

SECTOR 14 CONVENTION SPECIAL

Queens' University Science Fiction and Fantasy Society Newsletter

The Chairbeing speaks...

To begin with, I'd just like to say welcome to 'Sector 14'. What you hold in your hands is the newsletter of the Queen's University Belfast Science Fiction & Fantasy Society.

We are indeed a student society (although our membership is far from exclusively student) and we meet every week in the Postgraduate Common Room at Queen's on Wednesday nights from 7pm onwards.

Club activities include regular video showings - sci-fi & fantasy old and new, films, TV series, anime and an annual event is our 'Turkey Buffet' - a choice selection of some of the finest cuts of laughable or downright sorry sci-fi ever beheld. When we are not glued to a TV and VCR, we also spend a fair amount of time holding pub quizzes, the odd debate, discussions or plain old evenings chatting in the pub over a pint - be it Coke or Caffreys! The latter has always been highly appreciated by our membership, due perhaps to that not-very-inexplicable attraction between students and alcohol or general socialising. To date, club outings have included visits to Annagh Planetarium, Navan Fort and most of the recent sci-fi & fantasy cinema releases - trips to one particular trilogy of films proved exceptionally popular with all concerned.

In addition to all this (yes there's more), we are the proud owners of an extensive club library, writers' and video workshops, a superb selection of world wide web pages and a mailing list. On top of everything, we are planning to hold our own convention in the not-so distant future so watch this space!!!

This year, we have a membership of over 100, ranking us amongst the larger non-sporting clubs at QUB. Freshers' Night was very popular and we provided new members with a taste of our activities by managing to pack a mini quiz, video show and pub discussion all into one night. With a promising selection of events over the coming months, we fully intend to provide members with many an evening's (or afternoon's) sci-fi & fantasy oriented entertainment.

Thanks for taking the time to read this and enjoy the rest of your journey through Sector 14. So if you're ever in Belfast on a Wednesday evening, with nothing better to do, please feel free to drop in and say 'Hello'.

ENJOY!!!

Róisín McIlwee
Chairbeing 1997/98

"Tremble and despair for I am Power!"
Magician, Raymond E Feist

Our WWW address is -

<http://quis.qub.ac.uk/fantasy/>

Here you can find club info, events, committee details, how to subscribe to our mailing list an extensive selection of links to practically all aspects of sci-fi & fantasy.

The Seemingly Bizarre Tales of Quinckly Rumm!!

Our story begins (obviously) with a brief history of our hero, Quinckly Rumm. Little is known of his early life but stories abound concerning his complete ineptitude at all things sporting and academic. It was considered at first that this may be due to his having some Irish blood in him, but was in fact due to something even more simple - he was an Eton old boy and thus a product of the English public school system. How, you may ask yourself, can such an ex-boater-wearing fop be the hero of such tales of derring-do? Indeed, why would someone go to all the bother of writing about this upper-class twit? I ask myself the question night and day, over and over (well, it has occurred to me once or twice anyway). The answer is that he somehow transformed in the late sixties and early seventies into a paragon of Britishness. This is more than slightly rum in itself

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since he had been born sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, impeccable taste in clothes, art, music, women, cars, guns and a strange obsession with drugs all aided his rise to fame... or infamy, as he was continuously reviled by the Women's Institute, Mary Whitehouse, the Devonshire Amateur Dramatics Group and other powerful bodies of influence. Swatting off these attacks like the mere whinings of a group of pathetically unhip people, our hero stood above the image of the crumbling empire as a shining beacon to all foreigners that Britain may going down, but she was also getting down with the best of them.

At a time when it was still fashionable to wear trousers far too wide, shirts with massive collars, kipper ties, platform shoes (preferably not all at once though, otherwise people even back then might look twice at you... and not for the right reasons either!), Quinckly led the world in delving into weirdness. Of course it didn't help that many considered him to be the victim of his own drug-induced hallucinations and it certainly came as no surprise if it was reported on the news that he had been sighted running around Ayre's Rock naked, screaming that a giant, invisible, hovering Bunyip beast was after his Maltesers. It didn't matter. People all over the world still knew his name and his trademark neo-Victorian moustache-sideburn combination. Of course, it was a dead cert that people would recognise you when you drive about in a flashy big Bentley, painted in his characteristic pastel blue, with its unmistakable sign in the window saying 'Unless you earn more than £10,000 a year, stay away from my car or I will have you shot!' That, coupled with the fact that everywhere he went, he told people his name, dressed like an Edwardian on acid, got off his face on a variety of illegal substances and weirded everyone out, generally left people that he met with a distinct memory of him. Anyway, enough of an introduction, time for me to relate *The Scemingly Bizarre Tales of Quinckly Rumm!!* (probably in a vain effort to get people reading again)

Our Tale begins in London, any time in the early Seventies. Let's face it, no-one is reading this for historical accuracy or political detail so I can pretty much make up what I like :-). Quinckly was out shopping at the chemist's (looking for another lethal combination of narcotics to see him through the next week) when his erstwhile

companion and provider of (some) common sense, Sister Nadia, burst in looking breathless (no funny comments - she's a nun!) and kicked the plot into action.

