



Secret Histories Constructed While You Wait

"[T]here is something that secret histories give you that is very different, because you are trying to uncover the histories of groups and forces that always avoid history. In order to narrate those stories, you must become a little paranoid, though not in the sense that They are out to get you. I mean you must become a little paranoid as a critical method. You must start jumping across vague and shadowy realms of ambiguous data, weaving patterns that won't hold up in court, pointing out strange synchronicities that occur, names that reappear. Suddenly possibilities that exist outside of what we can conventionally narrate start to cohere, many of them bordering on the incorporeal and the imaginal. Patterns resonate in ways that seem to undermine conventional historical thinking itself."

-- Erik Davis, April 1997 interview

To one extent or another, of course, every one of these columns is not just gaming material, but GM advice of the world-building, scenery-painting sort. However, I usually leave the advice in the shadows and present the built world, the result of following said advice, on the outside. This week, since my topic is secret history (and a potentially conspiratorial secret history at that), I thought it might be interesting and instructive to reverse that -- to write this column with the advice in the light and the world in the shadows. Herewith, a Worked Example of secret historianship, a basic two-part primer on How To Suppress A Wild Transmission.

"The events of an interplanetary story -- aside from such tales as involve sheer poetic fantasy -- are best laid in the present, or represented as having occurred secretly or prehistorically in the past."

-- H.P. Lovecraft, "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction"

To begin with, you need a high concept, a Central McGuffin to wind everything around. Otherwise, you're just throwing stuff in the air until the players get bored. For this example, I'm taking the Lovecraft quote above, which presents a vastly underutilized topic ideal for our purposes. If this were a conventional Suppressed Transmission, it would have started with that quote, rung four or five changes on it, and concluded with a paragraph Putting It All Together. That's basically what I do when I design a campaign frame, too, as you'll see here.

So our central gimmick is Secret Space Travel, down through history and at least potentially beginning in prehistoric times. Now, SF from James Hogan's *Inherit the Stars* to Jerry Pournelle's *Janissaries* to H. Beam Piper's Paratime sequence have postulated either an extraterrestrial origin for space-travelling humanity or an earlier human history of the solar system, or both. **Traveller** does the same, and perhaps it would be fun to run a **Traveller** game centered on a minor and forgotten Vilani base in ancient Egypt, or Maya Mexico, or on Atlantis. But that starts us out behind the curtain, playing an entirely different kind of secret history game, and I think the concept can support a classic Mismatched Ragtag Team Of Investigators Slowly Piecing Together The Uncanny Truth game. So, our secret space travellers are the conspiracy behind things, and just to keep things simple (and "interplanetary" rather than "interstellar") we'll further restrict ourself to Earth's solar system. (This will also help us avoid the worst of the causality-FTL paradoxes, too.)

There's another two basic questions to answer about our central gimmick, to inform the whole nature of play. Is our solar system basically as we understand it -- inhospitable planets inimical to PC life forms? Here's where gut feelings and aesthetics come in: to me, unless the game is set back when people didn't know what the planets were like (pre-1940, say), it feels like cheating to say "There really are dinosaurs on Venus, and the Soviets and NASA just covered it up." It's extremely implausible and may result in player dissatisfaction when the Big Secret is revealed. And, although a Victorian-era *GURPS Steampunk* game wherein the PCs investigate Her Majesty's Secret Space Service ("Ad Astra Sub Rosa") and its links to the Canal-Builders of Mars would be extremely swell, it would likely soon take on a very different flavor from our "classic" conspiratorial secret history model. So let's assume the solar system is (mostly) like Real Astronomy paints it, with only the necessary Shreds Of Dubious Evidence otherwise such as the Face on Mars or the "Castle" on [the Moon](#).

The second question goes to the nature of the space travel. Again, for purely aesthetic reasons, I want to stick with physical spaceships (if only to tie in UFO legends and run space battle scenarios). However, I don't want a technology with a lot of "spinoff" applications; some kind of bogus "zero-point energy" that's good for flying to Mars and maybe building the odd pyramid, but unusable for a Babylonian Industrial Revolution, fits the bill. To further restrict it, let's make it depend on some rare unobtainium (Atlantean "orichalcum" will do for a start, methinks), which will also give us plenty of "treasure" to fight over, as well as good hooks for some opening scenarios:

- "Why was everyone in the house killed for a piece of costume jewelry from the 17th century?"
- "Who is kidnapping the great metallurgists of Europe?"
- "What possible reason would a shadowy Japanese consortium have for buying up the mineral rights around Roswell?"

