

Designer's Notes

Universe

Our science-fiction role-playing game is just a month away from deadline time, and it looks like we just might make it! All the elements of the game are now resolved and testing of whole adventures has been underway for several weeks. A few days ago I subjected five players to a harrowing exploration and information-gathering mission.

The planet *Laidley* in the 82 Eridani system had been explored and abandoned a few years previous to the outset of the adventure. About 10 of the original explorers had not returned from Laidley with the party and were declared missing, presumed dead. A wealthy merchant believes that some of the missing party (to which he is related) is still alive and he has also been told of some interesting creatures on Laidley, so he organizes an expedition (our five characters) to return to the planet for this dual purpose. The five man expedition is well equipped for its 20-day task (after which the merchant's ship will return to retrieve them) with a large ATV and light weapons.

Things start out well; the characters encounter and capture a few of the local creatures. They notice, however, that the roads and trails are much more developed than they expected and there are many new ones leading to unknown destinations. Then they begin running into the missing explorers, one at a time.

Well, we are planning to include the outline for this adventure in the *Universe* package so I do not want to give anything more away. Suffice it to say that in the play-through only two of the characters survived to leave the planet (with nothing but their expedition suits) and the world was soon renamed *Spiderweb*.

Character Generation

The character generation system is complete and we have used it to generate some interesting individuals. Here are two of the characters that participated in the above adventure.

Aram Ben Hellisar was born into the local establishment on a planet with .7 G's and grew up in a barren, hilly environment with very hot temperatures. His social background and early evidence of good coordination led him to study the military, business and the body. At age 20 he chose to capitalize on his high strength, dexterity, agility, mental power (bordering on the psionic) and wealth by becoming an armed trader, exporting and importing goods in hazardous areas of the empire. After 16 years of experience he had accumulated trading, linguistic, pilot, gunnery and navigation skills. His cash had been increased by a factor of four and he owned an excellent business/analytical computer.

Michael Puidokas was born into the skilled tech class on a planet with Earth-like gravity. He spent some of his childhood in cities but did most of his growing up in a lightly vegetated mountainous area with a mild climate. His excellent physique and love of people led him to study the body and the humanities extensively. At age 20 he joined the local law enforcement agency where his high strength and endurance soon allowed him to become a lawman, wandering his

planet executing justice in less developed areas. Although he did not get rich from this, Michael acquired many skills in his twelve years of service. He knew the ins and outs of geology, mining, law, jet craft, ATV's and many types of hand weapons. He owned a plastic pistol (for avoiding detection) and a paint gun (an advanced hand-held laser weapon). Unfortunately, Mr. Puidokas did not survive the expedition to Laidley.

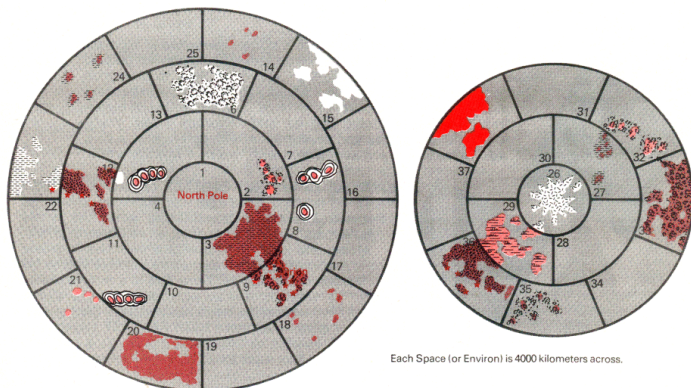
Planet Generation

The planet generation system in *Universe* has proven very successful, and popular with the playtesters. The following planet is an example of one of many types of worlds that may be created step-by-step using the system.

The Star *Orionis* (spectral class F6) is 26 light-years from our sun. It has five planets of interest in orbit. *Titus* is one and a half Astronomical Units (about 210 million kilometers) from Orion. Titus is slightly larger than Earth with a gravity of 1.3 G's. It has a spectacular set of rings and, orbiting further out, a small moon. Eighty percent of its surface is water (simple purification is required for drinking) and its atmosphere is like that of Earth's, with a few irritants that may be removed with a mouth filter. Titus rotates quickly; its day is only 15 hours long. Somewhat warmer than Earth, the equatorial band rarely drops below 100 degrees Fahrenheit and one small icecap covers the south pole.

The planet has been undergoing exploration and colonization for 80 years and now has about 20,000 humans in scattered settlements. Titus has a small spaceport in Orion, its largest town (6000 people) with limited service to other planets in the same system but no interstellar facilities. The colonists generally live in a manner similar to life

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Each Space (or Environ) is 4000 kilometers across.



Books [continued from page 34]

especially his fascination with audiovisual media and their impact on human thought, and his conception of human consciousness as behavioristic "programs" which can be altered either by an outside force or consciously reshaped by one's own mind. The book takes place in Aquaria, the only human civilization to survive a nuclear war. The protagonists are Clear Blue Lou, a sort of zen master of Aquaria's anarchistic society, and Sunshine Sue, one of the people who runs the culture's news network. The dominating belief of their society is a sort of idiot Schumacherism — "white" technology is that which operates off muscle, wind, water, or solar energy, and "black" technology is that which uses fossil fuels or atomic power. Aquaria manages to retain a fairly high standard of living only because it obtains large quantities of solar cells, transistors, and other hi-tech items from a colony of black scientists living in the radioactive wastelands to the east — a fact which its conscientiously "white" citizens do their best to forget.

Caught in a maleficent plot of the evil black scientists, Sue and Lou eventually take a space shuttle built by the nasties to the "Big Ear," a deactivated astronomical observatory and telecommunications satellite. There, they learn that, shortly before Armageddon occurred, human civilization had made contact with extraterrestrials.

