

Designer's Notes: Transhuman Space

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by David L. Pulver

My purpose in writing *Transhuman Space* was to break away from the prevailing medieval paradigms that dominated past science-fiction roleplaying games and create a modern, hard-science future setting. What are these paradigms? They should be familiar: one or more of them appear in most fantasy and science fiction games:

- that our ancestors (or ancient aliens) knew more than we do.
- that there will be a dark age, global war, or fall of civilization, often with billions of dead, before the new order is rebuilt on its ashes.
- that the future will be worse than the present.
- that changing the human body inevitably corrupts and destroys the mind or soul.
- that there will be one world government on Earth.
- that "machines" can't be the narrative equal to humans, and that humans as they exist today will continue to dominate Earth-descended society.
- that the laws of physics, as we understand them today, will be broken, in order to achieve fast space flight or star travel, psionics, or anti-gravity, and that this is easier and more likely than sapient machines, human genetic manipulation, or developments in psychology and social engineering.

The wave of cyberpunk RPGs at the end of the 1980s broke with some of these paradigms, but it only went halfway. I wanted to go all the way -- to create a roleplaying game that reflected the kind of science fiction I enjoyed, as written by authors like Ian Banks, Greg Bear, Greg Egan, Ken MacLeod, Linda Nagata, and Bruce Sterling, and inspired by non-fiction by the likes of Hans Moravec and Robert Zubrin.

In the spring of 2000, I proposed an idea for a worldbook called *Transhuman Space*, set in the year 2100, that detailed a future set after a century of uninterrupted technological advancement. The idea was that, thanks to cybernetics, biotechnology, and materials science (especially nanotechnology), we had left the cradle of Earth and created an interplanetary civilization. Borrowing concepts from the existing transhumanist movement, this setting would explore how nanotechnology, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence changed the definition of human in ways that created interesting story possibilities.

I sketched the outline of a future history and adventure setting, and sent it to Sean Punch. He read it, critiqued it, and helped me improve it. Then he passed it on to Alain Dawson (who was then managing editor) and Steve Jackson, and they agreed it had potential to support more than one book. With Sean's help, I drafted a line proposal for six books each of which would explore a part of the world of 2100. Three of the books, later named *Deep Beyond*, *High Frontier*, and *In the Well*, would explore the solar system; the other three, eventually called *Blue Shadow*, *Fifth Wave*, and *Broken Dreams*, would focus on aspects of Earth.

Things kicked into high gear. I had left my previous employer, Guardians of Order, and was now working full-time with SJ Games as a writer. My assignment was to turn *Transhuman Space* into a full-fledged line. Sean Punch and I established a detailed "story bible" for the setting, and we recruited other writers who joined a mailing list devoted to setting the project's basic parameters.

Jon F. Zeigler was one of the first to sign on, and agreed to take on the crucial task of writing *Fifth Wave*. He also helped Sean and I develop crucial background detail for the setting, especially its economic and political basis, and came up with many ideas that became pillars of the *Transhuman Space* background. Jonathan Woodward took on the task of writing *In the Well*, turning my sketchy notes on the Ares Plague terraformers and a China-dominated Mars into a living, breathing planet. Gene Seabolt's acerbic observations on human nature were a welcome antidote to utopianism, and John Snead contributed ideas for space colonization. The art side of the project began to shape up, with Phil Reed and Christopher Shy establishing the graphic design and visual look of the series. As for me, I had planned to write *Deep Beyond*, the book on the asteroid belt and outer system, but Steve Jackson felt that the setting really needed a central core book that would serve as an introduction. Sean and I agreed. *Deep Beyond* was taken off the schedule, and replaced by a new book. It was called *Transhuman Space*.

Why "*Transhuman Space*?" The title reflects the two main elements of the setting. First, the idea that humans are poised between human and post-human. Many people are still recognizably human, but they share the world with people who are becoming more than human, and with created beings that never were. Second, there's the concept that a key part of our future lies beyond Earth, in the planets, moons, asteroids, and comets of the solar system, and ultimately in the stars beyond. It is this cusp between the human and the non-human, the earthly and the unearthly, that makes *Transhuman Space* a setting that people can relate to. It's even possible to play "yourself" -- thanks to advancing medical technology, people alive in 2002 can survive into the year 2100.

The first draft of *Transhuman Space* appeared on the *Pyramid* boards in the late spring of 2001. The playtesters, led by John Freiler and Kenneth Peters, did a wonderful job, and I'd like to thank everyone, especially those whose suggestions I took but whom space constraints prohibited me from crediting, and those who took the time to correspond with me outside the playtest, like Anthony Jackson, M.A. Lloyd, and the many members of the *Transhuman*

Space mailing list (on Yahoo Groups). I didn't take everyone's advice, and sometimes I used their ideas in ways that probably drove them to distraction, but all the input and criticism helped make it a much better book.

