

Wisdom from the Wastelands

Issue #44:
Unique
Superscience
Artifacts III



By Derek Holland and the Skirmisher Game Development Group

Our first two issues on superscience artifacts, *Wisdom from the Wastelands* #39 and #42, introduced these unique and amazing devices created using Clarke's Second Law and Goblinoid Games' supplement *Realms of Crawling Chaos*. This time the theme coalesced around things alien — whether otherworldly, extra-planar, or just plain weird. But as before, the artifacts use such advanced technology they seem magical to denizens of the *Mutant Future* world.

All the items described here have multiple powers. Unless stated otherwise, individual abilities are discovered one at a time, each time the investigating character makes a successful technology roll. Each ability takes an hour to recharge. The artifacts' powers are described using spells from Goblinoid Games' *Advanced Edition Companion* and mutations from *Mutant Future*. For easier reference, spells are **boldfaced** and mutations are *italicized*; powers that appear in both games are in ***bold italics*** and Mutant Lords should choose their preferred version. The powers appear in parentheses, and have the same ranges, effects, damages, etc. as the original craft or ability (unless noted). However, MLs are encouraged to customize items or powers to suit their games. Because comparing objects would be pomegranates versus radiators, the Caster Level gives the harried ML a relative scale for each item's potential or strength.

Mother Seed (Caster Level 8)

Currently held by a community of mutant plants, this device is the source of their power — and likely their downfall. The Mother Seed is a genome modifier, medical technology designed to prevent genetic diseases by altering an organism's base DNA sequences with radiation pulses. Now it is a source of brand new mutations. (These can be new to the character



or new to the game if MLs enjoy creating their own mutations.)

The Seed is a metal and plastic cube, 2' on a side. One face has the controls and a decent-sized display panel; another has an aperture large enough for an arm (paw, fin, wing, or leaf). The Seed will work on pretty much any plant or creature — even oozes, if part of one enters the opening.

Although an incredibly complex machine, the Mother Seed has only three process settings. The results of each procedure take 3d4 days to manifest once the analysis is finished and alterations initiated. During this period the character feels mildly sick, but none of the processes inflict damage. However, there are the potential drawbacks from poor use or a gene cascade (see below).

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This publication is dedicated to providing useful information, game content, and ideas to players of modern, science fiction, and post-apocalyptic table-top and role-playing games in general and to fans of Goblinoid Games' *Mutant Future* RPG in particular. The material contained herein are compatible with it and any others that use the "Basic" system introduced in the most popular role-playing games of the early 1970s and are easily adaptable to many other games (especially successor systems, to include those covered by the Open Game License).

The first operation finds and replaces defective genes or gene complexes. In game terms, the Seed removes drawbacks it recognizes, rather like anti-virus software for a computer. MLs have a few options for how this works: a) the machine needs to be programmed/commanded to look for a specific drawback (e.g., *frailty* or *hemophilia*) and will ignore all others on a particular search; b) the machine has a library of drawbacks that it searches for automatically; or, c) the Seed might only be able to recognize and treat physical drawbacks, or mental drawbacks.

Because of the machine's buggy programming, if it does not find a recognizable drawback, it inflicts one on the patient. This can be rolled randomly using the tables in the *MF* core rulebook, or left up to the ML's discretion. Should the ML use option (a) from above, and is feeling particularly evil, if the characters do not program the Seed to search for the correct drawback, the original one might not be cured — the patient only receives a new drawback.

If the ML uses one of the other two options, new drawbacks can be added to the Seed's database. This requires a successful tech roll and a sample of the damaged gene sequence that creates the drawback.

The second operation creates new gene complexes by recombining the character's DNA; mechanically this means creating new mutations. Genes do not work alone. Most, if not all, function by working off each other, so changing one affects many more. Consequently, getting this task just right is very difficult and very delicate. It requires knowing a great deal about genetics and genetic engineering, so *every* attempt to execute this operation has a -75% penalty on the technology roll. Failure can mean any number of things, depending on the ML's taste and malevolence. Possibilities include drawbacks, damage, statistic loss, or even death. Success means the patient receives a new beneficial mutation. There are no limits on the mutations a ML can create: they might include material from the core rules, any of the Skirmisher

products, or something from the ML's imagination.