To briefly explain, Sister Nadia met Quinckly whilst he was on a mission to civil Communist China. She had been sent there to preach to the godless Reds, little realising that they would misinterpret her Bible readings as further proof that Christianity was a front for some sort of insidious Capitalist plan (and if any of you readers feel the same then turn yourselves in to the nearest priest - it will save time for them later... also feel free to grass on your friends as well) and thus attacked her entourage. Little did they realise that she had in fact been a former double agent working for both the KGB and the Church, and so had some training in this area. She hid in the Tibetan mountains for six years at a Shaolin temple, learning martial arts, before returning to China to wage a one-nun guerrilla war against the Commies. Quinckly (and a Chinese motorised infantry division) persuaded to give up her fugitive life and return to dear old Blighty... even though she had never been there before. Well, there's a massive hole in her character story but I don't care... she's only a side-kick. I can always fix that later. Needless to say, this story needs the inclusion of a Kung-Fu Nun, so I'm going to get her in anyway I damn well can.

'Quinckly!' she said. 'Stop looking strangely at that Night Nurse and Benilyn and follow me.' Never one to disobey an order from a woman in an amusing outfit, Quinckly rushed outside to find Sister Nadia standing over a dead body. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'You haven't been getting those flashbacks to China again, have you?' 'Don't be flippant, Quinckly,' she muttered. 'This man is dead.' 'I wondered why he didn't recognise me,' pondered our hero. He stooped to examine the body. Realising that he knew absolutely nothing about medicine, he decided to bluff it. 'This man was poisoned,' he said in an authoritative tone. 'How can you tell?' asked Sister Nadia, knowing full well of the buffoon's bluff but humouring him so as not to damage his ego. 'Why, the fact that his hair is standing on end

and he has a shocked expression on his face, indicative of a poison used by a pygmy tribe of the Upper Volta, known for their ferocious hatred of tall and fat people. In short, my dear, this man was the subject of a political assassination,' replied Quinckly, sounding terribly patronising whilst praying she knew nothing. Sadly, of course, in order for this to be humorous, she was not. 'But Quinckly,' she said with a curiously dangerous tone to her voice (Sister Nadia was not one to be patronised easily). 'This man is tall and thin, and the fact that he looks shocked, whilst it could be for a variety of reasons, many of which I am not allowed to contemplate due to my vocation, is more likely to indicate a massive electrical surge which stopped his heart. Wouldn't you agree?' 'How shocking,' quipped Quinckly, pathetically ripping off Goldfinger© (see, copyrighted... please don't sue me, Ms Broccoli) in an attempt to cover up his wildly daft analysis. 'The question now is,' said Sister Nadia 'Why on earth would anyone want to electrocute a seemingly innocent man?' 'My dear, if it's one thing public school taught me, it's that nothing is as innocent as it seems, especially not a man with a large cane,' replied Quinckly, with a waggle of his eyebrows. He began to search the body with the knowledge of a man who realises that anyone watching this scene would get some pretty funny ideas. Sister Nadia looked on with the knowledge of a woman who knows she's watching a moron at work. Quinckly found what he was looking for - the man's wallet. Pocketing the spare cash, he then began to look for some identification. He discovered a card which read - 'Top Secret Membership of the Cult of Strange Apparel (CSA) - don't tell anyone on pain of death and fashion rejection'. They looked at the corpse again. He was wearing a grey three-piece suit with a plain white shirt (you know, the ones you used to have to wear in school) and a plain blue tie. Quinckly screamed (God knows why... he'd seen the corpse before, but somehow it seemed more dramatically appropriate now). 'My God!' he cried. 'He's definitely dead alright, but now he looks like a dead Tory minister!' 'The only good type,' said Sister Nadia, showing a primitive flair for political satire and so ensuring her place on the next series of 'Have I Got News For You'. 'Watch it, Nadia,' replied Quinckly. 'We don't want any of that pinko liberal nonsense. You remember what happened last time.' 'Yes,'

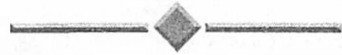
said Nadia irritably. 'But Vietnam would have happened anyway, wouldn't it!'

Whilst our heroes (?) debate politics, we will leave them until next time.

Will Quinckly discover the insidious plans of the CSA?

Will Angus Deayton make a play for Sister Nadia and discover what a nun's habit really is?

Will anyone actually read this or will they callously flip by as bloody usual?!?!?!?!?



Just in case any of you were wondering about any of the T-shirts sported by our lovely members at the con, then this was the origin. And so begins...

The Annals of the Binslayer!

The old man sat down with the children, and as always they gathered closer - for he was a tale-teller of some note. Small faces looking up into an old face as rugged as that of the moon - they waited for him to start. He waited a moment, face as one who was seeking to recall some obscure fact. He began to open his mouth to talk, then shut it again, and looked puzzled. The children looked at him, faces heavy with disappointment. Then he smiled, and started to speak:

"Children, gather around, listen to the tale I have to tell you. It is one of high adventure, romance, great sacrifice - and great rewards. I speak of the tale of Peal, the Binslayer!"

With the mention of the great hero's name their eyes widened - parents would not speak of the deeds he had done, for fear it would scar their young minds. The tale-teller continued:

"Befast was a prosperous City, its artisans and merchants brought folks from miles around to spend their coin within it's walls."

He paused, voice heavy with sadness.

