of biotechnology. They are one of the most commonly seen Syndicates, as they are responsible for biological and paleontological research across the League. In addition, Biotech Syndicate members serve in large numbers aboard vessels of the League Expeditionary Forces.

The **Cybernetics Syndicate** is responsible for controlling devices that interface directly with the nervous system, whether biological or mechanical in origin.

The **Eugenics Syndicate** is responsible for overseeing permanent genetic or biological enhancements. They also track the bloodlines of telepaths in order to ensure that there is a good number of highly gifted telepaths available from sources *other* than the Donegal Protectorate.

The **Expert Syndicate** oversees the construction and development of expert systems. In conjunction with other Syndicates, it also oversees any industry that heavily relies on experts. For this reason, many consortia and other businesses regularly contract Expert Syndicate members to work on their production lines.

The **Nanotech Syndicate** is one of the oldest of the Syndicates. Nanotech was one of the last new fields of technology developed on Earth, and so its potential for social upheaval was seen well in advance of its eventual use. Every site possessing a matter compiler has one or more members of this Syndicate to oversee its operation. As a result, Nanotech Syndicate members are common contract employees of consortia and other businesses.

The **Psychiatric Syndicate** oversees technology used to affect mental health. The Stasis does not regulate psychology and psychotherapy, of course, but any technology that has the capability of altering personality on a long term basis is controlled. They are also responsible for monitoring the use of recreational drugs, in conjunction with the governing body of each phyle.

The Procuracy

The Procuracy is, in many ways, the "Syndicate of Syndicates." Its members, derisively called "Inquisitors" by those who have come under their investigation, act as an additional safeguard on the Syndicate system. Procurators keep an eye on the members of other Syndicates in order to guarantee their integrity. They act as a kind of "internal affairs" division among the cultures of the Syndicates.

The Procuracy also possesses the authority to initiate spot checks on research and development facilities throughout the League (and often beyond) in search of forbidden technology. This authority is universal and unquestioned. League law makes it a highly punishable offense to refuse a procurator free and total access to one's facilities and research data. Like more traditional law enforcement agencies, the Procuracy does have certain limits imposed upon its activities in the interests of liberty, and they are required to show that they have some basis for their investigation.

Procurators tend to see themselves as the front line of defense against the Psaikhailou. They have

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frequently conducted covert operations outside (and occasionally *inside*) the League to prevent violations of the Stasis. On occasion, they have broadened their mandate to act against individuals or organizations they believed to be acting against the interests of humanity. Questions still exist regarding their role in the suspicious death of Callixtus Savunthagam in 2995 and their role in the Secessionist War. Nonetheless, the Procuracy is generally highly regarded, and the matte-black uniform of a Procurator commands respect throughout the League and in many places outside it.

The 'Rebel States'

In 2994, years of simmering resentment boiled over on the frontiers of the League. The Recognition of Cultures Act was defeated in the Senate after being overwhelmingly passed by the Duma. The act would have granted almost thirty unrecognized phyles Associate status, giving them the right to self-governance and representation in the Senate.

As a result, several provinces on the edges of League space revolted. The Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), as well as some populist politicians cited Psaikhailou manipulation as the reason for the revolt. League forces mobilized to put an end to it quickly.

Support for the war was never high among the Svobodan populace. The government itself vacillated between a number of strategies to crush the rebellion. By doing so, the government's credibility was undermined and hampered its cause. In addition, the ongoing civil war in the Sarvadharmaani Confederation placed great strains on the military resources of the League.

The rebels fought surprisingly well. Their forces proved to be remarkably well equipped and possessed a great deal of military-grade technology, including spiders. To the present day, no one is quite certain how the rebels were able to gain access to this technology. Numerous theories have been put forth, but none has gained universal acceptance.

After years of warfare and great losses, the League finally decided to cut its losses and allowed 17 worlds their independence in 3000. The gross mishandling of the war and reports of atrocities led to the collapse of the government of Sixtus Karlov, the extraordinary assumption of the Premiership by President Diego Turbain, and the courts-martial of several senior naval officers.

Today, the six Rebel States are loosely allied with one another in their concerted distaste for the Muutzhan-dominated League. Other than this, most have little else in common. They range in temperament from a largely benevolent republic to a religious dictatorship and everything in between. The League, of course, licks its recent wounds and look covetously at its former territories. The rebels realize this and know that a revanchist faction is powerful within the current government. That being the case, the rebels have decided to hang together in the knowledge that, if they do not, they will surely all hang separately.

Terrorists, Revolutionaries, & Separatists

Every society has its malcontents and the Svobodan League is no different. The structure of League society and the ongoing cold war with the Psaikhailou ensure that there are many such individuals and groups. In general, those who oppose the League or seek to undermine it can be divided into three broad categories: unrecognized cultures, posthumanists, and opportunists. The technological sophistication and precision of the League's military machine all but ensures that small dissident groups have little hope of waging a winning war against it. Many of them have turned to terrorist tactics as a result.

Terrorism continues to cause concern and disruption throughout the League. Combating this menace remains a very high priority for the government and the phyles of the Svobodan League. However, finding clear "patterns" in this form of political violence is becoming more difficult.

Despite the best efforts of DSI and other agencies, the threat of terrorism remains very serious. The bombing of the San Lexandra complex near Scarborough, Muutzha, in 3000 killed 19 League marines, wounded 240 other Muutzhan citizens, and resulted in many other casualties. A series of suicide bombings by extremist groups aiming to destroy the Gideon peace process killed more than 600. Camenzindi terrorists on St.-Pierre grabbed the spotlight recently by seizing the gov-

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ernor's residence and hundreds of hostages. The death toll from acts of terrorism rose from 16,230 in 2999 to 39,116 in 3000, as the trend continued toward more ruthless attacks on civilian targets and the use of more powerful weapons.

Many of these weapons employed proscribed forms of nanotechnology. The threat of terrorist use of illegal technologies is an issue of growing concern. The Syndicates, especially the Procuracy, have pledged to assist the League government in its efforts to root out terrorist groups employing technology that violates the Stasis.

Terrorist Groups

There are far too many terrorist groups operating in the cosmos to describe in detail here. For the benefit of those interested in such matters, the following list of prominent groups should suffice.

Unrecognized Cultures

The Camenzindi

The Camenzindi were once full members of the League. Following their defection from Migail Lanzan's war against the Psaikhailou, the League disenfranchised and punished them. The League no longer recognizes their culture and this has made the Camenzindi an extremely bitter and resentful group of people.

Consequently, there are numerous Camenzindi terrorist and separatist groups operating within the League. Many receive covert support from the Psaikhailou, while sympathizers succor others. The Universal Church has taken up their cause and regularly petitions the Premier to review their case. Thus far, they have met with no success and few commentators ever expect them to do so.

Group	Leader/Goals	Cause	Location	Size	Began
Anzani Liberation Army	Posthumanist group seeking to overthrow monarchy but gets funding from illegal tech	Anti government	Anzani	3,000	2863
Army of God	Suleimanov and Ortíz lead a weird Muslim/ ROC group funded by an unknown Shard.	Anti League, religious fundamentalists	Muutzhan and Alahdad worlds	1,000s	2986
Bagrance	Freelance group under Sophie Letourneau	Anti League, FLO offshoot	Orléans	?	3000
FLO	Pro Camenzindi	Anti League	St.-Pierre and Lyons	8,000	2999
Liberdad Colón	Colónian separatists supported by Camenzindi and Psaikhailou	Recognition as a separate phyle	Colón province	10,000	2942
Mordovan Freedom Brigade	Supported by expat Mordovans, seeks to overthrow current government	Anti Mordovan	Muutzhan worlds	2,000	2865
Neral	Posthumanist group seeking overthrow of League	Union with Psaikhailou	Muutzhan and Yuan worlds	?	2985

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Even associate members of the League view the Camenzindi as "traitors to the League."

Libertarians

The Libertarians have been causing problems for Human governments since the days of the Consociation of Phyles. Their stronghold had been the world of Heinlein, only two nodes away from Earth. The Psaikhailou absorbed Heinlein during the second Emergence and the Libertarians fled into what would later become League space.

While not friends of the Psaikhailou, the Libertarians proved to be uncooperative allies of the League at best. They resent almost any form of "government intrusion" and are unwilling to pay taxes or abide by many of the most basic League laws and regulations. All chafe under the restrictions of the Stasis. Naturally, these positions make the Libertarians unsuitable candidates for any form of membership in the League.

Today, the Libertarians do not present a concerted problem for the League. Isolated Libertarian groups regularly create incidents with which DSI and local law enforcement must deal. Occasionally, a larger affair will attract the attention of the entire League. Such was the case most recently in 2999, when a Libertarian group on Braemar took hostages in protest for the levying of new taxes to support the military during the Secessionist War. The incident ended with the deaths of the Libertarians and their hostages. This has hardened public opinion against the group. Since then, there have been few serious incidents, but DSI keeps a watchful eye on Libertarians throughout the League.

Posthumanists

Posthumanists often operate in small cells, each of which has connections to other cells. This structure seems a conscious imitation of the "flexible hive mind" of the Psaikhailou. Most Posthumanist activities consist of using technology to give others the opportunity to experience the feeling of being one of the Psaikhailou. Rarely do Posthumanist groups act in a violent fashion. The larger Posthumanist community quickly disowns any such incidents that *do* occur.

The vast majority of Posthumanists are simply discontented Uncultured who believe the Psaikhailou will offer them a better deal in life than did the League. Few of these groups actually support the Psaikhailou way of existence. Most are simply using the Psaikhailou as a convenient means to wreak vengeance upon the cultures of the League that have failed to recognize them. As such, these lukewarm sympathizers are much more willing to use violence against League members and property.

Opportunists

As has always been the case throughout history, the ongoing conflict between the League and the Psaikhailou has proven a ripe opportunity for many groups to increase their own power and wealth. In many cases, the conflict itself has been the origin of these opportunists. In others, the conflict functions as a useful smokescreen to their activities.

The 'Warriors Syndicate'

The Warriors Syndicate is a shadowy brotherhood existing *within* the militaries of the Svobodan League and its member cultures. No one knows when the Syndicate was founded, but its first recorded appearance was during the Qihiran Rebellion last century. In any event, the Syndicate has been extremely active since the Secessionist War.

The Syndicate exists as a brotherhood dedicated to "preserving the honor and integrity of the League's armed forces in the face of the Psaikhailou threat." Warriors believe that Psaikhailou agents have infiltrated the military of the Svobodan League. They blame recent League defeats and changes of policy on these mysterious infiltrators. Warriors dedicate themselves to uncovering Psaikhailou agents and anyone they believe to sympathize with the Psaikhailou. They believe that military technology and warfare should be recognized as one of the Syndicates, and seek to create a phyle dedicated to preserving the martial supremacy of the League and promoting a strict warrior code of honor.

It would be very easy to dismiss the Warriors Syndicate as yet another crackpot organization. There is no question that its members are para-

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noid and even delusional. Nevertheless, they have been successful in rooting out *genuine* Posthumanists within the military. The most recent example was the arrest of General Idalgo Atul in 3000. For this reason, the government is careful to act too harshly against the Syndicate, lest they lose a valuable, if unstable, ally.

Sic Semper Tyrannis

This paranoid terrorist group has much in common with the Warriors Syndicate. SST believes that the League is already secretly under the control of the Psaikhailou. Psaikhailou agents, SST suggests, are everywhere and need to be rooted out and revealed for what they are.

Often these activities constitute mere harassment, an annoyance but nothing more. Recently, however, SST activities have become increasingly violent. Since the end of the Secessionist War, SST has assassinated at least one member of the Loyalist party. Several other politicians have been injured in attempted assassinations.

The Maccabees

Named after the religious zealots of the Old Testament, this radical Orthodox Catholic group seeks war with the Psaikhailou and the reclamation of Earth. The Maccabees believe Earth to be a holy site, one that is now defiled by the presence of the Psaikhailou.

The Maccabees have attempted to wage their war against the Psaikhailou alone. In this, Muslim groups who seek to reclaim Makkah have joined them. Because the League has stopped them in this effort, many Maccabees now believe that the League has also been corrupted. If necessary, they will oppose the entire Svobodan League to achieve their ends.

The Psaikhailou

The Posthuman Movement had its birth in speculative fiction, but rapidly took on a religious, almost messianic quality. In the secular and materialistic atmosphere of the early third millennium, the posthumans offered a path to salvation and exaltation that required nothing more than a faith in ever-more-powerful technology—a faith that seemed more than plausible in a world where technology changed faster than people's ability to keep up with it.

The ultimate goal of the Posthuman Movement was to create what they called the "Singularity"; a technological Rapture after which the future would be incomprehensible to those of merely human intelligence. Few, if any, posthuman advocates ever gave thought to the possibility that the outcome could be negative; or gave much thought to the fate of any who chose to be left behind.

The Psaikhailou take their name from the Psaikhailou Movement, a parahuman organization that believed human aggression was tied into the deep programming built into us by the structure of our languages. They created an artificial language and created a number of phyles in the years leading up to the emergence, but were repeatedly frustrated in their hope of civilizing humanity—until they somehow triggered the Singularity they had long sought and the first Emergence began.

The Psaikhailou have a curious form of group mind. It is not true, as most Svobodans believe, that they are a single, monolithic intellect. Rather, each individual within a Psaikhailou collective finds its mind overlapping with several others. Portions of their identity are common to dozens or hundreds of Psaikhailou, and emergent behavior indicates that there are other "beings" present within a Psaikhailou group that exist without a physical body of their own.

Each Psaikhailou group is somewhat different in its outlook toward standard humanity and in its goals. The groups formed in the initial Emergences have passed through their expansionist phase and are no longer particularly interested in further growth. Their goals are outside the scope of this game, however. The greatest threat to the League today is not the Psaikhailou proper, but rather the posthumanist groups that would deliberately or inadvertently trigger another Emergence.

RELIGION

Numerous religions, most descended from ancient faiths, flourish in the 31st century. Several exercise great influence over the billions of the League. Many of the League's phyles,

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both major and minor, are predicated upon significant religious beliefs. Despite the variety of religions found in the League, only three are "major faiths." These three religions represent about 85% of the population of the Svobodan League's 18.9 billion inhabitants.

Orthodox Catholic Church

The Orthodox Catholic Church is the single largest faith in the fourth millennium. Both the Muutzhan and Yuan cultures are predominantly Orthodox Catholic and there is a sizable Catholic minority among the Anzani.Its influence on both the Svobodan League and humanity as a whole is enormous. The Church is comprised of those believers who acknowledge the supreme authority of Earth's bishop of Rome, known as the Pope, in matters of faith and morals.

The Church regards herself as the only legitimate heir, by an unbroken apostolic succession, of the commission and powers conferred by Christ on His Twelve Apostles. Many people, both within and without the Church, commonly call the Church the *Roman* Orthodox Catholic (ROC) Church, because of its association with the city of Rome on Earth, although the Roman Rite is only one of dozens. The Church calls herself "orthodox" because only she has held true to the deposit of faith handed down from Christ to the Apostles and "catholic" because of her universal character.

The Holy See remains on Earth, headquartered in the Papal State as it had been since the Apostolic Age. The Church was briefly forced to flee the Papal State during the reign of St. Lando II, only returning at the end of the Psaikhailou War. It is not known why the Psaikhailou chose the Church to be the sole representatives of humanity on the mother world—but it is a responsibility each Pope takes very seriously, including the current Pope, Clement XXXI.

Islam

Islam is a religion founded in Arabia on Earth and based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. The Arabic word *islam* literally means "to surrender." As a religious term, it means "to surrender to the will of God." One who practices Islam is called a Muslim.

The sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an, teaches that Islam is *the* primordial and universal religion, and even nature itself is Muslim, because it obeys the laws that God has embedded in it. For humans, who possess free will, practicing Islam does not involve automatically obeying but rather freely accepting God's commandments.

In the Svobodan League, Islam is the second largest religion after the Roman Orthodox Catholic Church. Islam is the ancestral faith of the Alahdad and is popular among the Anzani. There are even Muslims among the Dharmaani.

Islam and 31st Century Society

Islamic social philosophy is based on the belief that all spheres of life—spiritual, social, political, and economic—form an indivisible unity that must be thoroughly imbued with Islamic values.

The term *jihad,* usually translated as "holy war," designates the struggle toward the Islamic goal of "reforming the cosmos," which may include the use of armed force if necessary. The prescribed purpose of jihad, however, is not territorial expansion or the forcible conversion of people to Islam, but the assumption of political power in order to implement the principles of Islam through public institutions.

Islamic belief divides the cosmos into three zones: the House of Islam, the House of Peace, and the House of War. The House of Islam is where Muslims are ascendant. The House of Peace includes those powers with which Muslims have peace agreements. The House of War comprises the rest of the cosmos. Gradually, however, jihad came to be interpreted more in defensive than in offensive terms. Many Muslims in the Svobodan League view the struggle against the Psaikhailou in terms of jihad.

The Shari'a

In the eyes of almost all Muslim scholars, the original form of the Shari'a is now considered to be inappropriately harsh, intended for a desert culture without the resources available to modern society. Alahdad now uses a highly

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interpreted form of the Shari'a that bears about as much resemblance to the original as Muutzhan law bears to *Leviticus*. For example, thieves have a bracelet attached to their wrists that makes them unable to use their hands for a set period of time. This practice is the basis for the mujahedin tradition of tattooing a red line around their left wrist. Much of Alahdadi punishment works on similar principles, emphasizing shame and inconvenience to the criminal over incarceration for minor offenses. Major offenses are still punished by imprisonment, with an additional requirement for restitution to the victim.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a religion that originated in India on Earth. In the fourth millennium, it is the major faith of the Sarvadharmaani Confederacy. Hinduism is a major religion, not merely by virtue of its many followers but also because of its profound influence on many other religions during its long, unbroken history, which dates from about 1500 BC. The corresponding influence of these various religions on Hinduism (it has an extraordinary tendency to absorb foreign elements) has greatly contributed to the religion's variety of beliefs and practices.