The third operation implants gene complexes, splicing pre-existing code into the recipient's DNA. The procedure gives the patient a new mutation of the operator's choice. But, because genes work together, and the new genetic material changes how the original genes function, there is a 50% of a gene cascade. If this happens, the mutant must reroll all his mutations except the newly implanted one. Depending on the ML's ruling, this could simply be a one-for-one exchange or it might involve rerolling even the number of physical and mental mutations as well. A pure human must save versus poison at +4 or become a mutant. If the ML wishes, the character might remain "pure" human but gain only this one implanted mutation, or, because of the gene cascade, she might be changed to a mutant human and roll for mutations just as during initial character generation.

Oasis In a Pill (Caster Level 20)

According to the old wisdom, big things come in small packages. The Oasis is an excellent example. A terraforming project gone wrong, this artifact is the size and shape of a metal acorn, but when activated it completely transforms a circle of territory 20 miles in diameter.

Any shock or trauma strong enough to inflict a single point of damage breaks the pill's outer coating and releases a cloud of nanites. The tiny machines immediately start reshaping everything nearby, spreading outward in an ever-expanding disc, moving away from their origin point at a rate of one mile per week (for 10 weeks). Nearly any machine or object — of any sophistication, from hand-held farm tools to crazed AI — is repaired (**Mending**) and creatures are healed (the application of one **Cure Critical Wounds** spell), even if they are not wounded.

Unfortunately, because of decay and buggy software, the healing process leaves those creatures warped and asymmetrical (*bizarre appearance*), and suffering from



metabolic problems (*increased caloric needs*). There is no save against this effect, but MLs feeling kindly toward their characters can add one. In addition, 25% of objects start to glow (**Continual Light**); temperatures fluctuate randomly day to day, from -10F to 110F; and a field develops over the entire Oasis that inhibits mental mutations (*mental barrier*). These changes could last for decades, possibly centuries.

Pure humans within the area of effect must save versus death. Those who fail are transformed into mutants. They lose their pure human traits and must immediately roll for mutations, just as if generating a new character.

Ooze Brain (Caster Level 15)

This 8" diameter metal sphere originally manipulated vats of high-end industrial chemicals, quality testing and adjusting the mix as needed, while floating in the contents. Now it sits inside a gray ooze (see the *MF* core rulebook for details), acting as a brain.

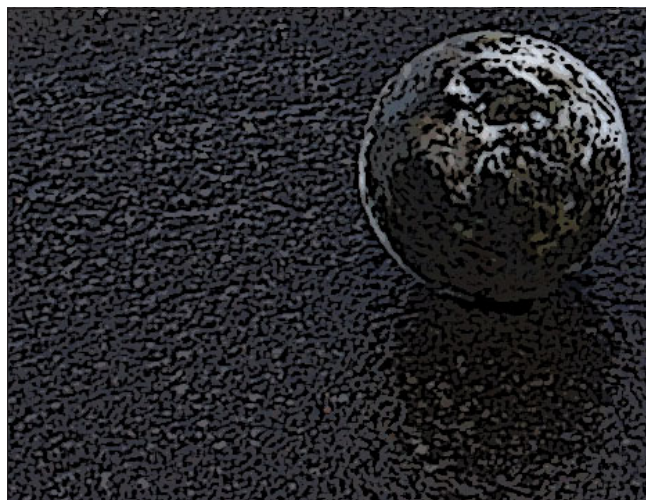
Spaced around the sphere are several holes where samples were taken in or compounds released. The Brain appears to be strangely magnetic, as several small pieces of metal circle the sphere, moving through the ooze's "body" like larvae beneath skin. The force is not magnetism (and does not affect other pieces of metal), but another form of energy that allows the Brain to control these exterior sensors/mixers, so they orbit much like *ioun stones*.