We can restrict it again, keeping our spacefarers to a small conspiracy-sized batch. Perhaps even with orichalcum, you can only fully tap its zero-point potential after lengthy and rigorous training of mind and body. Insisting on a training regimen also gives a central core to all those "initiated" groups from the Templars to the Shaolin monks -- they were practicing space travel techniques. Space travel thus becomes the Secret of the "underground stream" passed down from the pyramid-builders to the Druids to the Illuminati, or however. It's always good when your Secret History can mesh with the secret histories crazy people have already built for you. (We'll pick from our embarrassment of Usual Suspects to focus the campaign further in a couple of paragraphs.) Another advantage of the "trained flier" mode is that we can then say that psionic "tuning" of zero-point energy can keep you alive (or build a "vibratory barrier dome") on inhospitable Mars, which gives us a little more leeway on that score for scenarios set there.

It's a little early to address this issue specifically, but it's always important to think about how to include the player characters. Nothing spoils a secret history faster than inaccessibility: either the PCs can never get traction on it, and wind up spinning their wheels forever; or once they do bust in, they find themselves dependent on NPC mentors, prisoners, or allies for exposition, information, and aid. The party becomes a tour group, rather than a Noble Company Of Adventurers. A GM who likes to live on the edge might ask the players to roll up their characters first ("It's a modern-day game, and everyone should have some tangential connection to espionage or UFO investigation.") and custom-fit the game to suit, but it's less stressful (and better for the campaign's flexibility and realism) to build a bunch of open slots into the background for PC life history hooks. For example, one of the PCs could have a period of "missing time" -- during which, she was trained by a secretive group of rebel conspirators. Or, a PC with a suitable background could find it more useful than he thought: "It turns out your training in the Star Lodge Blessing Way back on the reservation contained the key concepts for psionic orichalcum control. Imagine that." That way, the party can actually use the UFO tech and keep themselves alive in Crater Tycho, rather than depend on GM charity.

"The name of the game is 'Find Your Adversary.' Your adversary's game plan is to convince you that he does not exist."

-- William S. Burroughs

Now that we know "what," "where," and "how," we move on to "who" and "when." Well, we have all time and space. Since our space travel game is still primarily mechanical-physical rather than spiritual-etheric (although that concept can work for [a whole different campaign frame](#) of secret space-travel), we should begin with a technically-advanced civilization. One possibility is our own future selves, who traveled back in time to gain leverage in an interplanetary Time War, and thus wound up spreading primitive humanity hither and yon. Unfortunately, this means adding time travel, at least potentially, at the beginning, and I don't need to tell you, that opens up a whole keg of worms. Since you don't need time travel to start with (and can always introduce it later, with controllable wormhole gates or something), let's go the other direction: [ancient astronauts](#).

It's not immediately necessary to decide anything about the ancient astronauts, or even if they were human themselves. The name of the game is "secret-historical space travel," not "chariot-tracks of the gods." For starters, then, let's say that the ancient astronauts colonized the Tibetan plateau in, oh, 6000 B.C. Why Tibet? Well, Tibetan initiates are reputed to practice the exact kinds of body-control (keeping naked monks comfortable on Himalayan glaciers, that kind of thing) we'll need on Mars, and Tibet is cool. (If you have a lot of knowledge of or interest in some other Place of Mystery, swap it in here.) The ancient astronauts split in two groups; one of which went west to build pyramids and ziggurats, and one of which went east to rule the natives as "sky dragons." At some point, catastrophe occurred and scattered the fragments of ancient astronautic knowledge hither and yon; the [Pole Shift](#), or interstellar war, or a rebellion of the natives. Possibly all three: maybe the Ur-Tibetan space activity drew the attention of some other power (we'll call them the Sirians for now), who tilted the poles, bombarded the main ancient astronaut bases, and incited the natives to rebel. This also helps explain why the Initiates have kept space travel a secret; if they explore space too openly, they may bring the Sirians back again!

So we have a basic concept, a few key limitations on it, a Secret Origin, a Fall of the Gods, and at least one semi-plausible reason for secrecy. In a week, we'll finish our Secret History of Space Travel and talk about how to do it all over again in an emergency.

Next Week: Part Two; More Bad Guys, The Plot, Directions, Bisociation, and Novas.

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