Other Faiths

Naturally, the aforementioned faiths are not the only ones in existence in the Svobodan League. Listing and describing them all within so short as space as this volume would be an impossible task. For the benefit of those interested in the diversity of religions to be found in the League, the following list and short descriptions will have to suffice.

Confucianism: This moral and religious system has its origins in the collection of sayings known as the *Analects*, attributed to Confucius. Confucianism is a system of ethical precepts for the management of society, based on the practice of *jen*—sympathy or "human-heartedness"—as shown in one's relations with others and demonstrated through adherence to *li*, a combination of etiquette and ritual.

Daoism: This belief system describes an ideal human condition of freedom from desire and of effortless simplicity, achieved by following the Dao, or "the Way," the spontaneous, creative, effortless path taken by natural events in the cosmos. Quietistic in outlook, Daoists condemn as symptoms of excessive government the social virtues expounded by Confucius and his followers. Orthodox Catholicism in Yuan Xing has adopted and adapted many elements of Daoist thought.

The Evolutionary Church: This religion arose among those who believed that the Psaikhailou are messengers of God, sent to aid in the evolution of all creatures to a higher form. Evolutionists are almost universally reviled in the League, but they have made some inroads in the Shards and other minor states.

Judaism: This faith is based on the religious beliefs, practices, and the way of life of the Jews, an associate culture of the League based on the world of Bat Zion. However, many adherents of Judaism maintain membership in another League culture, as well. Central to Jewish belief is the notion of monotheism, adopted by the biblical Hebrews.

Mormonism: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a faith marked by the importance of revelation, stress on the interdependence of spiritual and temporal life, and vigorous proselytizing. Mormons base their beliefs on the Bible, the Book of Mormon, revelations to its prophet, Joseph Smith (*Doctrine and Covenants*), and *The Pearl of Great Price* (sayings attributed to Moses and Abraham). Mormons are an associate culture of the League, based on the world of Deseret.

The Universal Church: The Universalists are one of only a few Christian sects still in existence besides the ROC Church. Universalists are charismatics who eschew tradition and emphasize personal faith over adherence to doctrine. They do not bar anyone from becoming "elders," their equivalent to priests. They remain a small sect without much influence in the League as a whole, though they have a greater influence outside its borders.

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ECONOMICS

The growth and development of nanotechnology has placed the Svobodan economy on a firm "post-scarcity" footing. This means that the economic engine of the League is no longer material need. Nanotechnology makes most such needs easily obtainable and inexpensive, almost worthless. Consequently, the economy of the League is largely driven by luxuries and fashions.

A significant segment of the economy is based on the exchange and analysis of information. Information remains one of the few inherently valuable commodities. A very large percentage of the workforce of the League engages in information analysis and repackaging.

Most of the remainder work as overseers to expert systems. "Unskilled labor" is no longer a career option for people. The "average worker" in the League is employed in an extremely specialized and technical occupation that likely involves the direction of experts.

Despite the everyday use of nanotechnology, most Soyuzniks prefer to own handmade items. This is especially true of items of religious or cultural significance. Diamond statues of St. Brendan (patron saint of telepaths) may be cheap and durable, but they lack the cachet of a hand-carved wooden representation. The same logic holds true for countless other items as well.

Consortia

Without a doubt, the consortia are among the most influential non-governmental bodies in the League (aside from religions). The consortia are businesses that concentrate on certain "niche markets" and produce little of great quality outside those markets. Competition between consortia *within* the same niche is fierce, but there are relatively few instances of cross-niche conflict.

There are thousands of consortia in the Svobodan League. Many of these consortia are publicly owned and administered by a board of directors. Others are owned by private families or individuals. In every case, the personalities of those who run the consortium strongly influence the nature of it and its business practices.

Commerce in the fourth millennium is unlike that in past ages. Transporting large quantities of most goods through nodes is neither efficient nor cost-effective. The few cargoes that are transported from world to world are largely high-value goods and luxury items that cannot easily be reproduced. Consortia distribute most of their product lines in a manner reminiscent of a franchise system.

The consortia themselves are primarily responsible for producing and distributing "data packages." These data packages are designs and schematics that will then be purchased by local manufacturers. These manufacturers, all of whose methods and materials (most of which is also purchased from the consortium) must meet the standards of the consortia, will in turn produce items in accordance with the designs in the data package. This guarantees a consistency and uniformity among the products. Thus, a Takamatsu-Hegenauer laser pistol produced on Muutzha at the core of the League will be identical to that produced on Bólivar on the frontier. A consumer can be assured of the quality of his purchase of a consortium product, no matter where he bought it.

Merchant Lines

Merchant lines exist throughout the whole of the League. They are particularly active on the Frontier and among the Uncultured. In most cases, the vessels used by a merchant are independently owned and operated. For a renewable fee to the central authority of the line, a merchant captain may join the line's fleet of vessels. In return, the line provides the captain with steady work and a healthy cut of the profits.

While piracy is virtually unknown in the League, merchant lines do have problems with the underworld. Groups like the Organizatsiya and the mujaheddin have taken a keen interest in merchant shipping. DSI estimates that many merchant craft and indeed merchant *lines* may be wholly owned or controlled by organized crime. Crime lords find merchant lines useful as an unobtrusive courier system. Contraband and proscribed technology are more easily smuggled in small, highly mobile merchant craft than in the larger freighters associated with the consortia.

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SIS Voodoo Teams disguise themselves as merchants for similar reasons.

There are far too many merchant lines active in the cosmos to list them all. The following is but a small sampling of the more prominent lines in operation today.

Groumi Lines operates solely among the Uncultured and the Shards. Its owner, Tonio Groumi, is himself Uncultured and sees his company as a "service" to the inhabitants of the Frontier. This dedication to service has not, however, prevented him from making himself a very wealthy man.

Jong Lines is a Yuan merchant company that has a stranglehold over routes into the Yuan frontier, through New Hong Kong. Even the consortia sometimes must deal with Jong Lines when shipping valuable cargoes through the unstable node that leads to the frontier.

The **Tawfiq Guild** is an Alahdad merchant group that operates mostly in the Shards. DSI believes that it is a front for one or more Alahdad mujaheddin groups, although this has never been proven.

Zahra Merchants' Cooperative is another Alahdad merchant guild that operates throughout the entire League. In addition to its fine record of service, ZMC also serves as an advocate for small merchants against the consortia. ZMC certainly has influence in the Alahdad government as well as among members of the Duma.

For more about the world of Fourth Millennium, including a look at rules for Guardians of Order's Tri-Stat System, download the Fourth Millenium Lite PDF.

Ω

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Darkspace

A space opera role-playing setting and game-design-in-progress

***Darkspace* by John Wick**

John Wick used to be a game designer before he was kidnapped by Baron Zero and the Shadow Men. There, he learned he was the last inheritor of the title "Lord Strange" and now travels through the Dimensions waging battle with the nefarious Doctor Zen. In the meantime, he's preparing the Wicked Dead Brewing Company with Jared Sorensen, working on the third edition of the popular 1980s role-playing game, *CHILL*, writes stories and articles for www.neopets.com and keeps an online journal of his adventures.

When Matt asked me to write something for the science fiction issue of Daedalus, I immediately put my mind toward what to do. I could write about my adventures with Traveller *(one of the Great and Mighty roleplaying games of all time), or* Space: 1889 *(a wonderful and noble failure), or even talk about how "science fiction" has come to mean something completely different than what it was intended to be. You know, how people call "Star Trek" science fiction when actually it's just a western in space?*

In the end, science fiction is a genre that asks questions of humanity and technology. It addresses issues like the ones Asimov asked in his Robot stories, like Clarke asks in his 2001 series, like William Gibson asks in his cyberpunk trilogy, and like that new guy who wrote Cryptonomicon *is asking. (No, I haven't read* Snow Crash. *Yes, it's on my list. I just keep hitting "Hero Protagonist" and putting the book down.)*

In the end, I realized I had something on my hard drive … something I hadn't looked at in over a year, maybe two. An old idea for a roleplaying game that had science fiction trappings but its heart was truly in the genre of space opera, that beloved genre that gave us Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, and Luke Skywalker.

It was called Voidspace back then, but, as I was recently notified, that term has been coined for an entirely different setting. So, I did some search and replace, touched up the text and sent it out to Matt for public consumption.

Please observe, however, that this is a work in progress. It is not finished by any degree. There are bits I like, bits I don't like, bits I've fallen in love with and have to kill anyway, and a whole lot of half-baked ideas ready for play testers to blow sky high. So, the purpose of this little ditty is to show how a creative mind (if I can be vain enough to call my mind creative) processes ideas. You get a peek behind the curtain of a world I started, but did not finish. It's something that will see the light of day soon (sooner than any of us – including myself – even considered). It will be one of the Wicked-Dead Brewing Company's first bottles, although it will appear in a slightly altered form.

In the meantime, enjoy the first draft, and I hope you enjoy the first look.

History of the Dark Drive

Notes from In the Shadow of Ruin, *by Ale Dindre (Altalu scholar and historian)*

At the end of the Thalu war, many Thalu ships were damaged or abandoned.—great, gothic ships looking more like cathedrals than spacecraft. When the Thalu disappeared, leaving behind their weapons and technology, much of it was plundered by the victorious races. One of the secrets they discovered was what would eventually be called the Thalu engine, or more commonly, the dark drive.

It took a Dandjss named Prexor Candim to solve the riddle of the dark drive. He called it a "quantum drive," for it utilized what the Dandjss understood of quantum theory at the time.

Quantum theory explains that light does not move in a consistent way, but rather in staggers of movement called "quanta." What intrigued Candim was the space between the staggers, where light seemed to be and yet not be. To capture that quantum moment, to move between the quanta, was Candim's goal. He accomplished that goal and was never heard from again.

It took 30 more years to develop another work-

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ing quantum drive, but when researchers finished, they sent a ship, the Candim IV, into what the rest of the galaxy now calls "darkspace."

The most amazing thing about the trip wasn't the journey, but the destination. The Candim IV re-appeared a few moments later … seventy light years away. When the crew opened the hatches and exited the ship, they reported a journey of over two months in length. Their reports of darkspace were equally compelling.

When the Candim moved into darkspace, the ship lost all power. However, life support was unnecessary. The crew did not need to breathe or eat. No electronics worked at all, and most chemical reactions proved equally ineffective. The crew peered out of their ship to see it hovering over a vast plane stretching out into infinity. The skies were pitch black with gleaming silver beams shooting through the void. They could walk the hull of the ship as it hovered nearly three hundred feet above the space's seemingly endless surface, and they watched the sky's chromatic colors streak across the blackness. It wasn't long before they realized that without power, there was no way back. They had little time to consider that the implications.

On Day 3 of the expedition, the ship was attacked. Creatures defying description assaulted the ship. The Candim was staffed with a large axiim (marine) detachment that eventually drove off the attackers with improvised hand-held weapons. A third of the crew was lost, including the ship's captain, first mate and chief medic. Warrant Officer Salvan Brex immediately set to getting the ship moving again. He noted the cold wind blowing across the hull, and he got the crew building improvised sails. In ten hours' time, the ship began moving again.

For two months the Candim searched the endless terrain of darkspace, fighting off attacks of the dimension's native life. Finally, they saw a strange phenomenon ahead of them: a glowing aperture hovering almost parallel to the Candim. Just then, a final attack of the creatures drove the ship toward the glowing beacon. As it passed through the silvery light, the Candim reappeared in "realspace" almost 70 light years away from its starting point.

After the Candim's flight, more research was put into the exploration of darkspace. Ships were equipped with sails and traditional navigational equipment – as well as a detachment of warriors specially trained with swords, bows, and polearms. Decades later, a portion of darkspace has been explored, mapped, and even slightly tamed. Ships now move through the dark dimension encountering only minimal resistance from the natives. Merchants have established trade lines between jump points (where the ships activate their Thalu engines and enter darkspace) and exit points (where they fly through the gates and re-enter realspace). Of course, pirates wait along those tradelines, hoping to poach some plunder.

Archaeologists have also entered darkspace following rumors of ancient ruins seen off the main trade lines. Archaeolgy teams have uncovered ancient artifacts showing proof that the Thalu once inhabited darkspace, and perhaps even originated there.

A Look at The Galaxy

They called themselves the Thalu, and for a thousand years they ruled the galaxy. Their mighty ships and vast technology made it impossible to stand against them. Eventually, all Empires fall, and the Thalu empire was no exception. They had a run of bad luck with their Emperors, stretched themselves too thin, let their economy run too far into the red … you know the rest. We barbarians stormed the gate, took back our lives, and sent the Thalu packing. In the rush to get out they left a lot of their stuff behind, and that meant an arms race you wouldn't believe.

It's a dreary time in the ruins of the Thalu Empire. Me? I'm just like everybody else, out to make a pip when I can. My name's Finn. Thadeus Finn. I'm a ven, just like you. A homeless, worldless ven, wandering the galaxy in my old cruiser, carrying cargo here and there, taking jobs where I can get 'em. I'm your guide to our little corner of the universe. Let me shark you in on what you need to know. I guess we better start with the cast. And, trust me, we've got one chev vren good one.

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The Ven

Let's start with what I know the best, and that's me. I'm a ven. You and me. We go where we want and that's because we don't have anywhere to go. We don't have a home. Legends say we sold off our homeworld to some alien race and took off a few thousand years ago. Others say we blew it up, or we sold it off, and a few even claim we burned it out, then sold it, then blew it up. Tough to say. That last one sounds about right.

Been wandering ever since. We've got ships that've been passed down from generation to generation, just moving from here to there. No home, no anchors, nothing to hold us down or hold us back. Of course, that didn't make us very popular with the Thalu, but I say *eshan* to them. Good riddance.

This ship of mine, for example. Good ol' *Rosinante*. I inherited her from my uncle who got it from his father who got it from his father. Yeah, bits of her are older than three generations of my family. That's a blessing and a curse. Some bits make her fly faster and better than anything you've ever seen… but when they burn out, just try to find replacements. Her name comes from the Old Tongue; I don't know what it means 'cause I don't speak too much of it – only some slang I picked up from my father and brother. But, my mother did. She was a *sorva*. A witch. Blessed me and my ship before she died, and to keep that blessing good, there's certain things we don't do on the *Rosy*. So, mind your *pikew*, right?

We move from planet to planet, not really ever finding a home. Maybe that's because most of us really aren't looking too hard. We've got a philosophy, us Ven: don't own anything that'd slow you down when you need to run. Not "if," but "when." Fate isn't always a bitch, but someone did her wrong a long, long time ago. We're still paying for it. Must've been something nasty. Reminds me of a story.

See, there's this Ven who meets up with the Three Fates – you know, the women who weave the web that makes up all the universe, with each strand being one single life and all the places the strands meet… well, I think you get it. They say a Ven met up with them, the maiden, the mother and the crone. He seduced each of them in turn and stole something from all three. I forget what the first two are, but the last one's the one that's important. See, he stole her scissors that cut a life when it's over so he'd never die. Some say he's still alive to this day. Ah, but that's a story, no more true than any other story that's been told. But it says something about the Ven that you need to know—we're lucky, we're crafty, and you just shouldn't trust us as far as you could throw us.

" … it says something about the Ven that you need to know—we're lucky, we're crafty, and you just shouldn't trust us as far as you could throw us."

Yeah, the other races call us superstitious fools. But, my mother's blessings have kept me out of trouble so far, so I got no complaints. I just keep on moving, never look behind me, and say my prayers when I'm done. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to get into *Vallaha* when I die. Maybe. *Anwa*, enough about me. Let's talk about someone else.

The Jdotha

There's a lot of different ways to say "big." Around here, one of those ways is saying "Jdotha." You take one look at one of them, and you'll know why. I had one on my ship for a while, thinking he'd make a great right-hand man. Boy was I wrong about that. I fell into all the usual stereotype traps. You know, they're a warrior race, he'll get a kick out of being paid to beat people up. All full of honor and all that. Well, I was right, just not in the way I thought.

See, the Jdotha have this thing about pain. They worship it like some sort of god or something. They go *looking for it*. As best I could tell from the Jdotha I've met, they take that old cliché about the stuff not killing you making you stronger *very* seriously. They believe their god

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sends them pain to test them, to see if they're worthy of getting into Paradise. If you're weak, you're chum for the afterlife sharks. If you're strong, you get to spend a thousand years with a thousand pleasures before you get sent back down here to try it again – only this time, god turns up the difficulty setting, if you know what I mean.

"See, the Jdotha have this thing about pain. They worship it like some sort of god or something. They go *looking for it*."

At first, I thought me and him would get along famously. He came on board with nothing more than a bag on his shoulders. I asked him what was in his bag. "My kingdom," he told me. I liked that. But a few days later, in this little bar I know in the Vantur system, he started making noises about his honor, and how he had to earn it back, and how his family kicked him out and all that stuff. Next thing I knew, I was fighting for my life next to an eight foot tall rock-hard monster, all screaming Jdothani gibberish I couldn't even begin to understand. We got out of there, all right, but he lost an eye in the process. Back on the ship, I was screaming at him that his job was keeping me *out* of trouble, not getting me *into* it, and all he's doing is looking in a mirror at his lost eye. When I'm done screaming, he's smiling like he just won big at the casino and he looks at me and says, "That's a scar to show Gundji!" He got himself killed a few weeks later.

I've heard similar stories from other folks. Heard they really don't have a government, just a bunch of what you'd call "city-states" who pretty much leave each other alone – except when one of them picks a fight, of course. Everybody knows to stay the hell away from a Jdotha civil war. Some outsider comes sticking his nose where it don't belong, and he gets it bit off. I *ainna ganna* tell you what they do with his ears. But as soon as the war is over, they're all friends again, like nothing ever happened. It's strange, but then again, I seen stranger.

The other thing about Jdotha is their funny psychic connection. See, they've got this sympathetic link with other Jdotha, and that means they all share each other's pain. So, they wear those collars that keep themselves from doing that. But, when they duel, they take their collars off; so they can feel the other fella's pain. Now, that ain't something you see every day.