Time and hard travel have altered this energy, and it provides the ooze with several useful abilities. The creature now has an intelligence of 12, can think faster than most humans (*quick mind*), and is not fooled by most holograms and illusions (**True Seeing**). When necessary, the ooze can grow a single useful tentacle (*prehensile tendril*), project jets of flammable chemicals (**Burning Hands**), change colors (**Hypnotic Pattern**), survive solely off of heat and air (*epidermal photosynthesis*), or secrete a viscous healing gel (**Cure Light Wounds**).

Unfortunately, being healed by the ooze can also be deadly. Although not intentionally hostile, the Brain accidentally causes bits of the ooze to flake off and transform into insect eggs, which are injected into the patient's skin during treatment. All those healed must save versus poison. Success means a patient's immune system destroys the eggs. Failure means the victim will die when the larvae hatch 1d4+4 days later. The victim's flesh is stripped from his bones, transforming into an insect swarm (see the *MF* core rulebook for details) of mutant flies or mosquitos that soon takes flight (**Polymorph Other**). The Brain does not realize this happens, because victims usually die far away.

It is possible to remove the Brain from the ooze with minimal damage; the best way is to use a powerful magnet. The machine experiences a small amount of damage or service disruption, and the ooze reverts to a normal, mindless monster. This damage does not affect the artifact's abilities unless the ML decides otherwise.

Once the Brain is freed, a new user can reactivate the machine's functions by being inside a large, fluid-filled container with the Brain and performing all technology rolls



there. This need not be a vat of chemicals; the liquid could possibly be water, blood, mutant maple sap, or even giant weasel pee. Of course, the machine could freak out if the chemicals aren't familiar. But this need not cause any long-term penalties to the tech rolls (after, say, a week); however, being waist-deep in some liquid with those whirling sensors/mixers is not an experience most intelligent creatures would welcome. (Da-dum, da-dum ...)

Orange Block (Caster Level 6)

Unlike many of the other artifacts described in this series — which just sound alien — this one actually *is* alien, brought back to Earth by one of the first interstellar explorers. Prior to the cataclysm the Block seemed inanimate, but something about civilization dying triggered changes. Currently it is the size and shape of a brick, bright orange, and made of wood grained like no terrestrial species.

When firmly grasped, the Block provides a mental prompt, one that is gibberish to Earth life. Should the bearer give any mental response, the artifact summons 1d4 spidergoats, which appear in 2d6 rounds and may turn on the artifact holder and his allies (50/50 chance). If desired, spidergoats can be summoned every six turns. Why they are attracted to the block and where they come from is not known.

If the holder perseveres (and does not give a summoning mental response), he can attune himself to the artifact and unlock its powers with technology rolls. This requires handling the Block for several hours a day on three consecutive days. When completely attuned, the holder can create a 20' diameter force field that keeps animal life at bay (**Anti-Animal Shell**). He can also generate a pulse that turns all metal within 50' into more alien wood (**Transmute Metal to Wood**). The material looks just like the original Block, but it is dead and inert. The transformation is permanent, but metal objects within range can save versus radiation to avoid changing.

Unfortunately, the pulse also releases a 10' radius burst of class 5 radiation, which does affect the holder. Worse, after a month the Block tries to control its owner (*vegetal parasite*); if successful, the artifact commands him to convert as much metal as possible.

Palace of Bones (Caster Level 20)