"It was a troubled city too. There were those who would do aught all day, but hang around in alleyways. Some times they'd be found luzzing in good folks' yards, smelling of God knows what. Then, at an appointed time each week these 'Bins' would looll about - on the street - with no purpose, except to inconvenience the decent people of the City."

A few gasps greeted the mention of the 'Bins', but save for one young child rapidly paling to a shade of green, the attention upon the old man was a great as when the hero's name was said.

"Once the Councillors of the City, stung into action by the residents, had purged the Bins from the City and it's surrounds. Folk rejoiced - surely now, with these layabouts gone - the City would prosper as never before."

Once more he paused, but this time the melancholy in his voice was tinged with anxiety, as if remembering his own fear, long, long ago.

"Within a week, they were proven most egregiously wrong. Those that had been ejected were of," he choked out, " - a gentler type of Bin - if 'gentler' is a suitable word to use in describing Bins. They were 'Tin' Bins. On leaving they passed word to their cousins - vile, black beasts - of great speed and evil demeanour. That week the wrath of the 'Wheellie' Bins descended upon Befast....."

Chapter One: The Bane of the Black Bins

Peol was walking down one of the many streets where folk of the City lived, worked, and (given time) died. It was late at night, but the Moon - nearing fullness - shed enough light to walk by. He was accompanied on his journey by Aman, an acquaintance known for his strange humour and stranger paunch. They had spent the evening with friends in Sencomunrum, one of Befast's better alehouses. After that, these adventurous lads had headed on to a friend's lodgings, and Peol had supped far to much exotic drink.

So they found themselves on the street, trying to get fresh air to clear their fogged minds - though they were in the wrong place for such air. The air

was heavy with the smoke of fires, the stench of sewage, and something, very unsettling.....A smell that sent shivers down their spines.....the smell of

"Bins! Oh deity!" Gaspd Aman. "Lets hurry back to Yeon's"

Aman turned to run back the way they had come - but froze on hearing the sound any sane man feared - the whirr of Wheelie Bin wheels!

Peol took charge of the situation, and had Aman guard the way they had come, whilst he stood sentry on the front.

Aman exclaimed "Oh Penguins! There's two of them, coming my way - run!"

He nearly ran over Peol, and looking fearfully ahead saw three more of the thugs bearing down on them.

"I'm afraid we'll have to stand and fight Aman, we have no other choice!" Peol replied coolly.

"Feathers!" groaned Aman. "I should have listened to my Mother. 'Join the Templars Aman! See the world and slaughter unbelievers.' - If only I'd listened to her....."

Then there was no time for talk - the Bins were upon them.

They approached into striking distance, but did not attack.

"Peol," Aman whispered, "maybe we can bargain with them?"

Peol shrugged off his black leather coat, and clad in his trademark black leather g-string stood combat ready facing the three in front.

"No Bargains Aman." He whispered, his determination making it as loud as a shout.

The middle bin of the lot in front began to taunt them.

"Well boys, if looks like the Army's here", said he

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sarcastically.

"Oh boss - can we escape the wrath of this Army of two?", replied the bin to his left.

The bin to the right chipped in cheerily, "Oh well, might as well fight Boss".

"Fight then!", Peol interrupted.

The middle bin clacked his lid twice - and on this signal all hell broke loose. The two bins at the rear moved up to attack, but Peol was not there. He had launched himself into an attack on the left-hand bin. Rolling forward towards him - Peol's flying kick connected with devastating effect, shearing the bin's lid off. The lidless bin rolled on in a zigzag fashion, spewing garbage over all the combatants, until it keeled over and was still.

"Jehosaphat!", exclaimed Aman.

"You swine....you delidified Bertie!!!! You'll eat your fill of refuse tonight! Kill!!!!!!", screamed the leader.

The leader and one of the rearguard launched themselves with great force at Peol. Used to violence was he - but the ferocity of this attack stunned him. Pinioned front and rear, he was assailed with rubbish and foul odours.

Aman found himself dashed to the pavement, butted about by a bin. There should have been another on him at least! Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the leader's right-hand bin, lying prostrate on the ground. He seemed to be puking over the pavement, muttering about 'Bertie'.

With a massive "Berwhuggggghhhhh!" The reclining bin emptied it's innards out on the ground.

The leader turned to remonstrate.

"Lennie, get up and fight like a.....Fwuck!" The last words being a reaction to being unceremoniously pushed to the ground.

Peol had taken advantage of the disturbance, unbalancing the leader, he moved forward and

span. The bin behind him, caught off balance, fell forward. Peol stopped himself with his left foot, and brought both fists down on the villain's lid - cracking it like an egg. It fell lifeless to the ground - gunk oozing between the cracks in his lid.

Aman felt the assault on him stop. Looking around he saw the henchman who had been assailing him helping his boss to his feet, and then they started to run.

Peol ran after them - but they were too fast for him in his present condition. Winded, he returned to the scene of the fight. A concerned look to Aman was fended off by a wave of his companion's hand.

"I'm O.K.", wheezed Aman.

"One more thing to sort out." He moved over to the green-looking bin.

"Oh Pot Noodles! No! I'll tell you all you want to know! Even if I don't know it!" The cowardly container cried.

Peol stood over him. "Lennie."

"Y..yes?"

"Shut up!" Saying that he brought his heel down on Lennie's handle. His hinge broke with a sickening "Crackk!".