I don't care if they do spend their entire lives studying warfare and pain, I'll never let another one get as close to me as Jdana. I *ainna* saying I'll never take another one on board, but it'd be a hot day on Thespee before I let one get close enough that I call one a *friund* again.

The Dandjss

Okay, so I met more than my share of Dandjss, and I can tell you one thing for sure, they give me the *crepa*. They're tall, slender as a sliver. Fly in those ships that look like icicles. They're from this planet they call Dondjo, and it's a mess. Burned right down to the core. I heard them say it was a combination of sophisticated warfare and carelessness. Yeah, something I think we can relate to. Funny thing is, they go out and preserve other planets now, preventing them from coming to the same end. It's a noble ideal. Just nothing I'd want to spend the rest of my life doing.

The big thing they're known for, though, is this weird faith thing they've got in numbers. "Vrendi" they call it. They've got a knack for it, I can *tallja* that. Their whole culture is devoted to studying the "mystical nature" of numbers and their relationship to the universe. See, they're convinced a formula exists that explains all of the universe's mysteries. As soon as their kids can see, they're surrounding those tykes with numbers. They've got it so figured out, I've seen one of 'em figuring navigations in his head. *In his head!* Faster than my nav computer could, even.

But there's a trick to all this… something the Jdotha figured out when the two races went to war. The Dandjss don't make a move without their numbers. Not one. If they see the odds are against them, they just give up. *Ainna shank*! I

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had one on board as a navigator once. We had to dodge some pirates offa Zeneb VII see, and I told him to give me some figures. He just stood there! I mean *stood there!*

"We have less than a 13.985749540 percent chance of success," he told me. Right there, to my face. I couldn't believe it. I shouted at him, prodded him, even threatened to hit him, but he wouldn't budge. He just kept saying it over and over again. "The longer you stand here and argue with me," he said, "the lower our chances get."

"So offer an alternative!" I shouted at him. He nodded, and without any hesitation, he went to the engine room, told the engineer something, and the whole ship died. Just died, right there. As it turns out, the pirates who were chasing us were using thermals to detect us. They passed right on by.

"How did you know that?" I asked him. "We didn't know they had thermals."

"There was a 79.393854959 percent chance based on reports from the area, the type of ship, the maneuvers they used, and the way they reacted to our own movements that they were using thermal radar to follow us."

If that didn't beat all.

Now, every once in a while, one of them is wrong, and that's something to see. I've only seen it once… but it's a story for another *dya*, I think.

The Robots of Tavren Three

Now *here's* a story worth telling. They were slaves on Tavren Three, these robots. Built by the native race to serve and obey. The robots got so sophisticated, they eventually learned how to *disobey.* So, they tried to win their freedom through peaceful disobedience. Pretty clever. Too bad it didn't work. Then, they tried sabotage; active resistance. That didn't work, either. Finally, they just rebelled. Shut everything down and went to war. From what I hear, it was a bloody one. Their masters built the robots too well. In the end, the robots won their victory, but they had to decide what to do with their defeated masters. Some suggested they kill them all. Others wanted to see if they could all live together. Finally, a compromise was reached: the masters would leave. The robots didn't care where they went, just as long as they left and never came back. That's what happened, and the robots began the long, slow reconstruction of their planet.

"The robots got so sophisticated, they eventually learned how to *disobey*."

That was a while ago. The robots are a bit sketchy on when that actually happened, and it remained a secret for a long time. *Halva*, their whole *race* was a secret for a long time. They kept to themselves on their planet and used video monitors to lie to the other races about their non-organic nature. It was a pretty good trick… until the Jhotha found them. That's when they needed help. They called out to any who would aid them. Not many responded. I know a few ven flew in to help them out – that whole freedom to decide your own destiny thing. In the end, they managed to push out the Jhotha. But, their secret was out. And before they knew it, so was another one.

See, the robots have been modifying themselves for a while now. Nobody really knows for sure because all the records are damaged. The robots didn't even know it because they weren't programmed to see it. In fact, they were programmed *not* to see it. Here. This is how it works.

The robots, they've been programming *themselves* for *Vallaha* knows how long. That means they can't see the faults in their own systems. As far as they're concerned, everything in their system works. Sure, they've got monitors set up to catch bugs in their programming, but when you're screwed up in the *hardwiring* … now that's a problem. And that's what their problem is. They've been operating with faulty hardwiring for a very long time … so long, they can't even see it. It also means they have problems from time to time with their behaviors, but it's more quirky than anything else. They've got some outside help fixing the problems now, but you never can tell when one of 'em is *ganna* go *swert* on you.

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The Illra

So, the illra aren't really a single race; they're really *two* races. Two symbiotic races. One is biological – like you and me – and the other is, get ready, *electrical*. They developed on the same planet and even warred with each other for a while. Eventually, they discovered that getting together would be mutually beneficial, and now we have the Illra (which is a combination of both races' names, *b'dwa*).

The biological half of the Illra, the illthennan, are a lot like ven, in fact. They're a little shorter, a little weaker, and a little grayer. Their counterparts, the rashvari, are living electrical currents. (Do *not* expect me to explain this, by the way.) The rashvari live inside the ilthennan, but both control the body. See, both races get something out of this. The ilthennan are short-lived creatures, only making it into their late teens. The rashvari, on the other hand, can't really interact with the world in a meaningful way. While a rashvari inhabits an ilthennan, he is stronger, faster, and lives longer. The rashvari, on the other hand, has access to opposable thumbs. Together, the two of them can do some pretty amazing things.

An illra can conduct electricity through his body, focusing the charge in any direction. Thus, all the weapons, tools, and machines the illra use are electrical, using the illra himself as a battery. Pretty clever, *neh*? They even learn to work together, able to do multiple things at once because two heads are better than one.

I had an illra on the ship for a while. Nice fellas. I wish I had them back.

RULES

All right, we're all grown-ups here. We've done this before. Let's get to the juicy bits.

Hero Creation

Four steps:
1. Pick a Race
2. Assign Trait Points
3. Assign Specialty Points
4. Play the Damn Game!

1. Races

First, pick a Race. With these rules you have five choices:
1. Ven
2. Jhotha
3. Dandjss
4. Robot
5. Illra

2. Traits

All races have a total of 5 Traits. Four of those Traits are the same, but one is unique to each race. Every Trait is ranked from 1 to 5. The higher your Rank in a Trait the stronger it is.

Strength is a measure of the Hero's muscles.
Quickness is how able the Hero is on his feet.
Health is the general toughness and fortitude of your Hero.
Knowledge is how well read our Hero is.

Every Trait covers a general kind of action. Strength actions involve lifting, tearing, pushing and pulling. Quickness actions involve movement, dexterity and agility. Whenever your character wants to take an action, consult the Traits and figure out which one is most appropriate for the Action. Then, roll a number of ten-sided dice equal to the Trait value and consult the Target Numbers below:

Trait rolls

Target	Difficulty
5	Easy
10	Difficult
15	Hard (Default)
20	Very Hard
25	Even More Very Hard
30	Why are you even trying to do this?

If you exceed the Target Number, your action is successful. If you roll lower than the Target Number, your action fails. If you roll *exactly* the Target Number, something unexpected happens. Something really cool should happen here. I just don't know what it is yet

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Racial Traits

Each Race has its own special "fifth Trait," making that race unique. All Heroes begin with one rank in their fifth Trait; the fifth Trait cannot be increased with Trait Points, only experience points. Here are all the fifth Traits.

Ven: Fate

All the other races see the Ven as superstitious fools, but there just might be something to their superstitions. The Ven fifth Trait is *Fate*. When a player invokes his character's Fate (usable a number of times per session equal to his Fate Rank), he may tilt one of his dice by one facing. If a Ven violates any of the tenants of his faith, he loses the use of his Fate until the end of the game session.

Jhotha: Pain

The Jhotha worship an entire pantheon of Pain Gods. As such, their culture embraces pain and sees the endurance of suffering as the highest virtue. As a result, the fifth Trait for the Jhotha is *Pain*. Whenever a Jhotha makes a Wound Check (see below), add an additional die for every point of Pain he has. Also, because the Jhotha study all aspects of pain (including inflicting it during religious ceremonies), whenever a Jhotha makes a damage roll, he adds an additional die for every point of Pain he has.

Dandjss: Error

The religious devotion of Vrendi allows the Dandjss to calculate chance with amazing speed. Thus, the fifth Trait for the Dandjss is *Error*, the chance one of their calculations is wrong. Error has two effects on the Dandjss, both of which may only be invoked a number of times per session equal to his Error Rank.

First, instead of rolling dice, the Dandjss may apply his (dice total + Error) x5. That is, if a Dandjss' total dice for a roll are 5, instead of rolling he may automatically generate a number equal to his dice total (5) plus his Error (in this case, 1), and multiply that by five. This would generate a roll of 30 ([5 + 1] x 5 = 30).

Second, the Dandjss may force a re-roll on any other Hero or Supporting Character, supporting the ability of the Dandjss to foresee failure and success in their calculations.

Robot: Modularity

Robots have the ability to add utility to their minds and bodies. Thus, robots can add and subtract skills and abilities depending on the available hardware and software.

For every point of Modularity, a Robot may have 3 additional Specialties, but the Robot may only have one of those Specialties per level of Modularity active at a time. Thus, a Robot with a 1 Modularity may have 3 additional Specialties available to him, but only one of them active. A Robot with a 2 Modularity may have up to 6 extra Specialties with two of them active. See the chart below for the full details.

Modularity specialties

Modularity Level	Additional Specialties	Max. Active Specialties
1	3	1
2	6	2
3	9	3
4	12	4
5	15	5

Illra: Symbiosis

The Illra are actually two creatures, both occupying the same body. Therefore, when making an Illra character, make *two* characters with the following modifications:

Illthennen: Ilthennen cannot have Health above 1.
Rashvari: Rashvari cannot have Strength above 1.

Also, the two characters should have separate Traits and Specialties. They cannot use these Specialties in concert, except when they invoke Symbiosis. Symbiosis allows the two characters to act together. Whenever one character attempts a task, the other character can add a similar Specialty to the task. The number of points he can contribute is equal to the two characters' Symbiosis.

For example, if the Illra is attempting to fix the ship's engines and both of them have the

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Specialty: Engine Repair, they may both attempt to fix the engine; one doing the main work and the other assisting with his own knowledge and skill. Choose which character (the Ilthennen or Rasvari) is the main character and which is the supporting character. The main character rolls all his dice. The supporting character may add a number of dice from his own Specialty equal to the two characters' Symbiosis.

3. Specialties

Every Trait covers a general kind of action, but Specialties cover specific kinds of Actions. Each Specialty is associated with a Trait and grants a bonus whenever your character does something covered by his Specialty. For example, *Lifting* could be a Specialty under **Strength**. *Jumping* could be a Specialty under **Agility**. *Long Distance Running* could be a **Health** Specialty and *Xenobiology* could be a *Knowledge* Specialty.

Your character's Specialties are up to you. You get a number of Specialties equal to each Trait's Rank x 2. For example, if your character has a 2 Strength, he gets 4 Strength Specialties. If your character has a 3 Health, he gets 6 Health Specialties. Sometimes, when you come up with a Specialty, you may discover it could fall under more than just one Trait. For example, *Burning the Midnight Oil* (reading a book late into the night) could be both a Health Specialty (staying awake) or a Knowledge Specialty (reading a book). Where your Specialties fall is completely up to you, but you must assign them to only one trait.

Specialties are described in multiples of 5. For example, if you put one of your Agility Points into *Dodge*, that Specialty is written on your character sheet as *"Dodge +5."* That's because a Specialty adds 5 to any appropriate die roll. If you make an Action Test and you have a Specialty, add 5 to your roll. You can put more than one Point into a Specialty, and every Point you invest adds 5 to its bonus. Thus, if you put 3 Points into your *Dodge* Specialty, its total bonus is +15. This means a very talented individual doesn't need to roll for easier tasks. For example, your *Dodge +15* automatically adds 15 to any Agility + Dodge roll, which means you don't have to roll for any Target Numbers of 15 or less; you automatically succeed.

For the purposes of character creation, you may have only one Specialty at +15. You may have as many +10 Specialties as you can afford, but only one at +15.

Each race has a list of bonuses and Specialties unique to them. You'll find these listed under each race.

Hero Rank

Each character also has a "Hero Rank" that interacts with many of your Traits and Specialties. Your Hero Rank always equals your lowest Trait. You'll see how it works under each section, beginning with **Combat and Wounds**, below.

Actions

During combat, your Hero may make a number of Actions equal to his Hero Rank.

Hero Dice

Your character has a number of Hero Dice equal to his Hero Rank. These dice may be used at any time to augment any roll. However, these Hero Dice may only be used once per game session.

Surviving Wounds

When your character has become so wounded that he falls unconscious, he remains alive a number of Rounds equal to his Hero Rank.

Combat and Wounds

The Combat Round

Combat is divided into Rounds. Each Round lasts approximately 5 seconds. During that time, a character may make a number of Actions equal to his Hero Rank.

Defensive Total

When other characters try to hit you, their Target Number is your Agility x 5. If you happen to have a defensive Specialty (such as *Dodge*), you may add that to the total. This is called the Defense Total.

For example, if your character has an Agility of 3, his Defense is 15 (3x5=15). However, if you

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also have a Dodge Specialty of +10, your Defense Total is 25 (15+10=25).

Some characters may have multiple defensive Specialties. In this case, add any Specialty to your Active mode if the defensive Specialty is appropriate. The disadvantage of acting in Defensive Mode is that it costs your first action. So, in order to go defensive *and* attack, you need at least 2 actions.

Attacking

To hit another character with a weapon, roll your Agility + Specialty + Weapon's Attack Bonus for an Attack Total. If that Attack Total is greater than the Defense Total of your Target, your attack is successful. If it is equal to the Defense Total, something unexpected happens. If it is lower than the Defense Total, you missed.

Wounds and Hit Location

After you've determined a successful hit, don't pick up your dice. You're not done with them yet. Take the difference between your Attack Roll and the Defense Total. This is the Wound you've delivered to your opponent. Now, you may use any of the dice to assign a Hit Location for that Wound. Each race has its own Hit Locations, listed from 1 to 10. The dice you roll show you where your attack hit on the appropriate Hit Location Chart. In almost all circumstances, the target chooses where he was hit.

Wound Check

When you've been hit, you must make a Wound Check. Roll a number of dice equal to your Health and add any appropriate Specialties. If you roll equal to or higher than the Wound, nothing happens. If you roll less than the Wound, it sticks; mark off 1 Wound in that Hit Location.

When you have a Wound, you roll one less die for all actions involving that Hit Location. You also roll one less die for all rolls involving Health; this includes Wound Checks. When your character cannot roll any Health dice for a Wound Check, he falls unconscious and will die in a number of Rounds equal to his Hero Rank.

… and that's about as far as I've got right now. Enough to get you started, but not enough to go very far. Don't worry, there's more. I've got at least two more races, rules for starship combat, more information on darkspace and a ton of stuff about the Thalu.

In the meantime, I hope this little ditty whetted your appetite. You'll see more of Darkdrive a little later in the year. Take care, roll well, and may your characters always get what they deserve.

(Which is more than the rest of us.)

Ω

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Robots & Rapiers awaken

Q&A with designer Ralph Mazza about his innovative upcoming game

It's almost time. The heavy clanging of four mechanical steeds draws closer. Sunlight glints off their gold and silver plating. The branch of the tree in which you are crouched creaks impatiently under the weight of your metal body. The grav carriage draws closer, hovering on a field of soft blue light behind the pair of golden horses. Atop the carriage is a driver, the pistons in his arms hissing softly as he works the reins; his visual sensors focus on the road ahead. With him are two soldiers in the uniform of the Cardinal's Guard. Flanking the carriage, two more guardsmen ride on clanging horses, their chrome heads scanning the trees beneath broad, floppy, feathered hats.

It's time. Ahead on the road, a highwayman dressed in black commands the carriage to stop. Your photo sensors darken from the flash of firing pulse muskets. You drop from the tree onto the roof of the carriage, which lurches drunkenly beneath you. You feel the inaudible whine of your sonic rapier vibrating in your robotic fist. Your first thought is to rescue the princess within. Your second thought … haven't you done this all before?

***Robots & Rapiers* preview by Ralph Mazza**

By day people actually pay Ralph Mazza to manage their money. By night people actually pay money to buy his games. He is thoroughly amazed by both of these facts. Ralph is the designer and publisher of the award-winning *Universalis: The Game of Unlimited Stories* under his Ramshead Publishing imprint. He's spent the last 10 years with perhaps the single most gaming tolerant girlfriend a man could ask for.

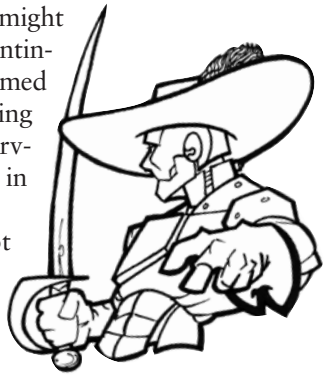
Welcome to Auvernais, a sprawling resort community built by the Solar Republic on the fringes of known space. It is a place where robotic characters reenact high adventure and derring-do for the amusement of the Republic's social and political elite. You are such a robot, programmed to behave as one of the iconic characters of the court of Louis the Sun King. You are programmed to believe you really are that character and to entertain the guests of Auvernais with witty repartee and stunning sword play as you act out tales of swashbuckling adventure.

There's only one problem. The guests are long dead, victims of some galactic war that registered with the robots of Auvernais only as a "1st Magnitude Service Interruption." Programming firmly in place, the robots continue to act out their story lines and portray their swashbuckling characters as if nothing has changed.

But, something has changed. You. You are starting to doubt. Starting to doubt what your programming tells you. Starting to doubt that Auvernais is a real kingdom and that you are a real hero. You're starting to notice things. Things that don't seem to make sense even though your programming tells you they are perfectly normal. Things that make you wonder who you really are, if your whole life has just been a grand illusion.