Songs from the Stars, like all of Spinrad's work, is vigorous in its prose style,

gorgeous in its imagery, and full-fleshed in its characterization. Spinrad explores his themes with insight and power. However, it has a number of flaws: its Schumacherism leads it to treat the black scientists, especially their master, Arnold Harker, as stereotyped inhuman calculating machines; and one of its major themes is a bit infantile: the idea that someone, in this case our big brothers from the stars, is going to save us from all our problems.

An interesting aspect of *Songs from the Stars* is that it seems perfectly calculated to appeal to the 1960's style counter-culture, and that degraded remnant of it that survives in the anti-nuke movement. The alien contact theme is very much consonant with the Aquarian mystical beliefs abounding in the Haight-Ashbury culture; the Schumacher "small is beautiful" business will appeal to ecouns young and old. If the 1980's become another age of protest, it is likely that *Songs from the Stars* will be one of its cult books, as *Lotr* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* were in the 1960's.

Whatever dialectical disagreements one may have with Spinrad's themes, *Songs from the Stars* shows once again that he is an extremely powerful writer — among the best science fiction has to offer.

Part of science fiction's power is that it plays on the cultural archetypes of our times: space, the machine, human progress, the future. Part of fantasy's power lies in the fact that it plays on the mythic archetypes of our culture: magic, power, evil, strange beings.

The best of fantasy, like the best of science fiction, can consequently be immensely provocative. Sadly, there are few fantasy (or science fiction) writers who are sufficiently skilled and sufficiently aware of the dynamics of the problems they handle to fulfill the promise of their themes.

Diana Wynne Jones, though, is a thoroughly skilled professional who knows precisely what she is doing. Her *The Spell-Coats* is not only a ripping good story, but evocative in imagery. It deals with a family of four children who, orphaned by a war, are forced to flee their village with their household gods. Propelled by magical forces they do not entirely understand, they flee down the river on whose banks they have lived all their lives to a meeting and destiny that are both beyond their knowledge and comprehension.

In part, *The Spell-Coats* is a coming-of-age novel. In part, it is a story of awesome magics fearfully wrought — and has the advantage that its magic is organized within a logical conceptual framework. In part, as well, it is a mystery: the reader must put together what is going on in the novel from the evidence that the author provides — and probably will not be able to before the characters do, which shows that, as a mystery, it is well done. As a whole, *The Spell-Coats* is sufficiently good to warrant place on my Hugo Nomination ballot, and should help establish Jones' credentials as an excellent writer.

Greg Costikyan

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in 1900; some industrialization combined with heavy agriculture. The empire does not keep a close watch on Titus, and many of its inhabitants only know of their heritage from stories. Unscrupulous traders and pirates using the latest technology from other worlds often get the better of the rather rustic Titians.

The major resources of Titus are its delicious high-protein fruits, found in great abundance throughout the temperate climates. Demand for this fruit keeps mer-

chants coming to Orion to take the delicacies to other worlds (where they are sold at exorbitant prices). Titus also has a fair amount of iron, copper, cesium and some minor non-metal elements. However, the Titians are not industrial enough to manufacture exportable goods with these resources. Shipping is the main form of transportation on the calm seas of Titus, and most of the settlements hug the coastline. Some alien life forms have been discovered on the planet, but none that were edible or intelligent.

The components of *Universe* have

changed somewhat. At the moment they include a four-color 22" x 34" *Interstellar Display*, providing detailed information on 150 stars within 30 light years of Earth; a 64-page *Gamesmaster's Guide*, a 32-page *Adventure Guide*, a 22" x 17" *Tactical Display* for resolving ship-to-ship combat; 200 counters for resolving ship-to-ship combat; 20-sided dice, a countertray and two-inch deep box. The package will sell for \$20. An introductory pack is also planned, consisting of the two guides and the *Interstellar Display* only. It will sell for \$10. John H. Butterfield

Twilight of the Gods

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gods have indeed survived Ragnarok — though no one knows how and no one ever will. Odin's sons Vidar and Vali, and their cousins Vili and Ve walk over the new land and meet at the mysterious place called Ithervale. Baldr arises from the dead, and his brother Hoddr with him, who has now regained his sight; Baldr takes the central seat in the meeting place of the gods. Thor's sons, Magni and Modi, also appear, along with the valiant Hoenir; these new gods remember what has gone before and will learn from the old gods' errors. Odin's great hall is to be rebuilt, and the gods will rule Middle Earth from a hall thatched with gold. The loremaster Hoenir reads the mysteriously engraved runes that have been found and forecasts a new era of peace. Unlike the Aesir and Vanir whose disagreement brought about their destruction, these gods

will never be destroyed. Under them the whole world will be renewed.

Now Yggdrasil flourishes. Its trunk splits open and releases into the world a second race of mankind, which the indestructible tree protected during Ragnarok. They wander out into the beautiful world to enjoy it. Like the gods who rule them, this second race of humankind will never know pain and sorrow.

"Would you know more?" the Sybil asks Odin. There is a great deal more to tell about the future world, she tells him.

At that moment, however, a dragon soars overhead. In its pinions are the bodies of men it has caught and will now eat. The appearance of the dragon breaks the Sybil's concentration, and with it, her prophecy. She will say no more.

This version of Ragnarok has been gathered from several sources and does not mean to serve as the only interpretation of

the *Voluspá*, the song of the witch, as preserved in the 12th century collection of poems, myths and history, the *Edda*, made by Snorri Sturluson. For further readings, see the accompanying bibliography.

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