His lid at an unnatural angle, Lennie spun his wheels once, they clattered to a stop, and he was still.

"Aman..."

"Yes... Peol?", replied Aman quizzically.

"He talked too much!"

It would be appropriate to say at this juncture...

TO BE CONTINUED

... but then since this is based on true events, nothing can be guaranteed. Watch this space (well, not this one specifically)!

Definitions:

A Roleplaying game (RPG) is a game in which the players portray fictional characters, somewhat like actors playing characters in a movie or TV show, but with the difference that there is no "script"; players must choose what their characters say and do depending on the situation and the character's personality and motivations. Dice are usually used to create a random element, which is one major difference between this and improvisational theatre.

One player is the Gamemaster (GM); he/she organises the game, designs plots for the players' characters to become involved in, and also plays all the other characters they meet, whether enemies, allies or mere passers-by.

The Babylon Project Roleplaying Game

Any *Babylon 5* fan who is also a roleplayer will want to own this, the first *Babylon 5* roleplaying game. But it is also obviously aimed at *B5* fans who have never roleplayed before, both as a resource and as an introduction to roleplaying games. Bearing this in mind, let's look at how well it succeeds in those aims.

At first glance it looks nice; the cover is Computer Graphic Imaging (CGI) as featured in the TV show, the pages are colourful and glossy and artwork is plentiful. However, closer inspection reveals that, like the original *Babylon Station*, its parts are flawed and may lead to structural collapse. Those nice but expensive glossy pages are full of wasted space due to excessively large margins (pushing the cost further up), the artwork ranges from mediocre to downright crap, and there's a surprising lack of CGI pictures; I counted 20 including the cover, which in 200 pages really isn't a lot, and all of those are of the station, ships or space; never of human or alien characters.

On to the contents; the text in general is fairly dense and often less clear than it should be. There is a thorough explanation of what RPGs are, but

stupidly there's no proper description of what you actually do when playing a roleplaying game (for those who don't know, most groups prefer to sit round a table, describing their characters' actions and only actually roleplaying conversations; other groups physically act out all the actions their characters take - except combat!).

As a source of background information on the *B5* universe, it's good, but not as good as it could have been. Much of the information here will already be known to avid *B5* fans, which most GMs if not players will almost certainly be. If you aren't a major fan I'm not sure the information in this book will really be enough on its own anyway. Furthermore, there are errors; e.g. the book states that Centauri telepaths may not be hired by non-Centauri, yet the TV show contains an example of exactly that. Also, the dates given for the Earth-Minbari war contradict statements by the show's creator, if not the show itself. But these are fairly minor points; there is information here which may be vital to the game and has never been mentioned in the show. However, I could wish for more information on the alien races of *Babylon 5*, in particular their history and culture. It would be a lot easier for both players and GMs to create and play aliens if there was some decent information on alien affairs just before and during the game's timeline. To be fair, this could be covered in a supplement, and it does say that the focus of the game is on humans.

One major bad point about the historical and cultural background in the book is the fact that it is found in several different places, leading to needless repetition, and there is no cross-referencing from one section to another. Indeed the book as a whole has absolutely no cross-referencing by page number, and only occasionally by chapter. This, combined with a total lack of index, makes it very hard to find things quickly if you need them in the middle of a game. The timeline of the game is from 2248 (the end of the Earth-Minbari war) to 2259 (the start of the Narn-Centauri war), but this is never clearly stated in one place. For that matter, it is never explained why games should only be set in this timeframe. Presumably it's because the state of the galaxy as described in the book is only accurate between these two wars, but any intelligent GM

with a good knowledge of the show should easily be able to adapt the information given to other timeframes. Another thing; the book does not mention how (or if) you should try to avoid the actions of player characters changing the history of the *Babylon 5* universe, or what to do if this does happen! After all, what if your players manage to prevent the Narn-Centauri war, or discover and publicise the Shadows in 2258, or even assassinate some character from the show?

The chapter of guidance for GMs on creating stories and campaigns is very useful but the campaign structure as suggested is fairly rigid; in a game aimed largely at new roleplayers there should be more emphasis on the flexibility of RPGs and the freedom of the GM to run his/her game any way he/she likes, up to and including changing any of the rules (as long as the players are told!) Character creation is nicely detailed and very helpful for first-timers, but there's no "quick and dirty" alternative given for GMs who need to make up a character quickly. Also, I would have preferred less Attributes (basic abilities like strength, intelligence and agility) and more Skills (learned abilities like piloting, languages and martial arts). Certainly there is not enough flexibility in your choice of ability levels in either of these. Another example of this general lack of flexibility is in character development; all characters develop at the same rate, with no allowance for rewarding an outstandingly successful character or player. The back of the book contains a story designed to start off your campaign. The plot is nice, but it's light on detail; fine for experienced roleplayers, but novices will probably find it a little difficult to run. Sadly, all the sample characters presented are human, except for one Narn. Nowhere in the book is there a sample Centauri or Minbari, and none of the TV show's characters are provided, so if your characters meet them, the GM will have to create their statistics.