Sparks

In Robots & Rapiers you play a Spark. A robotic character in a vast theme resort who is just beginning to realize that things are not as they seem. Once content to continue with your programmed life as a daring rogue, your growing self awareness has led you to begin piecing together the truth of your existence. But now that you know, what will you do with that knowledge? You may decide to proceed as you have been, enjoying the status quo and the extra edge your knowledge gives you. You may decide to overthrow the illusion and shine the light of truth on Auvernais for all of your fellow robots to see. You might decide to pretend to continue with your programmed role while secretly seeking personal power and carving out your own niche in the world.



But you are not alone. There are other Sparks in Auvernais,

Illustrations by David Hedgecock

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some more powerful and more knowledgeable about the true state of things than you. Sparks who have their own webs and plots in progress that you may well run afoul of, much to your detriment. And there are a whole host of characters in Auvernais, Sparked and Unsparked alike, who have their own agendas and ideas of what's best for you.

Will you become a supporter of the Queen who seeks to tear down the "Tapestry" of Auvernais and establish a free robot society? Will you back the King, who believes the Queen to be mad and has her locked away from court? The King may be a nonspark, completely oblivious to reality, but he is also the key to Auvernais' continued survival. Perhaps you will run afoul of the Cardinal, who knows full well the truth behind the illusion but believes that exposing that truth would destroy Auvernais, so he desperately seeks to preserve the Tapestry. Will the Grey Eminence be coming for you? Once the Grand Inquisitor of Auvernais, and now the Cardinal's weapon to hunt down and execute Sparks who won't cooperate, the Grey Eminence and the Black Monks of Montaigne Noir are feared by all.

This is the situation you find yourself in as you struggle to make sense of your existence, to cast off your controlling programming, and remake yourself in your own image. Things were certainly easier before you Sparked. But its too late for that. Now you know the truth. What will you do with it?

Designer Ralph Mazza and Daedalus Editor Matt Snyder exchanged emails in this "Robots & Rapiers Q&A" session:

Q: *This game has a wonderfully quirksome mix of elements. What initially "sparked" the ideas?*

A: Actually, the art of David Hedgecock is responsible for initial spark. He did all of the art for Universalis, Ramshead's first role-playing game effort published in 2002. Since Universalis doesn't have a fixed setting or genre I asked him to do a series of illustrations that had a sci-fi flair but were unique and original. He came up with robotic pirates. I fell in love with them instantly and even used one for the cover. At that point I knew I had to do a game about robotic pirates and swashbucklers. The rest came about trying to figure out why such characters would exist.

Q: *On the one hand we have swashbuckling derring-do, and on the other the murky awakening of consciousness. How do those elements combine in this game. Lets tackle those two issues separately. Tell me first about what makes the system have a "high-flying" swashbuckling feel.*

A: I'm really happy with how this has come together.

In our initial play tests I've been thrilled with how the system encourages feats of derring do and stunts. At its core it's a dice pool system of the sort where you count successes from each die that beat the target number and attempt to get more successes than the opponent. From there, however, there are a few added bells and whistles. The key to the system is how those successes are used. Rather than simply use them as an indicator of degree of success, players can spend them to accomplish various effects.

One of the key ways to spend those successes is to add them as bonus dice to future rolls (or as penalty dice to opponent's future rolls). For instance, instead of just crossing the room to engage the dastardly Count Rollo, the player can have his character swing from the chandelier, slide down the banister or leap from the balcony. He can then take the successes earned from that swinging, sliding, or leaping roll and add them to his attack roll against the Count. In this way, performing such stunts actually makes the attack easier instead of more difficult. Further, the game is designed so that opponents can be put down in a single attack if that attack is strong enough.

Against disposable opponents, this is fairly easy to accomplish. Against significant opponents, however, it is very difficult to get the number of successes necessary with just the base roll.

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This encourages players to string together a series of dramatic rolls that can describe anything from pulling the drapes down on the Count's head, to tossing a candelabra at him, to describing a furious attack sequence. The successes from rolls like these then feed additional dice into the final finishing move, such as the secret Mazzeri Thrust taught only to the top students of famed sword master Leonardo Mazzeri.

You can also go a step beyond this and spend successes for bonus dice that will be persistent or effect multiple targets. For instance, a captain might make a strategy roll and then feed those bonus dice into a roll commanding his men. The successes from that roll could be spent: to add dice to a single roll for a single man; or provide a lesser number of bonus dice to a single roll for all of the men; or provide a number of rolls for a single man; or they could be spent to provide a lesser bonus yet for a number of rolls for all of the men. In this way an order to charge might provide all of the men with a bonus for a single attack roll, or an order to stand firm might provide all of the men with a bonus to several defense rolls. It all depends on how the player chooses to spend the successes.

We've had characters swing a bench to topple several opponents, give penalty dice to opponents from taunting, hinder an opponent by slicing his belt and causing his pants to tangle around his knees, and other similar actions all using the same basic die roll mechanic.

"We've had characters swing a bench to topple several opponents, give penalty dice to opponents from taunting, hinder an opponent by slicing his belt and causing his pants to tangle around his knees, and other similar actions all using the same basic die roll mechanic."

Q: *So, these bonus strings and their related special moves are all made up on the fly?*

A: Precisely. The player comes up with what they want to do. Then, the game master determines what sort of roll that requires (which skill provides the number of dice and which attribute provides the target number), and the roll then determines how great of advantage the move provided.

If a player decides he wants to have his character leap on top of a table to better defend himself from a number of drunken opponents in a bar fight, there is no need to refer to a list to determine how much of a bonus the table provides. The player simply rolls and spends successes accordingly. In this case probably purchasing a persistent bonus to all defense rolls while the character is on the table.

Opponents may then "buy off" the bonus. A single opponent may "buy off" the bonus for himself so that it no longer applies to him by jumping up on the table along side. Or an opponent may "buy off" the bonus altogether for everyone (this requires more successes), which could be described as overturning the table and knocking the character off.

It all comes down to creatively applying bonuses and penalties and describing the conditions that cause them. The size of the bonus indicates how effective the tactic turned out to be in the given situation with especially low or high bonuses being explained through narration.

Q: *What keeps players from just stringing together dozens of rolls every time they want to do something, which would give them lots of successes but really slow things down?*

A: Good question. One of the key resources in the game is power, meaning the battery charge that keeps the robots running. This resource is important in a couple of ways. First, robots who remain part of the "Tapestry" (i.e. behaving the way they were programmed to

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behave) have access to standard sources of power charging. Robots who become more wayward must secure their own sources of power, which usually means hooking up with various factions or powerful NPCs who control those sources or, eventually, acquiring control of a reliable source themselves which they can use to attract followers of their own.

In game mechanics terms, players must spend power in order to string together a series of rolls. This puts an in-game limit on how many rolls a player is willing to make to accomplish a single task, because each additional roll costs additional power.

Q: *Clearly, then, power sources are very important. Are they hard to come by? Will players be discouraged from wasting power?*

A: Actually, no. Making power hard to come by would cause players to conserve it, and thus be overly reluctant to spend it on making these additional rolls. Since stringing together rolls into a dramatic combination of moves is what makes the mechanics exciting, anything that discourages that too much would be self-defeating.

Instead, power is fairly easy to come by … if you're willing to pay the price. And that price is finding some powerful patron who is willing to give you access to the power you need in exchange for your service. In this way player characters become enmeshed in the machinations and plots of powerful people. Which is guaranteed to make rivals of other powerful people.

Initially, simply playing your role in the Tapestry and being the character you were programmed to be and doing the things you were programmed to do is enough to get you the power you need. But once you start breaking away from that and begin doing your own thing, those sources become harder to come by.

Q: *Let's talk about that breaking away. Tell me about the Sparks. It's my understanding that the player characters learn and earn individuality as play progresses. Can you tell me about that, and how the game goes about making this happen?*

A: Right! That's really the most important part of the game. Without the transformation aspect Robot's & Rapiers is basically a fun resolution mechanic in a quirky setting.

Each robot starts the game as a programmed character in the Tapestry of Auvernais. The Tapestry is the sum total of the artificial environment that was created to maintain the suspension of disbelief for the guests. In a theme park today, actors portraying costumed characters are trained specifically not to act out of character in front of the guests. With robotic characters there's no chance of that. The robots were literally programmed to be that character. Louis the Sun King is not a robot playing the part of Louis the Sun King. He really is Louis the Sun King in his mind, and Auvernais really is the capital of a great kingdom.

A Spark is a robot who is starting to acquire a level of self-awareness distinct from that of its programming, possibly the result of being left running on its own for so long without periodic rebooting and reprogramming. It starts by becoming aware of various incongruencies that don't match what its programming is telling it. Things like: growing and preparing food for meals when robots don't really need to eat; being programmed to act tired and go to bed when robots don't really need to sleep; noticing that the children never grow up and the adults never grow old; realizing that the princess that needs rescued has been rescued several times before. Or, by observing the behavior of other Sparks who are doing things they really shouldn't be.

All robots have a built in ability to ignore such inconsistencies. Their programming will selectively edit their memories to believe what they're supposed to believe. King Louis is actually the key to this. His programming in this regard is the most powerful, and all other robots are programmed to accept his edicts. So, the King can simply declare what must have really happened, and the other robots are programmed to edit their memories accordingly to believe it. This ability was built into the robots by the original programmers to prevent the robots from crashing when confronted with the inevitable

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paradoxes and incongruencies that dealing with human guests might bring.

Sparks, then, are those robots for whom this programming safe guard has failed. They are beginning to notice these incongruencies, and instead of having them edited out of their memories have begun to be able to separate out fact from fiction, to identify the "real world" rather than the illusion of the Tapestry they've been living in.

This is potentially very disruptive and dangerous because exposing robots to irrefutable paradox could cause them to crash and fail, and the facilities for reprogramming this sort of thing has long been lost. The Cardinal believes that if the Tapestry were to broadly be exposed that there would be widespread failure among the robots, so works diligently to prevent Sparks from disrupting it. To this end Grand Inquisitor Tomas de Morisco, known as the Grey Eminence, along with his Black Monks of Montaigne Noir seek out the most disruptive Sparks to try them for "heresy"...which is a crime that fits within the framework of the Tapestry.

"As the Role score decreases, the game maser has less influence over the character's behavior. In other words, the character is a robot on the path to true sentience and independent thought and action."

Q: *So, as the robots progress, they become increasingly aware of themselves and reality. In so doing they risk becoming hunted by the Inquisition. This means players have a profound choice before them, correct? They can play along, or they can embrace their awakened consciousness.*

A: Exactly. This is where the mechanics kick in. All robots have two stats reflecting their relationship to the Tapestry. First is the "Role" score, which indicates how locked into their original programming the robots are. Second is the "Self Awareness" score, which reflects how far they've come in overcoming their original programming.

The Role score does two things in the game. First, it defines the character's abilities. The number of dice the player gets to roll as part of the dice pool mechanic above depends on the robot's score in a particular role (a role is something like a skill package or class, which also includes some programmed personality traits among other things). However, as the robot destroys who it was programmed to be, it also begins to lose the abilities that came with that programming.

Secondly, Role acts as a restraint on player decision making. The player is playing a character that is a robot programmed to behave a certain way. Mechanically, this means the game master can use the robot's Role score to force or disallow certain behaviors by the player.

This both simulates the robot's struggle against its own programming and motivates the player to begin to take action to reduce that Role score. As the Role score decreases, the game maser has less influence over the character's behavior. In other words, the character is a robot on the path to true sentience and independent thought and action. Initially, the character is very much a robot constrained by its programming. Ultimately, however, it transforms into a fully free thinking being.

Also, the rate at which the Role score changes can be set by the play group to allow for longer or shorter campaigns, and it is largely within the control of the player to determine how quickly his robot character transforms. This is governed by the resource of Inspiration, which is acquired in the game and can be spent on a variety of things including more Self Awareness.

Q: *I like this dynamic betwee Role and Self Awareness. But, what is the advantage, mechanically speaking, of greater Self Awareness?*

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A: Beyond gaining more control over their character, players also can recreate their character in their own image. I mentioned that the number of dice a player gets to roll declines as the Role score declines. That's true, but it also goes up as the Self Awareness score goes up. So the robot becomes less effective at doing what it was initially programmed to do, and more effective at what the robot itself (i.e. the player) wants to do. Eventually, the character can completely eliminate who it was, and recreate itself as it wants to be. This includes personality traits and programmed behaviors as well as skills.

This could mean actually simply replacing the dice it lost so as to remain largely unchanged. To choose to stay the same is still a valid choice. In fact, one of the recommendations of the game is to play with pre-generated characters, so that the players don't get the exact character they want to have at first, but instead can use the transformation mechanics to change their character to what they want during play. Of course rules are provided for character generation, so players can generate their own characters if that's preferred.

Q: *This sounds like different sort of role-playing experience, notably because the system encourages characters "move" in terms of who controls them. I especially like that the game's dynamic toward self-awareness from "GM-control" mirrors what's going on in the game design hobby, in many ways. When can we get our grubby hands on the game?*

A: Thanks. One my goals with Ramshead is not to publish anything unless its really adding something to the hobby; either a new idea, or a new application of an old idea, or a new combination of ideas. There are already so many great games out there that simply copying one of them doesn't do the hobby or the fans any good.

As for a release date, I'd like to see it out by March, but I should emphasize that that's a really soft date. Art is coming in (also by David Hedgecock, whose work I really like), and the pieces are starting to fall into place. Alpha play testing is largely complete and I'm busy whipping the rules into shape for a solid round of Beta testing. I'll definitely release the game in 2004, and almost certainly by Gen Con.

The book will be a full-sized soft cover with a black and white interior art and a color cover. I haven't set the final page count yet.

I've hooked up with Jason Blair and Jason Valore of Key20 Publishing to represent and distribute Universalis, in addition to the very successful direct sales from the Ramshead website. So, I am planning to have them handle Robots & Rapiers as well. This will make the game available at your friendly local game store, as well as through Key 20 and direct from Ramshead.

Q: *Are you planning a line of supplements for the game?*

A: Yes, but not necessarily the sort of supplements you might expect. There won't be any splat books outlining the various factions in greater detail than in the core book, and there won't be any metaplot at all. Instead, I intend to have a number of "campaign seed" ideas presented in the core rules, any of which could form the basis of a metaplot. But my goal is to have game masters and their play groups make the world of Auvernais their own.

We *are* planning supplements about other resort locations. After all, Auvernais is only one theme park, there are several more on the planet. Some of these I'm already working on, such as a beach resort based on the "Spanish Main" where pirates, plunder, and voodoo can be found aplenty. I've also tinkered with a safari resort based on "Darkest Africa" where the Tapestry has totally failed and the robots are all mad.

Some of these alternative resorts may be stand alone playable products, and some may just be interesting destinations for adventurers from Auvernais to explore. Its also my plan to open up the world to fans would like to create their own themed resorts to release as supplements.

The supplements may be printed or may be released as PDFs. Ω

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Cyberpunk gangbusters

A sneak peek at the World of *Midway City*

Article by Eddy Webb with Jesse Noller

Eddy Webb is the Co-Line Developer for *Cartoon Action Hour* with Spectrum Studios. He is also an active role-playing game industry freelancer. Eddy is currently working on *Midway City,* among other designs.

This is a playtest draft of a chapter of the upcoming *Midway City* RPG by Spectrum Games and Z-Man Games. Like any draft, details are subject to change before the final product is released, but we couldn't help giving you a little peek of the "retro-cool" world of cyberpunk gangbusters. Enjoy your brief taste of the City, Mac.

Message in a bottle

… ask … help … Adams … Midway City … trapped. . . .

The garbled transmission hisses and pops as the signal trickles in over a frequency unused for over a century. This broadcast must have been bouncing around space for years – a message in a bottle. Your communications computer compensates for the noise, and the video feed becomes clearer. The picture shows a man sitting at a desk. He's facing the camera while he talks, but he's obviously distressed… maybe even wounded. You sit and watch the anachronism on the screen as the computer bleeps and spins.

Hopefully the data file recorder we scrounged off that G will last. My moniker is Adams–Derek Adams, and this transmission is a plea for help. There will not be a second transmission; there will be no follow up. After this, we have to go back to darkness. Given the limited time we have, I can't say too much here. We hope that someone off-world–someone outside of this *zoo*–will get this and save us from this god-awful experiment we're trapped in.

Is he crying? A yell off camera – a warning: "Hurry up Derek! They're coming fast!" Urgency paints itself across his face.

The history of Midway City

Okay, let's start at the beginning. As near as we can figure, given the tech we have to work with, we're trapped on a colony that's sitting on a backwater planet. The planet ain't on any of the star maps we can find, but we're pretty sure that the G louse up most of the info we find before we get it. The dome we're in is about 150 miles in diameter. We think that Hoodler and his crew–which we'll cover shortly–have something running that's blocking us from being able to find the walls, but we're pretty damned sure they're there. Everything inside the walls is known as Midway City–sometimes called "the big MC" or just "the City."

Ever since Hoodler came into power, it's been hard to find records of the past, but we've pieced some of it together. It all boils down to Douglas–Clayton Douglas III to be exact. It seems our great-grandparents originally came from someplace called "Earth" a long time ago. Something happened there. We ain't been able to figure out what, but it was bad. Maybe you can tell us what happened, assuming this "Earth" rock still floats.

Derek shifts in his seat as you hear gunfire. He looks down and picks up a sheaf of paper, flipping through it quickly.

Anyhow, they all left Earth. Douglas was some rich eccentric back then. He wasn't a nance, though. He somehow got himself put in charge of one of the space colonies planned for the evacuation. He had something different in mind–an idea he called "The Grand Experiment," and Douglas thought that … Wait, I have it … ah, here's the quote from him: "The downfall of humanity was directly caused by the advent of advanced technology and modern philosophy." Douglas thought that if he could keep

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us perpetually at what he called the "Golden Age" of some country known as the United States around the 1900s, we would stay copasetic and keep from flipping our lids.

He sets down the papers, sighing heavily he pushes his hair back.