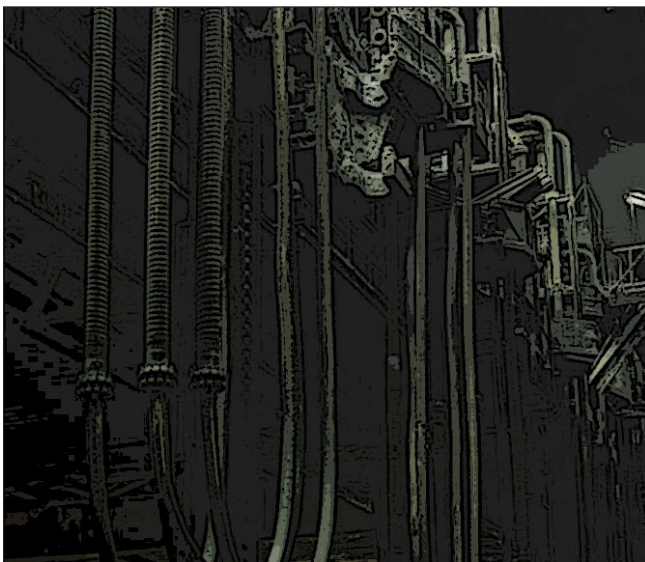
If the Ancients had brought together an architectural team of Escher, Giger, and Craven to design a monstrous edifice, the Palace might be the result. Whether purposely created this way; warped by time, damage, and wild energies; ported to Earth from an alternate plane; or, dropped and grown here by alien life from this universe, the current locals don't know. They just know to stay away.

The massive building spreads over 20 acres; there are no grounds, no vehicles, no staff, only interwoven ethereal spires and Gothic bulk. Its charred and bloody structure seems made from alien dinosaur bones — and appears alive: anyone close enough to examine the walls can see veins pulsing just under the surface.

But few have the will to venture near. Only those who save versus stun can enter, as the building tries to repel trespassers, using hideous sights, sounds, and smells. These illusions trigger 50' from the outer walls and continue throughout the interior. They range from the stench of a battlefield to the screams of a torturer's abattoir to whatever horrific visions the ML can come up with.

Those believing the Palace alive are correct. Every week the building must eat 50 pounds of bones, or go into hibernation. If it sleeps, it cannot protect itself with illusions — but it takes very little to wake the structure. Should someone or something touch the Palace, anywhere throughout the building, it bites. The victim suffers a nasty, ragged wound, takes 1d12 points of damage, and loses a digit or other small piece of bone (*carnivore*) — and the building regains awareness for 12-24 hours. The Palace's need and its security measures might seem counterproductive. However, the building is not sapient, only programmed with instincts, protecting itself with apparitions; its creators must have been immune to the sensory assaults and provided regular feedings.

Inside the building, adventurers might find any sort of amenity. Or not, given the alien design; this is up to the ML. Mutants with *metaconcert* or *neural telepathy* discover these mutations are enhanced to three times their normal power



while in the Palace. This affects range, number of targets, etc., and saves against the mutations are made with a -4 penalty. Also while inside, these mutants temporarily gain the *empathy* mutation, the ability to destroy enemy minds (**Feeblemind**), implant commands in others (**Geas**), and control unpowered robots and basic androids (**Animate Mineral**).

However.... If mutants with either *metaconcert* or *neural telepathy* stay in the palace for more than a week straight they become implanted with their own command (**Geas**): they must find the other palace that exists in another universe or plane of existence. On the up side, the powers mentioned above become permanent; but, if the afflicted characters try to fight the compulsion, they will probably end up dead. Another snag is needing to locate mutants or technology that can transport them to this other plane, a place they might not return from. Characters without either of the two triggering mutations do not gain the new powers or suffer the penalties.

Psion Shackles (Caster Level 20)

For psions living before the final wars, simple whispers of “the Shackles” could cause terror. Not a single restraint, this three-part neural dampener consists of a dark, nondescript helmet, gauntlets, and cuirass combination that could be simple body armor or a military uniform. Each element locks onto the prisoner and may be released using a biometric reader, key card, code pad, or some other mechanism of the ML's devising. Collectively, the Shackles provide an AC of 7, but may not be added to other armor.

Although they can be set to restrict movement, the Shackles were developed primarily to prevent a prisoner from using mental mutations. Which they do very well — usually. Every time the set is placed on someone with mental mutations, there is a 5% chance the Shackles short out and reboot in such a way that the wearer's mental mutations triple in strength while wearing the gear. This increase affects range, damage, number of targets, etc. and saves to resist the powers are made with a -4 penalty.