The dice-rolling system presented in this game is unnecessarily complex, especially in a game aimed at beginners. Basically you roll two six-sided dice, one of which is designated positive, the other negative. Only the die which gives the lower result is counted; if both are the same the result is zero. This gives a result from -5 to +5, called your "Random Modifier", to which you add the

appropriate Attribute and Skill to get your final result. Also, a double six or double one on the dice is a special result. That's the simplest kind of dice roll; sometimes it's much more complicated. Then there's the combat system, which features lots of tables and diagrams but no clear summary for quick reference during play. At one point it tells you to roll a Random Number, with no indication of what this is. I assume it's the same thing as a Random Modifier, but that's not clear from the text, and (of course) there's no cross-reference to help you find that if you've forgotten how to do it. That would be forgivable if it was easy to find, but as it's only defined once, in the middle of a previous chapter, it's actually quite hard to find. Frankly the whole thing is a bloody nightmare.

Overall, this is not a very good introduction for new roleplayers, while veterans will find the information useful but will probably want to convert it to another system. Casual *B5* viewers may not find enough background detail to enable them to easily create games, but this is a useful resource for fans (especially those who want to roleplay in the *B5* universe), although the organisation of information is poor, and all in all the game is a disappointment.

"The Babylon Project was our last, best hope for a decent Babylon 5 RPG. It failed."

The first supplement for *The Babylon Project* is called *The Earthforce Sourcebook*. It covers ships and space combat and is now available.

Mark Lamki is a dedicated B5 fan and can be found drowning his sorrows in the bar. Why not buy him a drink and make him happy!



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Operating out of smoke-filled rooms, somewhere in Northern Ireland, the Crucible Design team has been wearing out a plethora of keyboards as it rushes to bring more innovative RPGs to you. The strain has driven us all mad ... and some of us were mad enough to begin with. Enough about our best qualities!

Crucible Design

Producers of fine roleplaying games.

'The 23rd Letter'

The time is now. Psychics exist, not many, but enough - enough to worry those in power, and interest those who seek power. Governments and Corporations fight for them. The Network provides an imperfect refuge for those that escape the clutches of those who would abuse them and their powers.

Every test you have done has been analysed for indications of psychic abilities. Communities are experimented on, yielding horrific, but useful results. Thousands are maimed and killed each year, by the Corporations and Governments. Some may do this for power, some for defence, but they all do it - for the next war will be fought with the mind - and the victor will control the destiny of the Human Race.

Price: 9.99 Sterling.

Pages: 72.

Format: A4 perfect-bound with b/w glossy cover.

The 23rd Letter was reviewed in issue 16 of arcane, and was given 8/10. It was described as 'powerful, evocative and original', 'full of roleplaying potential', 'the stuff that cults are made of'.

'SpaceNinjaCyberCrisis XDO'

The war's been over for years, the world is just recovering from a conflagration that made previous world wars look like the teddy bears' picnic. There is hope in this world though - San Metro, a high-tech metropolis, symbol of the new world order, where modern meka-tek mixes with ancient architecture to provide the inhabitants

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with the ideal place to live. There is one problem with the city. It's not the petty crooks made superhuman with meka-tek devices, nor the 'tek equipped vigilantes that counter them - despite all the press says. It's a cancer, not of metal, flesh or bone - a cancer of the soul - and wise-guys and vigilantes may be all there is to save the world from it.

Price: 7.99 Sterling.

Pages: 52.

Format: A5 perfect-bound with 2-colour glossy cover.

Future Products

Keep an eye out for Qabal - set in a world where magic is real. Where magic has always been real and where there are those who can control the magic to great effect. The old magical covenant is ending, and those with power and wisdom vie to control the future.

For The 23rd Letter we have the Project Sourcebook - an insiders view to the government agencies around the world that exert their control on hundreds of lives.

And there's more! Airtight, The Sun Never Sets, and Tanks are just around the corner - as are more supplements for The 23rd Letter and SpaceNinjaCyberCrisis XDO.

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Drop by our webpages at: <http://members.tripod.com/~CrucibleDesign/index.html>

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Our games are available from:

Esdevium Games, 6 Wellington Street, Aldershot, Hampshire, GU11 1DZ Tel: 01252-311443.

SpaceNinjaCyberCrisis XDO

It's not often that we do role-playing reviews in the SF&F newsletter but since this game was right up our street we thought 'what the hell!'. SNCC XDO is the new game from Crucible Design, the same team that brought us 'The 23rd Letter' last year (which, incidentally, has just gone into its 2nd edition and is well worth a look), and the standard of this game is at least as high. Like its predecessor, it is designed for the more mature gamer (although there is nothing preventing a beginner from enjoying the game at least as much) and is geared more towards storyline and character than rules. This is not to detract from the system in either game, since both work very smoothly. The point is that the game is left more in the hands of the GM to do with as he sees fit.

The background to SNCC XDO is one immediately familiar to fans of the anime/ manga genre. For the uninitiated, these are Japanese animations and comics dealing with frankly bizarre subjects (and I'm a fan!). However, whilst it helps if one has seen at least one or two of the items on the recommended list at the back of the book, it is not necessary. The world is complete in itself and further reading/ viewing only adds flavour. Briefly, the game is set in the year 2019 after humanity has discovered MekaTek, advanced technology allowing mankind to do cool stuff like design whopping great suits of powered armour, space craft and so on. The setting concentrates on San Metro, immediately recognisable to fans of the genre. The city's main landmarks are described as well as a clever section about what Joe Average does in San Metro (a favourite of mine because it proves that they have football in the future). The different power groups in San Metro are described in some detail (hardly giving plot hooks to the GM and showing how they fit into the scheme of things) and a brief history is also given. The background is very entertaining and there is plenty for characters to do. There are demons, aliens, cops, robbers, vigilantes, religious whackos, prophecies and too many other things to mention. Suffice it to say, you won't get bored.