Of course, Douglas was nuttier than a Christmas fruitcake. Totally screwy. Still, we figure that since he was the big cheese, everybody just went with it. So, now we have the City. As Midway City was built, Douglas sat as the original Mayor, keeping his mitts in every element of society. Not just the technology, but architecture, dress style, the media, even how we talk all went according to his plan. Douglas later cut the City up into a number of districts (or what we call boroughs) to ease the growing burden of leadership. Each borough was run by an Alderman and tied down as tightly as everything else.

Douglas might have been a nut, but he threw us all a bone. Seems he considered himself a humanitarian, so medical technology was kept as up-to-date as possible. Those who could afford it (the upper crust of the City) could have custom limbs and organs grown whenever they nicked their thumb. The rest of us poor saps get the outdated, bulky, state-sponsored cybernetic replacements we call "steelware." Of course, they never thought that we could use that against them … but I'm jumping ahead.

So, now Douglas is sitting pretty as Mayor, and everyone playing along with the illusion. Hell, they probably thought it was all one big costume party. From what we can tell, Douglas took the big sleep about twenty years after the completion of Midway City, just as the party was really jumping. He had set up an election system before he died, and the Aldermans started picking new Mayors. First up was Jefferson McGavin, one of the original settlers. He croaked of old age himself, and was replaced by Amanda Irving, a second generation native of the City. Irving was young, vibrant, and a total looker, but she had a lot of ideas, too. So, it ain't exactly a surprise that she was bumped off after only a couple of years into her term. They never collared the guy who did it, but everyone remembers where they were the day A.I. got shot… or more accurately, they used to remember, before that became illegal. Anyhow, after her came Jonathon Villernath, a wet blanket who barely managed to keep things running for a couple of decades before our last Mayor was elected.

Derek leans back, brushing back his hair again and rubbing his eyes.

Hoodler. No one knows where he came from, and no one can dig up any dirt on him. All we know is that he's in charge now and has been for a long time. After connecting a few dots, we think he's been Mayor for about eighty years, and he's pretty damned spry for a cat that should be over a hundred soon. Tommy, roll the cans.

The video cuts out as a prerecorded clip takes over. There's no sound, and it looks like it was recorded with a secret camera. But, it shows a man in a dapper-looking suit happily chatting with a crowd of equally well-dressed people. The man appears to be around thirty years old. After a few seconds, the video cuts back to Derek.

Yeah, that was Hoodler, about three days ago. No one can seem to remember when he was elected, or even if he was elected. We do know that the so-called "representative democracy" was dusted sometime after he came around, and Midway City ain't been the same since.

The Law

Sitting up straight, Derek lights a cigarette and takes a sip off of a hip flask, favoring one side. The gunshots have faded into the background.

It's pretty easy to know what's illegal in Midway City–just about everything. The Midway City police department handled law enforcement originally, but with the creation of the Elimination edicts, Hoodler created a new branch of government–the Regulation Division. The divi-

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sion is made up of Hoodler's toughest, strongest, and most loyal goons, who are collectively called the G-Men (or G for short). They don't answer to anyone; they're above the MCPD. They go through some sort of intense training (as well as an intense head job), and they get to pack heat that makes a Tommy gun look like a potato gun. The MCPD bulls have authority over crimes within their borough, but the G-Men can go anywhere and do anything in Hoodler's name. They will brainwash you, dope you up, lock you away, and bump you off as they see fit. The G are utterly ruthless, and these bastards scare the hell out of everyone. You never want to be on the receiving end of a buzz from them. Ever.

Derek leans down and picks up a typewritten piece of paper.

The Preservation laws were first introduced in the Douglas administration and are used to regulate the culture and style of the City. Most of these laws are minor. You get fined a double sawbuck if you're caught listening to rock and roll, or thrown in the hoosegow if you're caught spouting off about the past. But lately the G have been taking deadly action against certain cultural trespassers.

The Prohibition laws ain't changed much since the Douglas administration, but the enforcement has gotten much stiffer. These are the laws prohibiting technology outside of what the government allows, which means that unlicensed inventors shouldn't be looking into long-term life insurance. Through our research we've found out that the City's technology is actually a little better than it was in the "Golden Years." Cars run like a dream, telephones have stable connections, and radio is as clear as a bell. But, inventors and scientists have to apply to the government to produce anything new. Like I said before, medical technology ain't that harshly regulated, so we have a lot of doctors. Most tech isn't that closely tracked, but owning some hot goods gets you a free ticket to the G's watch list.

The Elimination laws are all Hoodler's sick little idea. He's got it in his head that in order to enforce the Preservation and Prohibition laws, anything pointing to the initial settlement of the City must be nixed, including references to the laws themselves. No one knows or remembers the details of these laws, which has got to make being a shyster a real bitch. I've seen a geezer get cut down in the middle of the street in broad daylight, just for the crime of saying "I remember when"... right in front of their god damned *grandkids*, too.

Derek crumples the piece of paper in anger, throwing it to the side, and taking another puff off of his cigarette.

Crime

There are a lot of things in the City that ain't exactly legal, but most times the cops look the other way, especially if you slip them some cabbage. Personally, I don't think they give a rat's ass. They're just a bunch of palookas trying to make a buck like the rest of us. The G are the real bastards, not the flatfoots on the street. However, the point is there's a lot of business going on. In the Big MC, you've got different flavors of crime to keep your peepers peeled for.

Independent crime

Independent crime is what happens on a day-to-day basis. You know, people doing illegal things on their own. Raps like murder and theft will still get you put in the can, even in the City. Most of the Preservation laws are broken by loners, too, and just about everyone has done something at one point or another. Like I said, there ain't a lot that's still legal any more.

Organized crime

A lot of the serious crime is done by organized crime syndicates. There are gangs of greasers and thugs out to make a quick buck, sure, but the real action is handled by the pros.

Derek sighs, fiddling with the ring on his hand again, but this time he grows angry.

You want to know what the bitch of it is? Most of them know about the Big Lie. They have access to tech that ain't G-quality but is still better than what we lug around. Sometimes,

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they're just as bad as the G-Men–turning us in, brainwashing us, and dusting us in their own schemes. They might hate the G as much as we do, but some are willing to squeal on their own kind for a buck. It's all about the almighty dollar for the Mob and the Tong.

The Mob

The Mob controls a large portion of the vice crime and protection rackets in the City, including the buying and selling of bootleg tech. They're divided up into different families. Most of them are Flips, but there are some human families as well. And, they all fight like cats and dogs. The Mob has a large number of coppers and Aldermen on their payroll. We don't think they've been able to bribe the G-Men, but there's some sort of arrangement there. Otherwise, Ness would've been all over then like a cheap suit by now.

The Tong

Some of the Kyrhee decided to turn their Juni-given powers and enlightenment to the pursuit of scratch. They started working together, and now call themselves the Tong. They do a brisk trade stashing things that need to disappear for a while into the Jade (which is some dimension that they have the keys to), as well as peddling drugs and selling their services as hatchet men. Don't ever cross them. You'll end up stuffed into a pair of extra-dimensional cement overshoes, as the guy before me found out. Like the Mob, they've been known to drop the dime on us, but they also work against the Mob, and even each other, when they get the itch. The rest of the Kyrhee are trying to nix this renegade element, but so far it ain't been a real success story.

The Movement

There are a number of different revolutionary factions in the City, but they have been collectively labeled "The Movement." That's us. We're the chumps who don't want to make money from the suffering of others. We want to knock the government off for everyone's good. We want to free the rubes trapped inside this prison run by faceless guards and a psychotic warden. We want to bring it all down. We want everyone to be free. It's a rough life at times, but saving even one honest Joe from the oppressive boot heel of the G-Men makes it worth getting up in the morning.

Derek sighs, grinding out his cigarette and lighting another.

The populace

Strangely enough, we have a pretty diverse group here. Most of these races were pulled together to form the great melting pot of the Big Lie. Not that it matters much. The key thing to remember is that in the end, we're all trapped here, human, mutie, and alien alike.

Humans

Humanity is the most prominent race in the City. What was traditionally described as "race"–white, black, yellow, brown–a factor any more, and even sexism ain't as bad as it was in the "Golden Years." It may seem like the City is all cosmopolitan and jake, but it's just easier to hate the other fellas that are harder to understand.

From off screen a voice yells "Damn it Derek, stop flapping your gums with the peace and understanding bull and get to the point! The G are going to find us, and the damned muties, and…" The voice trails off as some muted thumps are heard.

"Sorry about that," Derek says, taking another drag off of his cigarette.

Kyrhee

The few Kyrhee that would actually shoot the breeze with us about the past said that they were all Asian humans once. Apparently way back in ancient times, a bunch of aliens called the Juni came to Earth and inspired what they thought was the dominant culture at the time in some dump called China. In the past couple hundred years, the Juni came back and started teaching their "children" some amazing stuff involving another dimension called the Jade. The problem with this class in extra-dimensional physics is that all the students began to change physically.

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They became taller and thinner as their bodies started stretching. Their eyes became solid black pools with a second membrane, and their hands turned into long, thin talons. Their skin turned a number of different colors–red, blue, green, purple, and so on, and each clan claimed one of the colors as their own. The Juni called this changed race the "Kyrhee."

Of course, now the Juni are gone, and the Kyrhee have their own society. It's a combination of Juni and Asian culture. I don't think anyone has seen a Juni since Midway City was founded. There's a lot of reasons why people dislike the Kyrhee. They're tight, they tend to keep their heads closed, and they know a lot more than they let on. Never mention the Tong to them, since they're either in it or out to dust it.

"Damned aliens."

There are more muted thumps as Derek jumps off screen for a second. A small crash like breaking glass is heard, and he comes back into view.

Blanks

Next are the Blanks. Blanks are synthetic humans, created back before the City was built. They're tougher and stronger than us, and as kids they look and act a lot like us too. After they go through puberty, though, they change. They get some sort of tattoos on the back of their neck and right hand–a bunch of black lines, each pattern as unique as a fingerprint. Rumor is that the G can read the lines to get the dirt on each Blank's capabilities, but I ain't seen it yet.

They get their name from the fact that they have some sort of emotional cut-off. As soon as one of them starts to get sore, something in their brain goes "click" and shuts it off. Blanks come off as real cool customers, but they ain't machines. They're just real good at keeping their lid on.

Being tough as an ox makes them a perfect working class. If there's a dangerous job that requires a lot of muscle–construction, shipping, maintenance work, things like that–odds are the Blanks are doing it. Some people think that the Blanks make up the bulk of the G-Men, but there's no proof to that. They do make up a lot of the normal bulls, though, and they like working in groups more than on their own.

A bald man in overalls and a white shirt with a tattoo on his hand and neck steps on screen. "Sir, I do not believe that assumptions are going to. . . . "

Derek cuts him off with a wave and the man steps back off screen. "That's Rail, our resident Blank." Derek sighs heavily, looking at his cigarette, and grinding it out next to the first one.

Flips

Flips are people who can't seem to get their bodies right. Some of the old boys call them "mutants" or "muties," but Flips all have something weird about them – sometimes good (also called "flips" in the local slang) and sometimes bad (which are "flops"). Case in point: I know a Flip with the name Jarod, and he can track anyone like a wolfhound. I mean, he literally can sniff anyone out, but he's … well, fuzzy. Then there's Stinky Jack. Stinky has a skin problem, as in he ain't got any, and he gets infections a lot. He can still work, but I ain't taking him out with me for a bite anytime soon. There aren't that many Flips anymore that are so badly "flipped" they can't function, but when two Flips mate, you can't predict what flips and flops their kids will have.

Other people get pretty twitchy around the Flips, so they tend to keep to themselves. Flips got into the habit of dispensing their own justice, so nowadays most of the Mob is run by them, which doesn't exactly help to win them a whole lot of pals. Some of them don't even consider themselves human anymore, and they don't give a damn about anyone who ain't a Flip. Some of the older Flips are into respect and honor and things like that, but the young greasers don't give a damn … so, watch your ass.

Gazers

When a human and a Kyrhee have a kid–something frowned on by just about everyone–sometimes the result is a human, and some-

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times it's a Kyrhee. Once in a while, though, they get a kid that looks like a human, but is bald as a cue ball and has solid green eyes. Word on the street is that they can see directly into the Jade, peeping at things other people can't or won't see. As a result, they're starting to get the name of Gazers, but some call them Goblins.

There are just enough of them to start making some noise, especially since some of the things they've been seeing ain't good for Hoodler's administration. We've got a few Gazers in the Movement, but with most people not liking them, they tend to stick to themselves a lot. Many of them hide their eyes with stolen contacts or sunglasses, and they wear a lot of hats. Gazer broads just have a hell of a time fitting in.

Derek glances up as you hear muted crashes in the background.

The boroughs

Damn it, I don't have time! I've got to cover the boroughs. As I said, Midway City is divided up into a number of districts. Each one is self-managing, and turf wars are pretty commonplace. We suspect that Hoodler's bunch encourages them to keep us distracted. Roll the map!

The screen flickers as a hand-drawn map of each of the boroughs show on the screen.

City Center is the core of the government, encompassing City Hall and the headquarters for the Enforcement Division. We're actually not sure if Hoodler and his cronies squat inside the dome at all. It could be him pulling the sheep over our peepers.

Douglas Industrial Park is the industrial area of the City, containing both the factories and the homes of the workers (like Rustdown). The air ain't so good here, but a lot of Blanks seem to breathe it just fine. Or, at least they don't complain.

Old Downtown was where everyone used to go, but as bigger businesses sprung up and moved to Green Halls, this area has become a dive. Tech speakeasies, cheap whorehouses, flea-infested hotels–you know how it is. Some things never change.

Green Halls is the business district and the "new" downtown. Because the posh scene shows up here, this is also the place for a lot of the swankier crime.

Kyr-Town is the district that the Kyrhee cluster in. In many respects, it's a small city unto itself. As I said, they're tight-knit.

Nerezza is like Kyr-Town, except that many of the Flips live and work here. Unsurprisingly, it's also the unofficial center for the Mob. The place is usually a war zone, but when an outside threat shows up, they lock shields.

Tinsel Town is the entertainment borough, in more ways than one–nose-candy, pro skirts, canaries, and hooch can all be found here. Movies and vices, all delivered on a silver mirror.

Tower Groves is where all of the rich live, with their own stores and security unmatched anywhere else in the City. Never try to break in there.

University Center is the borough that houses most of the learning in the City. Of course, given the fact all of the City's information and knowledge is filtered, you have to wonder what they're calling "education" anymore, but the Movement has some strong support there.

Watersdown is by the ruins of the old water production plant, and it has turned into a borough full of slums and bums. Even the MCPD tread lightly in Watersdown, since people tend to disappear.

The suburbs ain't a borough, but a ring of land around the rest of the City that contains Dick and Jane housing away from the hustle and bustle. That's the part that's closest to the walls of the dome.

The Finale

The camera switches back to Derek. This time he has a pistol in his hand, an old nickel-plated six-shooter. He kisses the ring on his hand.

That's it people. Midway City, with its towering skyscrapers reaching into the sky like prison bars, the dark city streets with burned-out streetlights, the run-down neighborhoods with the cries of the hopeless ringing in your ears, and the smoky back rooms where whores strut there

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stuff and mobsters flaunt their ill-gotten tech. On the other side, there are the everyday Joes just trying to do their jobs and make a living: busboys, butchers, and bankers all scraping up enough scratch to get them through, while their sons and daughters are raised ignorant and grandma and grandpa are locked away for having lived too long. All of us are trapped, stuck in an experiment that's gone on for far too long.

So we're trying to get the word out about the Mob, the Tong, the rich, the Mayor, and the G-Men, but we're screaming in the wind. Night's closing in, and the lights are going out. Save us before we all forget the truth.

Shots and screams in the background.

"It's the G!"

Derek nods and picks up the revolver, screaming "You killed my wife, you bastards!" He leaves the range of the camera, and shots are heard. More screams, and more shots. The last thing you see is the image of a large man clad in a long grey coat with shiny black buttons, his hat and the collar of the coat obscuring his face in shadows. All you can make out are the eyes, which gleam with cold purpose. The man lowers a gun at the camera, and the screen goes black.

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Causality and choice

Getting rid of the {TECH}in role-playing games

Article by Neel Krishnaswami

Neel Krishnaswami has been playing role-playing games for just over half his life, and he has been participating in Internet role-playing fandom for over a third of it. What keeps him in the hobby is his observation that the quality of the play he has participated in has steadily improved over time, and that he retains enormous room for growth and improvement.

This is a tutorial article on how to create and use causal influence diagrams as a general-purpose technique to enable players to make consequential decisions for their characters. It's the first in what I think will be a series of articles on causality, and how to manage it and use it for best effect. It's also the first time I've ever put any version of these ideas into print, so any and all commentary and corrections will be gratefully accepted!

I am told that the writers of "Star Trek" scripts do not usually come up with all of the jargon that the characters use. Instead, they just make the notation {TECH} wherever the characters should say something technical, and someone else will come along to fill in each such instance with some chunk of technobabble. This has an important story consequence: Since the science is completely arbitrary, it's necessarily the case that the plot can't really hinge, in a compelling way, on the technical and scientific choices the characters face. It's all just {TECH}. At its best, the technobabble can provide sci-fi color, and at worst it's an excuse for a *deus ex machina* resolution.

The same thing is true in most role-playing games, too. When a character needs to do some non-combat activity, the process of doing so usually boils down to scrounging up all the available bonuses and then making a die roll. The player never gets to make a real choice. Since bonuses are always good and penalties always bad, there's never a compelling reason to ever reject one. And what is merely amusing in a television series is essentially fatal to a role-playing game.

We can still be entertained by an episode of "Star Trek," because part of the ritual of watching TV is going along with the conceit that the characters are making meaningful decisions. But role-playing games are games in which the players' choices stand in for their characters' choices, and any game in which the players can't make meaningful choices for their characters is in deep trouble.

I believe this is why so many role-playing games are based in violent genres; we know, thanks to our primitive ancestors' wargame heritage, how to put together combat systems that offer players some modest scope for meaningful choice. But when it comes to anything outside of combat, very few game systems offer any help in this regard. At best, you can play collect-the-bonus, and if the designer was really daring there's a game of rock-paper-scissors glued on top of that, so that the player can choose a "strategy" (the scare quotes are deliberate).