A mutant so affected can also, with some testing (technology rolls), influence groups (**Mass Suggestion**), manipulate others' emotions (**Implant Emotion**), and even ignore wounds for a time (**Illusory Stamina**). There are some downsides to these three powers, though. After use, each requires an eight-hour recharge period before it can be used again. Worse, using a power triggers feedback, a combination of electricity and mental energy burning directly into the wearer's brain. This causes permanent damage, reducing both INT and WIL by one point.

Sea Charm (Caster Level 14)

This half-inch diameter ceramic sphere is dun shot with blood-red streaks and covered in spines. The Charm was originally designed as a chest implant, allowing undersea exploration with minimal electronic or protective gear — by temporarily transforming an Ancient user into a small shark. It has not been repaired since before the final wars, and the

consequent hard use and decay have altered its effects.

Instead of a small shark, the current user grows into a 35' long great white (**Polymorph Self**, *gigantism*). In addition to the stat block information found in the *Labyrinth Lord* core rules, this creature has a useful tentacle in place of its dorsal fin (*prehensile tail*) and skin so tough that projectile weapons only inflict a single point of damage when they hit (**Protection from Normal Missiles**). The skin only repels bullets, arrows, and other physical ranged weapons — not energy weapons. Also, rather than needing to be placed between the sternum and its covering flesh, the Charm can now be activated while in contact with any skin.

Transformation takes two rounds and the artifact is absorbed into the user, so the shark form cannot drop it. If the user triggers the implant while on land, she will almost certainly suffocate; death by freshwater will likely result should a good Samaritan try to help by submerging the giant in anything but salt water. The change does not cause any damage to the user, only to her clothing — unless she's wearing armor. Then things can get messy. Injury is determined by the ML, but it can range from 1d4 up to 10d8 points of damage, if the user is wearing EMA or something similarly unforgiving. The ML also needs to determine if the armor is destroyed, or if the shark becomes extruded sushi bits.

Another downside to the Charm is its automatic timer. Even outside the body, held against the epidermis, the implant connects to the holder's nervous system, allowing it to be activated at any time, solely by willpower. Unfortunately, the user automatically changes back into human form after the timer shuts off, in 1d8+6 hours. She has no control over the duration, nor when the Charm can be activated again, which happens after a recharge period of 1d10+50 hours.

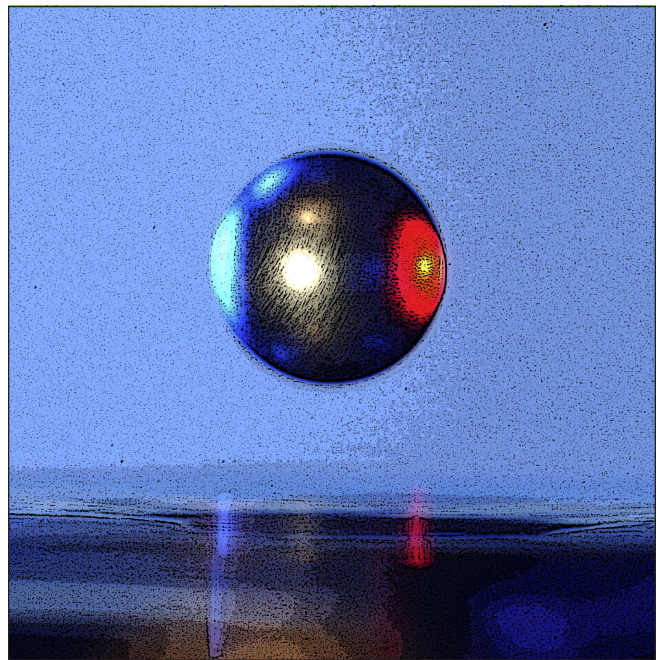
Fortunately, the safety function still works. If the altered character is in distress (having lost more than 75% of her total hit points), she automatically **Teleports** straight up to the surface. This feature can also be activated upon command, if desired. This is especially handy if the timer runs out while the user is deep underwater.

Silver Sphere (Caster Level 20)

Those dealing in illicit goods have always required a degree of ingenuity to circumvent police and security. The Sphere was created to smuggle objects of great wealth into areas where teleportation technology was blocked by force fields or wave disruption generators.