Moving back to the system briefly, I have to say it is very, very quick indeed. Characters have ten traits which all start at 3 and are then added to with starting points. MekaTek is

also a statistic which begins at 0 - players must spend points to increase it if they want to start out with mad techno gear. Some people might moan about the fact that they can't flesh out the character because of the limited skill list; I went through it as an experiment and I could not find anything they'd left out. If a character vitally needs to have a skill in Aardvark Tickling then he can bloody well talk to the GM about it. There is more than enough breadth and depth to allow such variation in the game. The point is that characters are about exactly that - character. Your history and personality should mean a lot more than numbers on a page. Besides which, the game has its tongue very much in its cheek. This is why I like the idea of the Life Notes. Apart from being very funny and setting the tone of the game nicely, they do give players a nice framework to build around. To add to the fun, there are both positive and negative notes which have to balance - for each roll on the positive table, you must also roll on the negative table. The system itself is devastatingly simple. Roll 2d6 and try to get under your trait. I mean, the old Fighting Fantasy books were harder to suss than that! In short, the system is designed to be simple and quick, and it achieves this very well.

To finish up, you may have guessed that I am quite impressed with this game. Guilty as charged, I'm afraid. What can I say? I mean, I'm a fan of manga, I like the sense of humour that the game has (I challenge anyone to find a better tag line for a game than one that includes '... demons with amazing groinal powers...'), I was very impressed with the system and background detail... suffice it to say, you get the picture. As if all of this wasn't enough, the new Crucible Design format of perfect-binding their games is very nice, and they've even thrown in some art work. This is of a very high standard (I don't know much about art, but I know what I like) and includes a 4-page comic at the start of the book. Were there any faults with the game? Not really. More extensive playing might reveal a few hiccups, but I would be very surprised if there are any. It is designed to be a very fun game so my advice would be that if you like manga or you want to get a game that you can enjoy rather than endure, you should seriously think about buying SNCC XDO.

Book Reviews

The Vacuum Diagrams by Stephen Baxter

HarperCollins, 1997, £15.99

In a handful of novels Stephen Baxter has described an epic, fascinating and bleak future history. After colonising the solar system mankind endures two invasions and occupations by aliens. Once we free ourselves, we set out to conquer the cosmos, only to find that the Xeelee, an all but omnipotent civilisation has got there first. The Xeelee are locked in an aeons long conflict with the dark matter Photino Birds, both are seeking to remodel the Universe to suit their own interests. Envy and overconfidence leads humanity into a pathetic and doomed attempt to dethrone the Xeelee. They impatiently swat us aside, imprisoning the survivors in a pocket universe before returning to their real war. Eventually the Xeelee admit defeat and the Birds bring the Universe as we know it to premature and dismal end. The novel Ring ended the series, but in millions of years of history there was plenty of gaps to be filled.

Baxter's latest book is *Vacuum Diagrams*, a collection of stories from this sequence. There is a linking narrative set in the early days of the post invasions expansion. A race called the Ghosts is conducting experiments which may incur the wrath of the Xeelee on all our heads. A human diplomat has arrived and the Ghosts create a simulation of his dead wife who tells him the book's stories to justify their work. We find why he is being told these tales which cover all periods of this history including the future, at the book's close.

Most of the stories can be roughly grouped in three sections. The early stories deal mainly with discovering life in surprising places in the solar system, from Mercury's polar caps to Pluto and beyond. Then there are stories of the lone-hero-hired-to-investigate-natural-or-technological-wonder type rather like Larry

Niven's *Beowulf Schaeffer* series. Finally there are tales of the last barbaric humans exploring and eventually finding release from their prison. In the course of the stories, marvels are casually thrown to us. One takes place on the Sugarlump, an artificial planet in the shape of a cube. A moon is eaten by self-aware mathematical formulations. Another deals with a voyage to the far side of the Universe. Bizarre aliens, Qax, Squeem, Spline and others, play their parts, but are dominated by the unseen Xeelee.

Baxter specialises in evoking the sense of wonder. He uses big numbers and hard science to do this. If you are not up to speed with quantum mechanics, cosmology and Godel's theorem, it can be occasionally daunting, but just treat the explanations as Star Trek techno-babble and read on. He is a good writer and the book holds the reader's interest. There are few British authors who write hard SF in this vein, yet Baxter is not a British David Brin or Greg Bear. Behind the flash and dazzle of the places, creatures and artefacts lurk a faint despair and sense of entropy. His characters may win their victories, but everything will be lost in the End.

Forget the movie and TV-related pap which constitutes too much of SF today. Read *Vacuum Diagrams* and experience real Science Fiction.