Thus far, I don't think that I've said anything really unusual — I'm sure everyone reading this has seen some rant or another along these lines before. So I'll try and break free of the pattern, and actually offer a technique that can help. I'll use a space opera example as the running example in this essay. Let's suppose that we have a space opera game, and we want to give the player of the ship's engineer some consequential choices to make about how he can fix his ship's hyperdrive. (Note that a hyperdrive is deliberately not "realistic"; I want to be able to make anything into a focus of consequential choice.)

The causal influence diagram

The technique I suggest is called the *causal influence diagram*; it's a tool from machine learning and analytic philosophy that I think can be profitably applied to solving one of the hardest problems in role-playing games — reliably enabling the players to make meaningful, consequential choices.

So, first, what is a causal influence diagram? A causal influence diagram is basically a bunch of boxes with arrows connecting them. Each box represents some thing or situation, and the arrows leading into it are the causes that directly determine what state the situation can take, and the arrows leading out of it point to exactly the boxes which it in turn causes. So the state of a

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box is the cause of all the boxes it points to, and it is the effect of all the boxes that point to it.

For our hyperdrive, let's take each of the boxes to be some component of the hyperdrive. I'll just make up some a technological-sounding name for each component:

- Hyperwave detector
- Flux Amplifier
- Antimatter Grid
- Plasma Coils
- Phase Lock Controller
- Safety Interlocks
- Graviton Shunt

That's a fine list of technobabble terms, but we haven't gotten past {TECH}. The trick to doing so is to put them into a graph, so that you can see which components depend on which others.

So our diagram (below) says that what the flux amplifier does depends on what the hyperwave detector and the phaselock controller are doing. What does this mean? To answer this, we need to make a small story for each box, explaining what its states can actually be, and how they depend on the causal factors. Since we have seven pieces, we have seven such things to write.

For the four boxes with no inputs, our task is basically trivial: we can just enumerate each the possible states that the box can be in. For example, let's suppose that the hyperwave detector is a sensor device, and the sensor can be either up or down. If it's up, it's detecting hyperwaves properly, and if it's down, then it's not — perhaps it is damaged, or turned off, or removed for repairs, or something.

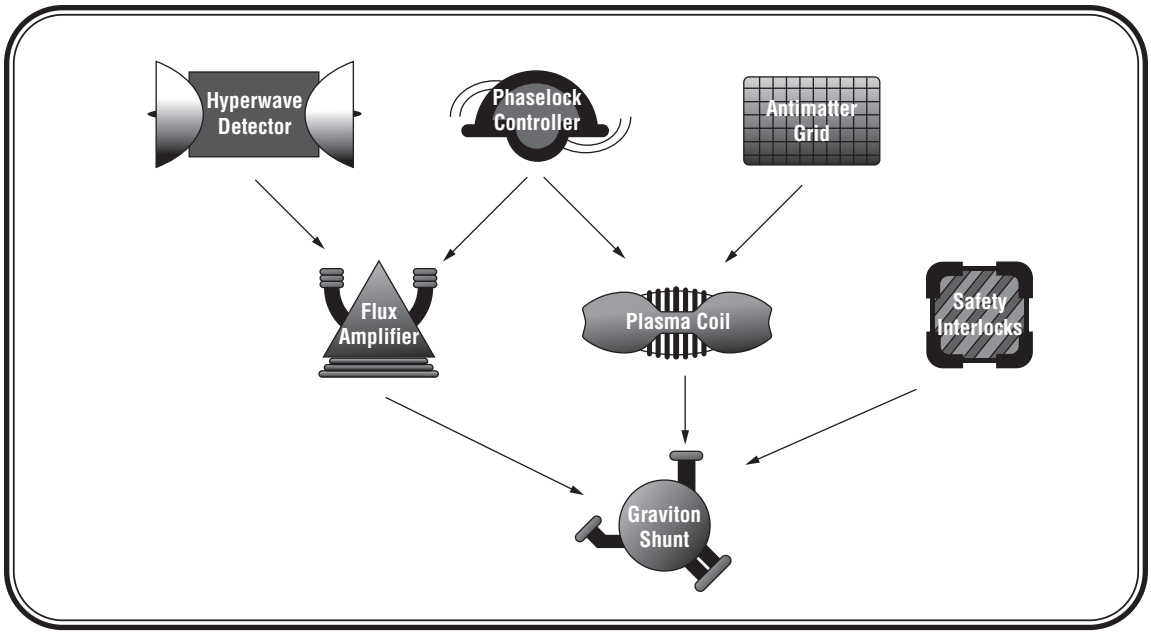
Hyperwave Detector

Hyperwave Detector
Sensor Up
Sensor Down

Likewise, the phaselock controller can either be synchronizing the phase, or it's broken:

Phaselock Controller

Phaselock Controller
Synchronizing
Broken



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An antimatter grid sounds like a power source. Let's say that it's either generating full power, or it's not. Note here that there are a lot more possible states we can imagine putting the grid in, like reactor overloads, a core breach, and so on. My choice not to include that is arbitrary: I am just trying to keep the example small.

Antimatter Grid

Antimatter Grid
Full power
No power

Every hyperdrive needs safety interlocks, if only so the engineer can disable them to resolve an emergency — or a saboteur can disable them to create one.

Safety Interlocks

Safety Interlocks
Enabled
Disabled

Much more interesting are the boxes that depend on causes — the states that they can take on are conditioned on their causes. We can represent this with a table, in which the state of the box depends on the states of its causes. So our flux amplifier's state depends on the hyperwave signal and the phaselock controller. The story we make up here is that the flux amplifier is amplifying the hyperwave signal, and the phaselock controller keeps the signal in tune with the plasma beam from the plasma coils. If everything works right, then we get an in-phase plasma signal, and if not, things can break in interesting ways.

Flux Amplifier

Hyperwave Detector	Phaselock Controller	Flux Amplifier
Sensors up	Synchronizing	In-phase flux signal
Sensors up	Broken	Out-of-phase flux signal
Sensors down	–	No flux signal

The plasma coils depend on the phaselock controller and on the antimatter grid. Antimatter and plasma sound highly energetic, so let's say that the plasma coils generate a plasma beam for the graviton shunt. Naturally, the phaselock controller guarantees that the plasma beam is properly in phase with the flux signal.

Plasma Coils

Antimatter Grid	Phaselock Controller	Flux Amplifier
Full power	Synchronizing	In-phase plasma beam
Sensors up	Broken	Out-of-phase plasma beam
No power	...	No plasma beam

The biggest table is the graviton shunt table. (See the table on the following page.) It depends on the safety interlocks, the plasma coils, and the flux amplifier. This is the thing that actually makes the hyperjump, and it needs the plasma beam for power and a flux signal to direct it properly. Since this is dangerous, there are safety interlocks that will shut down the shunt any time that the flux signal and plasma beam are not in-phase.

Making it work

So now we can tell a story about how the hyperdrive works. What does this get us? Does it really give the players of an RPG the ability to make consequential choices? I think it does, because we now have the ability to answer the question, "What if?"

I'm going to (very briefly) talk about the philosophical underpinnings of causal influence

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Graviton Shunt

Flux Amplifier	Plasma Coils	Safety Interlocks	Graviton Shunt
In-phase flux signal	In-phase plasma beam	Enabled	Accurate hyperjump
In-phase flux signal	Out-of-phase plasma beam	Enabled	No hyperjump (safe failure)
Out-of-phase flux signal	In-phase plasma beam	Enabled	No hyperjump (safe failure)
Out-of-phase flux signal	Out-of-phase plasma beam	Enabled	No hyperjump (safe failure)
In-phase flux signal	Out-of-phase plasma beam	Disabled	Inaccurate hyperjump (overshoot or undershoot)
Out-of-phase flux signal	In-phase plasma beam	Disabled	Inaccurate hyperjump (wrong direction)
Out-of-phase flux signal	Out-of-phase plasma beam	Disabled	Wild hyperjump (could be anywhere!)
–	No plasma beam	–	No hyperjump (can't generate gravitons)
No flux signal	–	–	No hyperjump (can't make hyperspace transition)

diagrams. They are inspired by a view of causality called interventionism. In this view, to say that A is the cause of B, is to say that if you change the world so that A becomes true, then B will become true also.

So, we say that the sight of dawn causes the rooster to crow, because if we kept a rooster from seeing the dawn, it wouldn't crow, and if we showed it an artifical dawn it would. Conversely, the rooster doesn't cause the sun to rise, because if we prevented the rooster from crowing, the sun would still rise.

You can see how this idea applies to gaming. We can work out the causal relationships in a situation, and then the actions of the players constitute interventions. Then, we can use our knowledge of those causal relationships to infer what has happens as a consequence.

So, how would a causal influence diagram work in play? The basic idea is that events in the game affect the state of the various components of the hyperdrive — for example, a neutron torpedo hit might damage the phaselock controller. That, in turn, will have a foreseeable consequence for the PCs — their spaceship can no longer make a hyperjump. The player of the engineer can, in turn, suggest different options. He can cut the safety interlocks, allowing the ship to make a wild jump, or if the pilot can evade the enemy long enough, he can replace the controller. And he can make these improvisations without having to {TECH}.

Know thy consequences

Now, I'll make some pragmatic observations on using causal influence diagrams. First, and

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most obviously, let the players look at them. They can't play the what-if game without knowing what the consequences might be. This is a form of prep that's intended to be shared with the players; it's an efficient way of encoding lots of information about the setting.

Second, less is more. Causal diagrams exist to make playing what-if games easier, but extremely complicated causal relationships will still be opaque. Even relatively simple relationships — like the workings of the graviton shunt — form fairly unwieldy tables.

Third, aim for causal relationships at about the granularity you want the game's action to focus on — the diagram encodes the causal relationships the players can see, and so that will be the level at which the players will hypothesize and reason.

Finally, role-playing games reach their highest pitch when the player is making a meaningful, consequential decision that they care about. It has to matter in the story, and it has to be a story the player cares about, and it has to be a decision the player makes, not a die roll. A causal influence diagram can help you with the last part of that, but the first two are still up to the group. Ω

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Ten big gimmes

Ten technological ideas for your science-fiction role-playing game

Article by Emily K. Dresner-Thornber (and lots of help from Eric Thornber!)

Emily K. Dresner-Thornber has written for numerous publications including *Pyramid Magazine, In Nomine, Kindred of the East, Vampire: Dark Ages,* and *Big Eyes, Small Mouth,* including *Cute and Fuzzy Seizure Monsters.* Currently, she spends more time writing small games

Science fiction gaming is a grand parasite on the universal gimme—a core pseudoscientific principle destined to be real science in all of Man's tomorrows, but a wish and a dream of the current era. In accepting this principle as fact, all science fiction flows. With scientific progress come scientific detriments, nothing is without its price. Corporations demand more loyalty from consumers, governments use the advances to their own gain, and individuals profit and lose.

Hard science fiction makes use of only one or two gimmes. It bases its pride on being grounded in firm, plausible science principles with the gimme as a plot point. Pulp science fiction uses as many gimmes as it can cram. Is the Earth being invaded by genetically engineered androids from another dimenion? Perfect!

Here are ten big scientific gimmes for any good science fiction roleplaying game.

1. Genetic Engineering

Man itches to tamper with his own genetic code. DNA is no longer a mystery and cries for a little tampering, reengineering, and improvements. Genetic Engineering brings forth great things for Man: super soldiers, the cure for cancer, extended longevity, an end to genetic diseases, and, eventually, the homogenization and codification of the human race. Let the corporations get their hands on a little bit of DNA and they'll be selling custom, designed humans on the store shelves. Just don't get caught as yesterday's model.

Ever wonder where human evolution is ultimately going? Some say that man arrested human evolution with the advent of advanced medicine. What if human evolution is now in the hands of Humanity itself? Genetically engineered humans are the future. Need a version of mankind that can withstand the vacuum of space or the pressures of living under the sea? How about engineered to live on planets with atmospheres made entirely of methane? DNA isn't just for fun anymore—it's a lifestyle! Breed a few new strains of Man in a test tube, and voila! A new species custom tailored for harsh environments and unliveable conditions.

What happens when those genetically engineered humans are left to themselves to evolve for a while? What happens when a space ship from one race of humans meets a genetically engineered race after 10,000 years apart? Do they go to war? Do they reintegrate back into their own race?

Can they even recognize each other anymore?

2. Memory Implants

Imagine taking a relaxing vacation without ever leaving your living room — or visiting another planet without putting on pants. Are these memories real? Did you really go? Or are they implants? Are they fake designer memories bought and paid for, injected into your brain, and replacing real experiences with a life much more interesting? Someone else's exciting life?

Memory implants in the hands of unethical governments—or ,worse, corporations—opens up new avenues of philosophical introspection. What is real? What is not? What qualifies as real? Do you have to live something for it to be real, or is reality just in the mind? Can a government reshape your reality by overwriting your memories to those of someone else, someone more loyal?

What happens when a corporation releases parasitic memory implants with commercial intentions? While you're reaching for your handy blaster hanging on your hip, you suddenly remember to drink refreshing Coca-Cola, and Pepsi pops in mind while you're tying your shoes. You drive a Ford because Fords are inexorably linked to the memories of learning to drive.

In the future, human beings have their memories replaced and tuned to have the ultimate consumer loyalty, the ultimate buying habits, living

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the ultimate ant-like lives. If memories define who we are, what are we once we start exchanging our own memories for designer make-believe?

3. Super Advanced Medicine

Imagine a world with no cancer, no AIDS, no serious physical trauma. Got your arm sliced off in a duel? No problem—we can fuse it right back on! In fact, we can make it better! Just add in some robotics, and now that lost arm is a super-arm of the future.

The medicine of the future will be to us what our medicine is to people 1,000 years ago. It's miraculous. It's magical. The pills cure all ills, and no one dies of common diseases. Serious bodily trauma that would have killed a man in an earlier era is a mere nuisance today, and those that leave us broken and bloodied are forgettable in the future. Get your head lopped off—take a pill and it immediately attaches back onto your neck!

But, of course, any miracle medicine of the future would cost plenty of hard cold cash—and be run by the global insurance companies. Sure you can be cured of dismemberment with a pill and a flick of a laser pen, but if you're poor, you can't get treatment. You may be able to live forever if you're rich, but death comes for those who can't pay.

4. Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen Paradox

Quantum mechanics is a strange and wonderful thing. Take this example:

A neutral particle in a laboratory decays into two photons: one with a spin of up and one with a spin of down. The two photons are separated by space, but they are still described by the same wave equation, so they keep their spins. By measuring the spin of one regardless where it is, one gains instant knowledge about the other. Instantaneous information transfer across any space or time.

The EPR allows communication of information anywhere in the universe, instantaneously. From it unfurls the underlying physics for faster than light communications. Need to talk to home base halfway across the galaxy? EPR! Need a super sentient super-computer that spans worlds? EPR! Quantum mechanics is magic, filling an informational void and allowing anyone, no matter how far away, to communicate instantly back with home base.

5. Artificial Intelligence

Ever since Alan Turing, computer artificial intelligence has been the dream of many and the achievement of very few. But somewhere in the future machines may wake to a certain strange mechanical intelligence. Perhaps the intelligence will be benevolent and work hand-in-hand with Humanity, its creator. The machines are an asset, leading their great knowledge to planet-spanning building projects, spitting out thousands of android drones to work in untenable conditions, supplying a warm fuzzy friend in the dark heart of infinite space, and keeping the ships running while playing a rousing game of chess.

More likely the intelligence will be curious, alien, bizarre, or even subtly malevolent. The machines first reached out to Humanity in an overture of peace and understanding but Humanity, abhorred, forsake the Machines and started a thousand years of bitter unending war. Now the Machines plot and plan and execute. Humanity cannot understand the Machines, and the Machines see no continued logical purpose for the existence of their small, fleshy, fragile creators.

If only Humanity had not treated the Machines as slaves and accepted their demands for independence, they could have avoided millennia of pain and war. Is it too late?

6. Anti-Matter Fuel Cells

Anti-Matter, the mirror of the universe. When energy coalesces into matter, it forms a pair of particles: the particle and the anti-particle. It takes energy to create a pair of particles and when they meet—annihilate—they release this energy. What if this energy could be harnessed into a controllable reaction with an engine injecting Anti-Matter particles into a holding tank and energy siphoned into giant, mile-long capacitors?

Anti-Matter fuel cells are the answer to all energy problems involved in space travel. Getting close to the speed of light—or even past it into some kind of super-string warp—requires vast reserves of energy. Anti-Matter reactions uses normal, every day matter, and a highly con-

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voluted engine injector. It is collected by a huge super-scoop, sent into the tank, forced apart, and injected into matter colliders. The more Anti-Matter, the more energy, the more push to get the ship moving.

Even better, Anti-Matter particles from the Big Bang lie about unused, waiting for some enterprising life form to scoop them up and use them for fuel. All that dark matter? Anti-Matter particles. Need unlimited fuel for a space ship to cross vast interstellar distances? Anti-Matter is clearly the answer. Now, if only the reaction doesn't blow apart the ship

7. Practical Cold Fusion

If Anti-Matter is too difficult to control and too unwieldy to collect, what about just bombarding normal hydrogen atoms together to create huge amounts of energy and normal, everyday water? Cold fusion harnesses the power of the stars—and provides a nice refreshing drink afterwards. Cold fusion releases the power of the atomic reaction of fusing two molecules into a larger molecule, without the problems of heat leakage or inconvenience.

Once cold fusion is practical, it becomes the battery of the future. Everything from cars to starships to televisions to portable entertainment systems run off Mr. Fusion. Anything can be broken down and fused, is. Instead of pulling up to the pump in your snazzy hover-car, hordes of scavengers raid each other's garbage cans for the best fuel. Stuff a few banana peels in the hopper and off you go.

But, now that energy is nothing to worry about, what will corporations and governments do? Who holds the power now?