The next couple of months saw myself, Sean Punch, and Andrew Hackard revise and edit the manuscript into shape, while Phil Reed and Christopher Shy worked on layout and art. At the same time, other books in the series -- *Fifth Wave*, *In the Well*, and *High Frontier* -- went into playtest. Many ideas that evolved during their writing and playtest made it into the core book, which had grown in size from 192 to 208 pages and become a "Powered by *GURPS*" release. It was originally intended as a full-color book, and Chris Shy produced beautiful painted illustrations for it, but printing problems forced us to put those plans on hold. Instead, the book appeared in at the end of January 2001 as a black-and-white softcover -- but \$10 cheaper. However, a full-color hardback edition will appear later this year.

Mutable Point Totals

A section in *Transhuman Space* that got misplaced on the way to publication was the guidelines for Mutable Point Totals. Here they are again . . .

One way of playing *Transhuman Space* is to treat character points as an administrative record-keeping score, rather than a means of rewarding character advancement. Whenever a character does something that would cost points, like an infomorph character buying an extra body, simply increase his point total to cover it. Whenever something happens that would cost him points, like losing an Ally, decrease his point total. Here's an example:

Tanith Tokamura Hecate starts out as a 200-point character. She's a Tennin parahuman, who works for a "vacuum cleaner" orbital salvage operation, while moonlighting as bounty hunter. Tanith has two Allies (Programmable): Jim, a wearable interface with an NAI infomorph companion, and Bob, an LAI residing in a tech spider cybershell. She also has a partner, Grimalkin -- a free Felicia bioroid -- who is another PC, not an Ally.

In Tanith and Grimalkin's first adventure, a troubleshooting expedition to a secret research station turns nasty, and Tanith's tech spider is eaten by devourer cyberswarms! Medical bills for the team's other injuries (Tanith is badly injured by nanoburn gas) use up the rest of their resources, and Tanith cannot afford to replace her tech spider. She earned 2 points of experience, but lost a 10-point Ally [Programmed]; she's now a 192-point character!

In Tanith's second adventure, she and Grimalkin rescue a kidnapped slinky idol from Martian Triad xoxnappers and earns a \$15,000 reward. Tanith spends some of it to buy a Guardians perm nanomod (3 points). She also earns 4 character points worth of experience, which she puts toward skills. Tanith is now a 199-point character.

In the group's third adventure, they continue their bounty hunting, tracking down Jill the Ripper, a rogue cyberdoll sexworker possessed by the shadow of notorious serial killer. They capture it, but Tanith loses her right hand to the cyberdoll's razor-sharp katana! She now has the One Hand [-10] disadvantage, but the GM awards her 4 character points, bringing her to 193 points. Tanith also retrieves the disabled cyberdoll, planning to repair it eventually -- if she does, it might become a new Ally, but until then it's deactivated, and not worth any points.

In Tanith's fourth adventure, she's on Luna, hanging around the Moonshadow spa waiting for her new arm to grow, while Grimalkin prowls the bars. However, the GM decides to make things interesting. In the spa, Tanith runs into a tall, dark, and handsome stranger who turns out to be an amortality assassin. Tanith discovers and foils the assassin's plot (one-handed!), and the GM awards her 5 character points. She also gets her hand replaced, eliminating the One Hand disadvantage [-10]. This adventure has seen a net gain of 15 points; she's now a 208-point character.

In the party's fifth adventure, Tanith and Grimalkin go to L5 to salvage a nuclear reactor from an abandoned plague-struck space habitat. Unfortunately, it's not abandoned: they discover a nest of Maple Syndicate data pirates. In the ensuing firefight, Tanith is shot dead. Grimalkin rushes Tanith's corpse to hospital and arranges for it to be quickly placed into nanostasis, then brainpeeled. The operation succeeds, and Tanith's now a ghost.

Grimalkin can't afford a new body for Tanith, but she remembers the cyberdoll they captured back in the third adventure, and has it repaired. Tanith wakes up in that body. It's worth 146 more points than her old one! When added to the 1 character point she earned during the adventure, she's now a 355-point character. But she's no longer human . . .

If the "Mutable Character Points" option is used, point totals are still used to determine how powerful a starting character is. (To prevent "gameplaying" during character creation, the GM may wish to rule starting wealth must all be mostly spent before the first adventure begins, and can't go to anything that would cost points.)

Article publication date: March 1, 2002

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