The Tranquillity Option by Allen Steele

Ace Science Fiction, 1997, \$5.99

A few year years ago Allen Steele made his name with novels like 'Orbital Decay' and 'Lunar Descent'. These were gritty, yet poetic, stories set amongst the space exploitation and industrialisation of the early 21st Century. Unlike any other space heroes, Steele's

refreshingly blue collar characters generally won through but wore grungey T-shirts, complained about the boss, drank, went on strike like any other working class Joe. At the space time we were never allowed to forget what a majestic, wonderful enterprise space travel is. Sadly, the near future lunar mines, orbital construction shacks and powersats of these books already seem as dated as the silvery rocketships and gracefully spinning space-wheels envisaged in the 1950s, which brings me to Steele's latest novel 'The Tranquillity Option'.

This is an alternative history story, in this time line space travel started during World War II with an abortive Nazi attempt to attack America with a sub-orbital rocket plane. After the Allied victory, an American military space program developed along the lines schemed by the likes of von Braun. Rather than being sealed in capsules, astronauts rode into space in winged rocketships, a large space station was operational in the 1960s, and the first voyage to the Moon was made in a giant spacecraft assembled in orbit. Later of fleet of these ships serviced a Moonbase.

But by 1995, the American space effort is in decline, public apathy and economic difficulties have lead to the abandonment of the Moonbase and its subsequent sale to a German-lead European commercial operation. However, alongside the civil base there lies six silos containing nuclear missiles, secretly built during the Cold War and abandoned after their existence was leaked to the public. Before the Europeans can take control of the base, the missiles are to be deactivated. America's last operational moonship is launched carrying a team to close this chapter in history.

The crew includes several NASA and German astronauts, a TV news crew, a British executive from the consortium and a computer specialist. In fact, there is a nasty conspiracy afoot, the hacker has been brutally replaced by an impostor and some of the crew have sold out to the bad guys.

This is a good book, but not a great one. The techno-thriller plot is fine and occasionally very exciting, but the characterisation is not up to the standard Steele has achieved before. The central character is a typical straight arrow astronaut, his female co-pilot has the Right Stuff, but is being forced out of NASA because of her private life, and the TV reporter is a bitch. No one else really stands out. In other stories Steele has made Earth orbit and the Moon places of wonder, but in this book he doesn't even try.

The book does succeed in showing us a plausible world where space travel is so much more routine than it is in ours, so much so that no one is interested anymore. Between each chapter there is a 'non-fiction' interview or article illustrating the differences between our world and this one. These are very good and include a hilarious review of 'Star Trek: the New Generation' (Anthony Quinn as Picard, Steven Segal as Riker, Robin Williams as Q).

Then there is the technology, so much more interesting than the people, here spaceships are thirty years old, patched up and battered. Steele knows about spaceships and he makes them and their lore fascinating. His disappointment with those who don't share his enthusiasm in the real or his fictional world is plain. If you like spaceships you'll like this book

2001 may be closer than you think!

The place - Kennedy Spaceflight Centre, Cape Canaveral, USA.

The time - 1st of January 2000.

The Shuttle Discovery stands on the launch pad, ready for lift off. Inside the crew are tense - to be expected, given that they are strapped into a powerful, complex machine that has claimed the lives of Astronauts before. The Captain has made his final checks, and waits for Mission Control to contact him. He knows that there's be a brief Q+A

session with the media before the first flight of the 'New Millennium'.

The comm. crackles, and the voice of the Opps. head comes through.

"Frank, there's been a little bit of a problem, we've had to cancel the interview".

"What's wrong?" The Captain replies, a tinge of concern in his voice.

"The Japanese have beaten us into orbit - with a business jet. All the jourmos are on their way to Tokyo. The mission's fine though."

"That's OK Phil, I never liked interviews anyway"

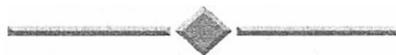
Sound far-fetched? Not according to the X-prize Foundation. This American organisation is offering 10 million dollars to the first team to commercially launch a reusable spacecraft into a sub-orbital flight, and repeat the feat within 48 hours. So far there are 17 teams in the race, some planing to claim the prize in 1999.

The aim of the prize is to stimulate the private sector in space. Many of the designs are designed to take passengers on a short hop into space - the holiday of a lifetime. Others focus on launching small payloads into orbit. One is designed as a space business jet, capable of getting from LA to Tokyo in an hour.

To a world used to billion-dollar spaceshots, such a venture must seem far-fetched. But when you consider that most of the space launchers operating today are based on 60's and 70's technology - perhaps these space pioneers can do what they've set out to achieve. Their craft do not have to carry massive spacelabs, spaceprobes, or secret military satellites. Neither do they have to be able to stay in space for a week, like the shuttle. The military are not going to hamstring their designs, as the military did to the Shuttle, in order to meet their exacting mission parameters. All they have to do is get to space safely, with a payload capacity that will allow it to survive commercially, and get back safely - and do it again in two day's time. Even if they're off in the 2-day turnaround, it'll be quite an achievement.

Whenever you consider the problems NASA has in getting funding for it's share of the International Space Station (due to be up and running in 2001), and the constant trouble it and other space agencies have in getting the funding they need to survive - maybe this is the way forward in Space. There'll be less bureaucracy, the craft will have to generate it's own funding, and last but not least the public will be able to get into space - for a price.

It's always been bittersweet watching 2001 - commercial shuttles, giant space stations, large moonbases - things people in the 60's expected to see in a movie set at the dawn of the new millennium. Well, there'll be a spacestation, maybe two if the ISS is put up in time - no moonbase, but perhaps we'll see a few commercial ships running day trips to a station-or-two in 2001.