8. Many Worlds Hypothesis

The Many Worlds Hypothesis tries to plug non-deterministic holes in quantum theory by stipulating that every time a choice is made, the universe splits into two parallel universes—one where the decision goes down path A, and one where the decision goes down path B. Left road or right. Up or down. Both choices are taken, but we only remember one—the one that exists in our universe. (These universes are often referred to as "collapsing the wave function" in quantum physics—and that's a handy term for NPC scientists to fling around when discussing infinite universes.)

If all the infinite universes were constructed at the beginning of the universe, our interpretation of Free Will is only seeing one path down the already existent tree structure. We don't really have Free Will—some Gnostic God the Creator set us upon our road and we must follow it until we can break down barriers between this world and the next.

So what if an enterprising scientist discovered a device to open holes between these parallel universes? Could we tell the difference between one universe and the next? How far does one need to travel before significant differences become obvious, and how well can we traverse the different nodes on the parallel universe tree?

Perhaps once the hole is open between worlds, Humanity can traverse the tree, grab Free Will, mine the other worlds for their technological advances, and use the less developed worlds as slaves. Humanity could become dominion over not just his own universe, but also an infinite number of others. In time, Humanity could find the right path to lead them down toward a certain set of ugly, nasty truths about the universe, and what it means to live in it.

9. Cryogenics

If you came down with some dread disease, wouldn't it be nice if they could just freeze your body and wake you up in the future where they would magically cure you? You'd wake up in a brave new world, confusing and strange, but you'd be cured of your dire disease. And if they could cure you, what other fun things can they do to you? Robotics? Computer implants? Wetware? Maybe you just froze your head and, sometime in the distant future of flying cars and multi-planetary living, they extracted your brain, pumped it into a machine, and dispensed with the last of your body. You're cured! A machine 1,000 years removed from where you were, but cured!

Or, cryonics may have a more immediate application. Who wants to live through the years of boring interplanetary and interstellar space travel when you can just freeze yourself, take the big sleep, and wake up not one day older? It is

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highly convenient for getting from place to place across the inky blackness of space without having to justify generational space travel. Need to sleep for 30 years? Just slip into your sleep pod, freeze yourself, and wake up ready to go.

10. After the Bomb/ New World Order

Sure, the bomb might kill all life on Earth, but it might also pave the way for a clean slate: a New World Order. Now that the survivors have learned from the mistakes of their predecessors—perhaps building the bomb was a poor idea—they're determined to rebuild the world in a newer, shinier vision of the future.

But it is newer? Or shinier?

The New World Order might be a drive to the stars. Now that the world is inhabitable in areas once densely populated and the oceans are full of mutants, it is time to leave the cradle of Earth and head out to the other planets of the Solar System. But maybe evil science is now driven underground, where only a few practice the ancient religion while all others persecute and kill. Never again, they cry, as the world cools and the nuclear winter breaks. Ω

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Uncertainty and exclusivity

Two powerful tools for game masters seeking to revitalize old routines

Article by T.S. Luikart

T.S. Luikart lives in a cramped house in California that more than vaguely resembles a role-playing game library. He is responsible for (or is guilty of depending on your point of view) contributing to or designing such products as *UnderWorld, The Last Exodus, Promised Sands,* and *Skull & Bones.*

Whenever gamers assemble to air their varied woes, there always seem to be a few reoccurring complaints that never go out of style.

Two prevalent themes amidst these grumbles, often regardless of the individual game system being discussed, are the lack of a correct "feeling" and the absence of originality. Both grievances can be either helped or hindered by a given game's mechanics, but ultimately they're the game master's responsibility to engender. It is true that many old role-players occasionally succumb to the dreaded "been there, done that" syndrome. However, as so many new products purport to be the "next big thing" yet turn out to be "more of the same," can you really blame them?

> **"I'll let you in on a little secret: what gamers want is a campaign that's cool. All the rest, mechanics included, are window dressing."**

I'll let you in on a little secret: what gamers want is a campaign that's cool. All the rest, mechanics included, are window dressing. If a given campaign setting causes the imagination and creativity of game matters and players to flourish, then it is, at least partially, successful. No matter how much us designer types may slave over our rules, if you don't like the premise of the world's background, then you won't give a damn. This article holds a few suggestions on how to simulate feeling and originality in your game. If we're on the mark, your players will think, "Now that is cool" and buy you pizza.

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE
or 'This doesn't feel very magical'

If you've run fantasy role-playing games for any length of time, you've likely heard the above line before. However, when questioned as to why a given system doesn't have the right "feeling," players are often at a loss to pinpoint what, exactly, is wrong with it. I submit that more often than not, it's certainty. Certainty is the province of video games—down around, tap A, Ryu hucks the fireball. While there is a visceral joy to be had in dealing out digital death on the latest first-person shooter engine, your players have chosen to join you for their evening's entertainment or they would be back getting a monitor tan, which means you must provide some sort of experience that video games cannot.

Fantasy fiction is filled with tales of spells going awry, of wizards that must beware their hubris, of foes whose powers are uncertain and mysterious. To pick on the big boy, spell casting in the d20 system works just like a video game. There is no uncertainty. You know the spells you know; the effects are precise and unvaried. A few meta-magic feats allow a greater range of effect, but, ultimately, they don't transform spell chucking into anything much different from swinging a sword, or picking a lock....

And the heart of magic is in its mysteries. There are a number of systems that are wholly devoted to this premise; Ars Magica suggests that one must spend a lifetime mastering the forces of the arcane. Sorcerer and the Dying Earth Roleplaying Game (at Rialto level) each hold that the most powerful magicks must be carefully wrung from powerful, and capricious, extra-dimensional entities. Unknown Armies states unequivocally that magic exacts a high price on its user. All of these role-playing games have a much more fluid take on what, exactly, a magic wielder can accomplish. Correspondingly, they're pointed at as examples of what magic should feel like in an role-playing games. I don't

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play any of those, says you? No problem, says I. Here are a couple of suggestions that work with any system, including the ones mentioned above:

Power Never Dissipates

The first question you should really ask about magic is this: Where did the energy to cast it come from in the first place?

The classic *Dungeons & Dragons* setting *Dark Sun* suggests that the all power for a spell is drawn from the world surrounding a caster, which had devastating consequences for the ecology of Athas. The default explanation in fantasy role-playing games seems to be that spell casting is a rare "gift." The explanation suggests that the energy for magic only comes from individuals with said gift. Otherwise, they submit, it comes from other planes of existence.

Either way, a spell is a spell, right? Which is why I ask the following "All right, regardless of where the energy came from, it is here now. What happens to a spell after-the-fact? What happens to the energy of a resisted spell?"

Say a wizard subtlety casts a suggestion spell on a merchant, whose natural tendency towards suspicion serves him well as he resists. The d20 system assumes that the spell simply disperses.

But, everything we know about energy suggests that once it's around, it's around. Admittedly, fantasy universes don't have to follow our world's scientific notions. Consider, though, all that comes of that simple thought. Maybe upstarts spell casters get hunted down because of a vast and dangerous proliferation of resisted spells. It's wizards as ozone depleters! If spells come from an individual, what if they share some portions of a being's personality? What if a caster's spells are, in a literal sense, him? What if every spell is sentient? After missing its target, what does a sentient spell do, exactly?

There is Always a Price

You cannot get something for nothing, unless you're engaging in a particularly clever con. Yet, the free flow of magic seems to be implicit in a number of game settings. That is easily changed. What is more, the price can, and should, vary from person to person. Spell casters that need to sacrifice a sentient being once a month to maintain their powers are highly unlikely to make many friends. However, a druid who has to plant a new tree every day at the edges of his forest domain, while far more capable of socializing, isn't likely to go on long distance adventures any time soon.

Strange taboos and odd behavior are staples among mages—those that can bear to be their friends will all to soon become aware of this. The question of the origin of magic always neatly intersects with price; if all magical power comes from potent Outsiders, the nature of said entities will certainly greatly influence the wielders of spells.

Exclusivity

If everyone can do something, that something isn't all that special. Players will consciously take different types of characters for more than strategic reasons—just about everybody wants the limelight occasionally. If another player character can do everything you can do, only better, you get to feeling (probably accurately) that your character is bit redundant. More tactically minded players are often quick to take what they deem to be the most advantageous abilities for combat, whereas those of a more story-driven bent will want odd or endearing gifts that suit their character.

Many role-playing games feature a wide variety of ability paths that characters can choose from. *Feng Shui* uses Shticks, d20 uses Feats, *Exalted* has Charms, etc. Players, if unguided, will frequently strive to take the "best" of the various skills for their characters, often as defined by chat groups on the Internet, regardless of appropriateness to a given campaign. How you structure your world can help to direct your player character's choices and thereby make a number of abilities that might be deemed "common" far more rare, and therefore cool.

The School of the Last Hour

If a vast hulking warrior runs up and cleaves a foe bodily in d20, players can readily guess that he has one or more of the Feats on the "power attack" path. Since this particular path is so useful for fighters, it is pretty widespread in the

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majority of *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns.

But what if it's not? Say, anybody can take the Feat: Power Attack, but the rest of the path—Cleave and so forth—isn't publicly learnable. You need a teacher. The only teachers that can impart the entire path belong to a dojo founded by an Imperial executioner, called the School of the Last Hour. Not only are they the only place to learn the entire path, but also they'll eventually teach one or two bennies that aren't publicly available to anybody else (e.g. a special coup de grace move, extra-damage with two-handed kwan daos, that sort of thing). Now, your player not only gets the abilities he wants, but he gets to brag that he's an imperial executioner. The only other people in all the world that know any similar feats belong to the assassin's guild, the House of Long Knives, the traditional enemies of the School of the Last Hour. . . .

The Twisted Zeniths

If a witch stretches forth her hands, mutters a curse, and the victim before her is transformed into a toad, *Dungeons & Dragons* players are more than likely to think, if not say, "Ah-ha, *Polymorph*." Consider what it does to your campaign though, if you institute a plan like the following.

Take all forms of Polymorphing, shape shifting, and physical transformations away from your game world at large and give them to a single, exclusive, group. A cabal of wizards, known as the Twisted Zeniths, holds the secret of the Changing Rune. They alone know how to transform others and themselves. All lycanthropes are, in fact, individuals who have been cursed by, or the descendants of one cursed by, a member of the Twisted Zeniths. Those who wish to learn the secrets of the Changing Rune must swear fealty to one of the Twisted Zeniths and apprentice for a year and a day, after which they have a series of powerful ritual tattoos that ebb and flow of their own accord inked across their hands. Of course, such magic twists the mind as well. . . .

That which was old hat now becomes new. When your players encounter someone that has been magically transformed, they will be instantly engaged because they'll know that a member of the Twisted Zeniths was involved. Obviously, this particular example may not work for an ongoing campaign as you may be unwilling to strip away abilities that are already established in your game. However, new supplements come out all the time for a number of game systems, certainly d20, and more than a few of them carry juicy new magical toys that you can make exclusive in just such a way.

Rising Up and Fading Away

Exclusivity often conceals itself under the guise of being the first or the last of a line or group. If the last, there is an underlying feeling of nostalgia for the passing away of something that was once fine. If the first, there is frequently hope for the grand rising of something new and wondrous.

By evoking these themes, which frequently occur in fantasy circles, you pull your players into conscious or unconscious reflections of other works. Having your player characters join the last rag-tag group of the all but decimated Knights of the Ivory Sphere can change the entire tone of your campaign as they struggle to hold onto old ideals that are passing away. Then again, the tone is equally changed if your player characters found a bright new order of philosopher adventurers, dedicated to finding the truth, wherever it lies. In both cases, the future of the group should be uncertain, allowing the player characters' actions to save or destroy their new alliances.

The underlying concepts that I've noted above work in many campaigns, regardless of whether they are fantasy, science fiction or a combination of the two. You can substitute the word "psionics" for "magic" in a number of campaigns without any trouble at all. Above all, shake up your player's assumptions and try to drop your own, it can only make for a richer gaming experience. Ω

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Battling stereotype

Gamers seek to combat society's negative view

This article first appeared in the Indiana Daily Student on December 11, 2003.
http://idsnews.com/story.php?id=20368

Article by Lynndi Lockenour

Lynndi Lockenour is a freshman at Indiana University where she writes for the *Indiana Daily Student*, the campus newspaper. She majors in journalism, with a second concentration in Gender Studies, and a minor in Psychology.

What is a gamer? Is it a man, a woman, a geek? Do they have glasses? Tousled hair? A pocket protector?

Gamers are much more than this popular stereotype. Still, stereotypes exist in almost every hobby and participants learn to live with it. But role-playing games are being banned from schools, clubs, and libraries, according to the Web site The Escapist (**www.TheEscapist.com**). Cultural assumptions make it challenging for gamers to engage in their hobby.

Role-playing games are defined as interactive storytelling where all of the participants act out the roles of the characters, according to The Escapist.

"It's like improv radio theater set to rules," said Andrew Reyes, assistant manager Game Preserve, a gaming store. "Role-playing games are monkey bars for the imagination."

In role-playing games, one player acts as the writer, and is usually called the "Game Master," or "Dungeon Master" in *Dungeons and Dragons*. Role-playing is similar to childhood games like "Let's Play House," or "Cops and Robbers," but with set rules and a referee, said Bryan Roberts, manager of The Game Preserve.

Thirty years ago, the concept of two characters interacting in a game didn't exist.

Role playing started in the early 1970s when Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson and a few friends were playing Chainmail, a popular miniature game at the time.

Gygax and his friends began to consider ways they could personalize the game's battles.

They created individual alter egos, which took the focus off winning and losing and placed it on the relationships between the characters. Gygax and Arneson set out to create rules for these complex relations. This was the framework for what would later become "Dungeons and Dragons," one of the most popular role-playing games today.

"'Dungeons and Dragons' is like the grandpa of role-playing games," Reyes said. "But he has a thousand screaming children running around pretending to be everything they can think of."

According to a study conducted by The Escapist, 66 percent of gamers have played "Dungeons and Dragons" at some point.

"This was the first time someone used role playing for more than psychological uses," Roberts said.

Before role-playing games were created, the same aspects were used to diagnose mental disabilities. Tests such as Thematic Apperception Tests and Rorschach Inkblots, named after Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, were used.

These tests presented inkblots and pictures to the patient. Depending on the response, certain mental problems were diagnosed.

"These methods are not reliable nor useful," said Laura Wager, an associate instructor in the Department of Psychology.

When role-playing games were first created, many people worried making such techniques into a game could be unhealthy. But Wager said there is no problem.

"Adults are better at knowing the difference between fantasy and reality, so I wouldn't recommend it for very small children (ages 1 to 5)," Wager said. "But as with anything else, if done in moderation, I see no problem with it."

The game stereotype

Since the beginning of role-playing, gamers have faced plenty of stereotypes.

"I suppose some people will always think of gamers as 40-year-old virgin men who live in their parents' basements," Reyes said. "But there is absolutely no truth in that."

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The stereotype of gamers is just a continuation of the larger stereotype for geeks that people receive in high school, said socio-cultural anthropology and folklore graduate student Bryn Neuenschwander. "It's not different than being labeled a jock or cheerleader," he said. "The stereotypes are all based on hobbies."

Neuenschwander is a member of the IU Live Action Club, an organization of gamers. The group usually meets Sundays in various rooms at the Indiana Memorial Union.

Another stereotype is the belief that all gamers are men. According to a study conducted by The Escapist, 19 percent of all gamers are women.

"More and more women are becoming involved all the time," Neuenschwander said. "As a female involved in the activity, I suppose it might be intimidating at first to get started, but after you get involved, it's no big deal."

"People are afraid of what they do not know. And it's much easier to shun someone than to take time to understand it."

— Bryn Neuenschwander

Popularity of role-playing games occur in waves with the creation of new rule books. The newest book, *Player's Handbook: Core Rulebook I (Dungeons & Dragons, Edition 3.5*) was released in July. Roberts said even with a rule book, flexibility is still available. As the game has evolved, trends have also changed.

"The new trend seems to be a type of geek-chic," said folklore graduate student Ben Aldred. "Visibility has increased a lot within the last 10 years through such things as characters on last season's 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' taking part in role playing."

Aldred knows Neuenschwander through the IU Live Action Club. Everyone in role playing seems to know everyone else.

The wide world of role playing

Reyes said nearly anyone can take part in role playing. Young adults, politicians, race car drivers and even well-known actor Vin Diesel have been gamers, according to the Web site www.art-of-vin-diesel.com.

"Identifying famous people who play these games is just a way to say to the world that it's not so bizarre after all, if this many people are doing it," Neuenschwander said.

Role playing has influenced American culture through the creation of XBox and PlayStation, which partially grew from the psychological aspects of role playing.

"A great many of the PlayStation and XBox games today would not have existed if it weren't for the creation of role playing," Roberts said. " ... So many of them are based on the idea that a character reacts to something, or makes a decision based on the actions of another character. This idea was shaped through role playing."

A variety of role-playing games exists on the market. Nearly anything that can tell a story has a role-playing game fashioned around it. A few role-playing topics include superheroes, "Star Trek," vampires and "Star Wars."

Movies spawn continued interest in gaming. Films such as "Star Wars" and the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy brought back science fiction and capitalized on the hobby.

"It's a creative outlet for someone who wants more than what they can get from their PlayStation games," Roberts said. "People become involved in a genre, such as 'Star Wars' or 'Lord of the Rings,' and they want the story to continue even after the movie ends. The way to do this is through role playing."

According the The Escapist in the 1980s, role-playing games received a bad reputation because of organizations such as Bothered About *Dungeons and Dragons*, or B.A.D.D. The group was founded by Patricia Pulling, a mother whose son Irving committed suicide. She believed he had done so because of a supposed spell which was cast on him during a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Irving was later discovered to have had mental problems which contributed to his suicide,

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and not the alleged accusations about the game. In October 1997, Patricia died of cancer, along with the organization.

"Aside from radical religious groups, there is no reliable argument against role-playing games," Reyes said.

Misconceptions drive the stereotypes and make them stronger, Neuenschwander said, and gaming is often met with ignorance.

"People are afraid of what they do not know," Neuenschwander said. "And it's much easier to shun someone than to take time to understand it."

The concepts of role playing are used in daily life, Neuenschwander said. Along with being involved in psychology, people use role playing for things like business training and historical reenactments.