It is a featureless, 3' diameter, metallic globe that usually floats about 5' above the ground. Cargo is phased through the Sphere's surface, and, if necessary, the artifact can shrink an intended payload (*density alteration others*) to fit within its hold. Fully loaded, the Sphere can carry up to 1000 pounds; it also holds enough air to transport live cargo, though not in great comfort (**Floating Disc**). Even at maximum capacity the Sphere can still fly 900' per round (*flight, psionic*).

Should the Sphere be caught (with nets, force fields, or robots), or otherwise unable to reach its destination, it contacts its master for instructions (*neural telepathy*). It is



opaque to most scanners (**Mind Blank**), refracts light to avoid visual detection (*control light waves*), and can aerosol a toxin if trapped (**Cloudkill**). If the Sphere is attacked and pinned down, it puts up a very strong force field (**Prismatic Sphere**). Damaged severely enough, the Sphere will self-destruct and destroy its contents (**Disintegration**). This only affects the immediate vicinity, so unless attackers jump directly on the artifact as it becomes component atoms, they will not be hurt.

Silver Twig (Caster Level 15)

While it seems nothing more than an 18" tall toy tree in a gallon pot, this is one of the most feared artifacts known — at least for intelligent plants. The Twig is a humbug, a Frankenstein-ian creation with branches and fruits from many different species. And it's not really wood; it's a machine. The artifact is always in motion, moving around like a windup toy, making strange squeaks and pops as it does, its branches constantly windmilling and striking the ground to drag the pot along (*free movement*, movement rate 1).

With some careful examination and experimentation (tech rolls), a character might find the Twig's controls hidden behind a panel on the pot. With these, the holder can access several useful functions directed by a combination of sounds and button presses. The twig can paralyze plants (**Hold Vegetation and Fungus**), communicate with them (**Speak with Plants**), or gain complete control over them (**Charm Plants**, save at -4). The Twig can also cause their fruits and seeds to incinerate or explode while still on the vine or after they have been dropped/released (**Fire Seeds**), a nasty weapon to use against most plants, especially those vulnerable to fire.

If necessary, the Twig can readily defend itself. As one of its perpetual activities, the machine collects spores from the air and modifies them until they are highly toxic. When threatened, it sprays a cloud of them at its attacker(s) (*poisonous spores*, class 12 or higher). Unfortunately, the Twig's holder is not made immune to these spores.

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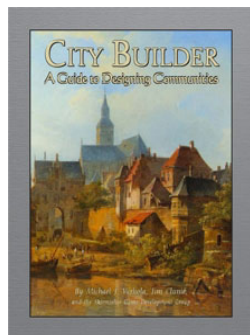
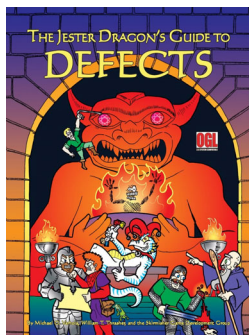
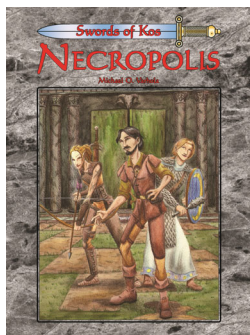
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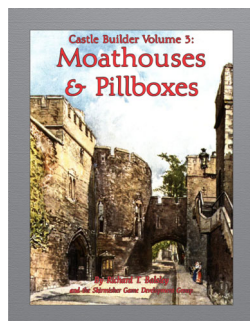
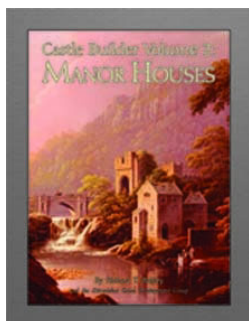
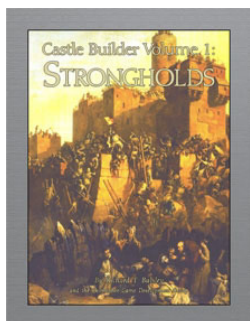
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