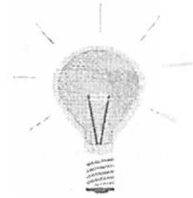
The Magic of Science *Science Fiction vs. Fantasy*

What is the difference between fantasy and SF? Well, that's not an easy question to answer; many more learned people than I have tried to find a clear way to distinguish the two. In general, SF is based on what we currently know of the universe, extrapolating that to give real (if unlikely) possibilities. Some cases seem pretty clear; spaceships, aliens and future technology are SF while dragons, elves and magic are fantasy. But it's not that clear cut. There are many borderline cases, there are stories involving both magic and technology, and the distinction between the two is not always obvious, as Arthur C. Clarke once pointed out in his famous statement that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (if anyone knows where and when he said that please let me know!).

Another problem was pointed out by Phillip K. Dick when he proposed the example of a story involving telepathy. If the reader believes telepathy exists, he/she may consider the story to be science fiction. If he/she thinks telepathy is nonsense, he may consider it fantasy. In other words, what you believe to be possible varies from person to person and can hardly be judged objectively. Orson Scott Card's Homecoming series features a medieval-esque world with seers who receive prophetic visions from an apparently all-powerful godlike being called the Oversoul. This sounds like a clear-cut fantasy, but in fact the world is an Earth colony and the Oversoul is a phenomenally powerful but far-from-omnipotent supercomputer which has genetically engineered certain humans to be able to receive its transmissions, which of course are their visions.

Ultimately, there are stories which are clearly fantasy and others which are clearly science fiction, but there is a huge grey area between the two, and no clear dividing line can be drawn. Fantasy can develop its fantastic elements so consistently and thoroughly that they become scientific, and SF can make its science so powerful and advanced it becomes magical.

So perhaps we should stop pigeonholing so much, making distinctions which depend on a stereotypical and unrealistic view. After all, aren't such views exactly the sort of thing which annoy us about the media's depiction of our genre? Science Fiction "anoraks" do exist, but some of us are perfectly normal, and there are all sorts of shades in between. Similarly, SF and fantasy have all sorts of shades in between the extremes of High Fantasy and hard SF. So let's all just get along (famous last words!) and save our arguments for the real enemy... the media!



And finally... a note from the editor.

I hope that this sample of our club's newsletter has served as a good introduction to our club and what it does. We are always on the lookout for new members (despite being a Queens' club, you DO NOT have to be a member of Queens' to join us) simply because the more members we have, the longer our club survives (and the more contributions I can hope for towards another issue of this). If you are interested in joining or would just like to find out more then either -

- speak to one of our people at this con
- e-mail our mailing list
- take a look at our web pages

For any of the addresses involved, please see the back of the newsletter (conveniently located over the page). Student membership is only £2 and this includes any newsletters we publish (postage free for those in foreign lands) and any back issues that you require to bring you up to speed.

For those of you wondering who to blame for the various articles, all shall be revealed -

- fiction by Eamon Watters + Paul Keenan
- RPG reviews by Mark Lamki + Paul Keenan
- book reviews by Colin Johnston
- comments by Eamon Watters + Mark Lamki

A big thanks to all involved! We know who you are... hence © to the authors involved. Any breach of this copyright will result in a large man dressed as a penguin coming round to your house to jabber at you and a strange man in black assaulting your bin. You have been warned...



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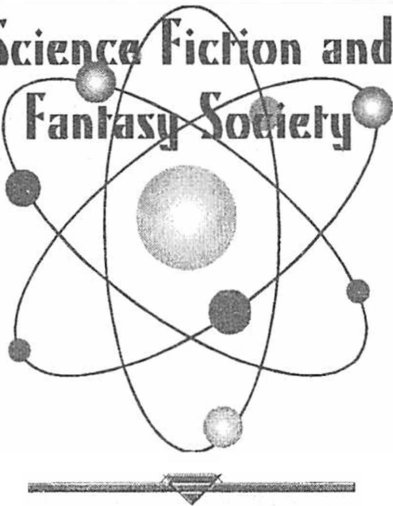
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Science Fiction and Fantasy Society



Popular and cult TV & film showings

Every week (aside from consuming copious amounts of alcohol), we endeavour to show both the latest releases and a wide variety of cult classics on video. We tailor our showings to the tastes of club members, so there will always be something for you to watch.

Discussions & debates on SF&F topics

Every term, based on one of the video showings, or current events in the sci-fi and fantasy world, we hold group discussions on anything our members feel like arguing about (as long it's not, "Did you spill my pint?!").

Writers' Group & Video Workshop

These two groups within the club aim to bring out the members' creative side, providing a forum for people to write their own work, and receive constructive feedback from their peers. The end results can be anything from a short story (some of which are featured in this newsletter), through to low budget, schlock horror films, although we have been running low on zombie extras (I told everyone not to make snuff movies).

Pub meetings and pub quizzes

These speak for themselves (God, do we have to explain everything?!?!)

Club cinema outings

Whenever any of the local cinemas or theatres are showing an SF&F related feature, the club arranges an en masse outing to see it, with a discount for members. Last year's highlight was the re-released Star Wars Trilogy.

Extensive Library

Well, we've got one. And quite big it is too (ooer, Matron).