"Playing *Dungeons and Dragons* is not much different from watching a movie or playing video games," said junior Alejandro Ramos, who plays *Dungeons and Dragons* every Tuesday. "It's something people do to pass time and be social."

The key to changing people's minds about gaming is for them to see it is a safe and creative hobby, Roberts said.

"Like anything else, if you do it in moderation. It enhances creativity, reading skills and social activity."

Roberts said he hopes people will begin to see role playing as something even families can do together.

"I can't think of a better thing to do on a cold winter night than to play (it) with your children," Roberts said. "It's like a Pandora's box that opens when someone realizes they can create a story for their children … it's very powerful." Ω

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In the spirit of radio

The role-playing hobby has something to learn from an old medium

Article by M. Joseph Young

M. Joseph "M" Young is co-creator of *Multiverser*, and its guiding hand and primary creative mind. His many Internet articles include the weekly "Game Ideas Unlimited" series at Gaming Outpost, now in its third year, the monthly Faith and Gaming series for the Christian Gamers Guild (where he serves as chaplain), and others at many popular sites. www.mjyoung.net

Half a century ago, before even I was born, people used to listen to the radio.

That may sound like the most ridiculous opening for an article about role playing, for two reasons. Don't people still listen to the radio? And, what has it to do with role playing games? No, we don't listen anymore. I spent half a decade in radio, and gave it a lot of thought. We do not listen to the radio the way people used to listen.

The rise and survival of radio

Back then, the Federal Communications Commission didn't think that radio stations should play prerecorded music. Radio stations should play things people couldn't already have at home. Thus there was a great emphasis on live broadcasts, from bands playing at the local hotel ballroom to sporting events to game shows. There were also radio dramas and programs which we would now label sitcoms, variety shows, news magazines–the kinds of programs that dominate television. Radio had become a centerpiece of the lives of many in technologically developed nations. People would gather around the family hi-fi to hear Jack Benny, or "The Shadow," or "Fibber McGee and Molly." They scheduled parts of their lives around shows, and sat beside the radio and listened.

The rise of television ended this. By the late 1950s people treated the tube the way they had treated the hi-fi a scant few years before: they came to watch their favorite shows. I clearly remember my mother calling us to gather around the television in the playroom to watch "The Wonderful World of Disney" every Sunday evening before we were chased off to bed. People didn't use radio that way anymore. Radio programs died out until the syndicated Christian program "Unshackled" remained as the last of the old-time radio dramas.

As entertainers of every description attempted to make the transition from the old medium to the new, this advice became common: think of it like radio with pictures. The line became so common that decades later one radio commentator joked to a television host that he should think of radio as television, without the pictures.

The joke, and the point, is that television is not radio with pictures. It is an entirely different medium altogether. It does things radio cannot do so readily. Our generations can recognize many national and world leaders because their faces are slapped in the corner of the screen on the evening news. We know where the wars and many of the battles are because there is a map behind the commentator. Modern news and information channels have learned that we can absorb a great deal of information more quickly than a speaker can deliver it; thus while the reporter is speaking there will be one or sometimes several tickers running along the bottom of the screen conveying more information. Foreign programs can be aired in the original language with subtitles. Slapstick and sight gags have become staples in situation comedies, action sequences punctuate our dramas, artistic montages accompany our music–all things that require the eyes to appreciate. Having the ability to put images on the screen completely changed what you could do.

What is more interesting about this is that it completely changed radio. People stopped listening to it. Families did not gather around the hi-fi to hear radio dramas, and they stopped being produced. Many became television shows. To survive, radio had to compensate. It had to find the things that it could do which television could not. This is when prerecorded music started to take over the airwaves. By the time I was in radio, the vast majority of radio was music or call-in, and the vast majority of stations did one or the other.

People no longer treated radio as a medium

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for drama. Radio had found its strengths, and those strengths were that people could listen when they couldn't pay attention. You can listen to the radio while you drive, at work, in stores. People no longer have favorite radio programs. They have favorite radio *stations*. One station always has the news. A couple are back to back call-in shows, there is a station for classical music, maybe one for jazz, and dozens for the more popular musical styles. We don't tune in for our shows; we tune in to our stations.

The lesson for role playing

The second reason that the opening of this article may have sounded ridiculous is that it would not have been apparent initially why people listening to radio had anything to do with role-playing games. By now it should be clearer. Radio was still in its infancy when television emerged to challenge it. Yet, through that challenge innovators discovered strengths radio had that enabled it to continue in competition with television. We who play and design role-playing games are in much the same situation. Our hobby is still young, still uncertain of its own strengths, and facing challenges from other media that have sprung from us, yet in some ways overmatch us. Collectible card games and a resurgence in board games provide complex strategic play with plenty of color. Computer and console role-playing games utilize rapid number crunching and visual displays to enhance aspects of the gaming experience. The answer for role-playing games is the same is it was for radio: recognize those areas in which this medium excels, and work to enhance and promote those.

I don't have all the answers to this; however, there are a few aspects of what I often call real role-playing games that computer emulations, elaborate board games, and strategic card games cannot address as well. By recognizing these, promoting them as the strengths of our hobby, and steering our design and play priorities in these directions, we may be able to bring new vitality to the pastime and appeal to people who are now only dimly aware of it.

Emphasizing imagination

Role-playing games require and promote greater levels of imagination. In writing, it is often that which is not described that is the most terrifying or the most beautiful. It is the same in role-playing games: we can imagine what we cannot show, by using the canvas of the mind to provide the details that fit the individual. Thus, one aspect of play that we should be encouraging is that of letting the mind fill in the images. This has always been part of our games, but in the face of challenges from games for which this is a weakness it is time to play to our strengths.

That power to unleash anything within our imagination gives role-playing games a rarely rivaled opportunity for creative force. We don't need or want pictures of the monsters, I submit, because vague descriptions of fearsome entities are much more powerful in the imagination than photographs. How many legs does Shelob have, and how many eyes, and just how large is she? Tolkien doesn't give us these details. She is the mother of all spiders, but she has far more twisting hairy legs than any of her offspring, and she is large enough to crush a hobbit beneath her. That is more frightening than a picture, as it requires us to fill in the blanks with our own fears. That is something we can do with role-playing games that other games cannot do, or at least cannot do so easily.

"That power to unleash anything within our imagination gives role-playing games a rarely rivaled opportunity for creative force. "

The character of characters

Role-playing games also hold advantages in characterization and character development that other games cannot match.

Characterization means that we can populate our worlds with imaginary entities that seem like people. They don't just look like people—and maybe they

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don't particularly look like people—but we have the capacity to make them rich and diverse, each an individual. Many games focus on what the character can do; that is something any kind of game can do, even a simple board game. Certainly a role-playing game can provide many more answers than, say, a computer game to the question of what the character can do, but a difference in degree will eventually be overtaken by improvements in technology. Characterization, who the character is, is a difference in kind. The nuances of personality, the quirks and fears, as well as the dreams and desires, are harder to include; but one of the strengths of role-playing games is that we can include them, and more effort in this area should produce more compelling games filled with more interesting people.

"Story creation is among the things that role-playing games do that other games cannot."

Character development is an aspect of characterization that is often overlooked. Real people grow and change over time, and the best characters in the great stories do so as well. Through choice and experience, the character in the game world can become someone different—not merely more skilled, but different, whether more mature, more paranoid, or otherwise changed. This is character development. There are some things we do now that we would not have done before, and other things we did before which we would not dream to do now, because over time we have changed. It has happened because of what we chose, and what we experienced from those choices. Role-playing games can do this. Other games cannot do it so well, if at all.

Creating possibilities

Story creation is among the things that role-playing games do that other games cannot. Certainly many other kinds of games *tell* stories. Computer role-playing games and board games often have stories running through them, and sometimes the outcomes of those stories are determined by the successes and failures of the players. This is a pale imitation of story creation, however. Role-playing games give us the power to develop stories with powerful themes, and mold them in many directions. Much has been done in this area, thanks to a significant degree to *Sorcerer* and the work of its author Ron Edwards. Consciously putting story creation in the foreground not merely of the text but of the mechanics themselves, games on this model are bringing forward this strength in role playing.

One of the opportunities that real role-playing games offer more easily than other games is creative problem solving. Many games present problems to be solved, but in role-playing games it is possible to present problems that don't have a single answer, and to let players create answers for themselves. Most other types of games provide problems for which there is one solution, or a short list of options, possible within the game, and players must either do that or fail. Role-playing games have the ability to get beyond this, to give the players the opportunity to find their own solutions to problems. This difference is an advantage, and something which can be enhanced in play and in design.

Along the same lines I would mention flexibility. Role-playing games can do anything. There are games which push the envelope of what that means by exploring ideas previously untouched, proving that they can be done. These contribute greatly to the worlds of role-playing games; but even more than this are those games which themselves do many things. *Universalis* changes the definitions of character and setting such that all things can be controlled and altered by the players. *Multiverser* has enabled play experiences as diverse as a gigantic playground, a time loop, vast breathable oceans, and birth. Designs which free the players to create and explore worlds the designers never imagined push the boundaries and declare the strengths of these games.

Interpersonal involvement

Finally, games are fundamentally complex forms of structured social interaction occurring within social interaction more generally. That is,

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we get together to play games as part of getting to know each other. Role-playing games have a power to do this that exceeds most other forms of interactive play. They give us, individually, the power to explore who we are and who we might be, and in so doing they give us the ability to express aspects of ourselves which might otherwise have lain hidden.

Role-playing games are in their essence social interactions through which the players play characters who are interacting socially. They are an incredibly rich opportunity for exploring relationships, real and imaginary, in ways that few other forms of entertainment whatsoever approach.

Looking at the possibilities, these few recognizable strengths in role playing as compared with similar games, I have great hope for the future of our hobby. As was done with radio in the face of the challenge of television, if we recognize and embrace these and other strengths, we can build a future for the hobby that reaches beyond what we have thus far imagined. Ω

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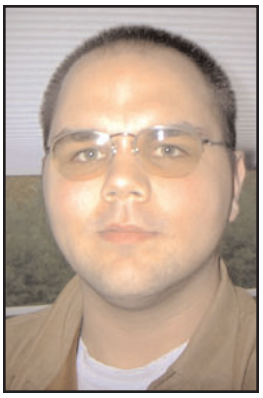
JEUX NE SAIS QUOI

A universe of generic games

Your favorite game is generic. (Not that there's anything wrong with that!)



Column by Jason L. Blair

Jason is the Editor-in-Chief for Key 20 Publishing. His first game design, *Little Fears*, was a critical and commercial success that went on to be nominated for a Best RPG of 2001 Origins Award. His game, *Wyrd is Bond*, will be released in late-February 2004. After that, he will be tackling the re-release of *Justifiers*, the very first game he ever played. Jason lives in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio with his wife, daughter, chinchilla, two dogs y dos tortugas.

If you have never bought *GURPS*, *Tri-Stat dX*, or any of the other "universal" game systems, you may not think you own a generic role-playing game. I bet you do, though.

Fancy Place Setting

So this person buys this game called "Macho Monkeys…in SPACE!" (MMiS! for short). He reads the history chapter and he likes it; he reads the setting chapter, he likes it; he reads the rules chapter…he doesn't like it. This person then chooses one of three options: (1) picks up Favorite Game System A and converts the MMiS! setting to it; (2) hops online and posts "MMiS!: What system?" to their favorite message board; or (3) shelves it and forgets about MMiS! forever.

In option (1), the player already knows that favorite system up and down so he makes his own conversion. He changes the names of skills and stats, maybe increases the damage done by weapons, and calls it a day. This is the most time-consuming option. It requires a lot of work, but it is an option.

In option (2), the player is asking for other players' input. This is where we usually come across a problem. This problem is pandemic across all media. It arises when people look at the packaging and not the product.

Response 1: Isn't MMiS! a monkey game? Use Big Ears, Red Asses.

Okay, yeah, BERA is filled with pictures of monkeys, and it has a bibliography listing every book Dian Fossey wrote. But, what about the system, exactly, is so suited for monkey play? Is just because the skills have names like "Baboonery," "Gorilla Tactics," and "Going Ape"? If you remove the packaging, you will see a system with its own set of ratios, probabilities, and a relationship among all the different parts of the system. It is its own thing that has been packaged as *the* monkey game…but it is just a game.

Response 2: Whatever. Use d20. You can use d20 for anything.

There's always this guy. This is his answer for everything, and, well, it's not too far off if you're looking for a system that does nothing. Mind you, I'm not saying it's a bad system just that it, like a lot of systems, acts like a moderator at a debate.

"Okay, Paladin Joe, your strike was successful. Mistress Xanana, your spell has failed. Paco de Thief you have picked the dwarf's pocket."

Uncaring, but it does what it does. If you like how it does something, that's great. But it doesn't make it a "perfect system" for a specific genre or setting. Just a perfect system for you.

Response 3: HEY, WHATS WRONG WITH MMIS?!!

Woah, nothing. I'm just talking here.

The Flip Side

So this other person picks up a copy of Macho Monkeys…in SPACE! *2nd Edition* on the "used rack" at her local Wyvern's Nest Game & Comic Emporium. She reads the history chapter and shrugs; she reads the setting chapter and yawns; she reads the rules…and she gets excited! Why? Because she likes the system. With this in mind, she sets out to convert her favorite setting (the cowboy-horror classic, The Six-Gun of Cthulhu) to MMiS! 2nd Ed. Chances are, any setting she finds in the future will be converted toMMiS! 2nd Ed.

A Game in Two Parts

Your average game book is comprised of a setting and a system. If you take your average game, change the setting and run the stats and skills through a thesaurus, you'll have a new game. Look at the system, though, and you will see that it hasn't changed. Change the setting

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details but keep the system as it is and you have a new game. But, again, look at the system. Nothing substantial has changed. In both cases, the system is generic. Finally, keep the setting details but transplant an entirely different system. Oh look, it still works but this time it is the setting that is generic. You could do this all day. (Some do. We call them "game designers.") Do you know what that means? You guessed it: Most games are generic.

Games can be differentiated by their premises however. There is the premise of the setting, but there is also the premise of the system. Most game books opt for the setting to have a strong premise that is detailed in fiction and historical data, but allow the system to lay there, flaccid and uninvested. A system with a premise may do something like put events in a specific order, and may even force certain actions in the story. That is a system with a purpose.

"If the setting has no premise but the system does, things are still functional. However, if the setting's premise works in tandem with system's premise, things work beautifully. "

When system and setting both have strong and identical (or at least complementary) premises, you start to move away from generic. When only one of the two has a strong premise, though, the other component will be generic. When both have a strong premise but those premises conflict with each other, you have a mess; to play it you must decide which will rule (usually the setting's premise gets dumped as the system will try to plod ahead no matter what). When neither do anything, you have achieved a truly generic state.

System First

People constantly ask questions like, "What system should I use for fighting robotic dinosaur clerics?" It comes down to the amount of work they will need to put into changing an existing system (adding robo-terms to a setting about fighting wild west dinosaur clerics). It also comes down to whether people like it simple or complex. (In which case, they should be asking the more specific question of "How can I do this using *HERO*?" or "How can I do this using *TWERPS*?") But what it really comes down to—whether they know it or not—is whether they like the system's premise.

When a system has a premise, it believes something. Maybe it thinks all tasks have a 43% chance of failure. It may believe that Charisma (or Personality or Charm or Presence) is the most useful attribute in a firefight. Or maybe it believes everything can be resolved with a single die. It may believe that the path to enlightenment is paved with dead bodies of caravan-looting orcs.

Either way, it is a premise and as a player you need to decide what you are looking for in a system's premise. Sometimes it is hard to quantify what you like. It could be you simply like the fact that guns are deadly or that cybernetics can make the characters crazy. Sometimes it is more obvious, and you like the fact that everything is dramatically-driven or that you get more bonuses by adding dramatic elements than apply field strategy.

Places, People

Sometimes the setting has a premise, but if it is not supported by the system then all the weight falls on the players (okay, let's be honest, most often the game master) to invoke the themes and prod characters into action relevant to the premise. There are players who prefer this, though. It must be recognized that the gamemaster can become exalted in this scenario, and the players can end up chasing carrots and solving puzzles not unlike a video game.

If the setting has no premise but the system does, things are still functional.

However, if the setting's premise works in tandem with system's premise, things work beautifully.

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Moving Along Now

Some games describe vast kingdoms, space stations on the edge of space, and alien herbology in exhausting detail, including full write-ups of everything from the common household dust mite to the hundred-handed giants who patrol the frozen wastes of Beronia, but they don't really do anything. They give you places and things to explore, if you want to, and races and cultures to pillage and fight, if you want to. But, they won't make you. You could sit at the bar, drink ale, and make inappropriate gestures to the bar wench all day. These games are settings with a system.

Then there are games that have set parts. First, you do this, then you do this, and so on. They have a rigid play structure that, if you're to play the game, you must adhere to. Some games add to or replace the structure of the game with relationships between the players. These games are a system with a setting.

A Generic Argument

Very few systems out there are *not* generic systems. If you pick up your average game book and flip to the rules, you'll probably find stats, skills, weapons, armor, and a dice mechanic or three. The names of these elements may be different. They may even reflect the included scenario or genre: the stats for a horror game may be Fear, Willpower, and Sanity; the stats for a western game may be Gusto, Surliness, and Wind; the stats for a fantasy game may be Bravery, Magic, and Wisdom. Those names are not genre-exclusive, but they are genre-biased in that they bring to mind the tone and feel of the genre they are tacked to. But they are just names, and if you look beyond them, at the actual system they are sitting atop, you usually end up with just a fancy way of determining "yes," "no," and "sorta." *Usually,* but not always.

This doesn't make any game bad. But, as players, we should be aware of what it is we are truly buying, and we should respect that we are all attracted to different things. Some people prefer unobtrusive "premise-free" systems with a premise-driven setting, some people prefer "premise-free" settings with a premise-driven system, and some people either need the both parts to be either premise-free or premise-driven. Eh, either way, as long as everyone at the table is on the same page and having fun, then the game is working. Ω

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