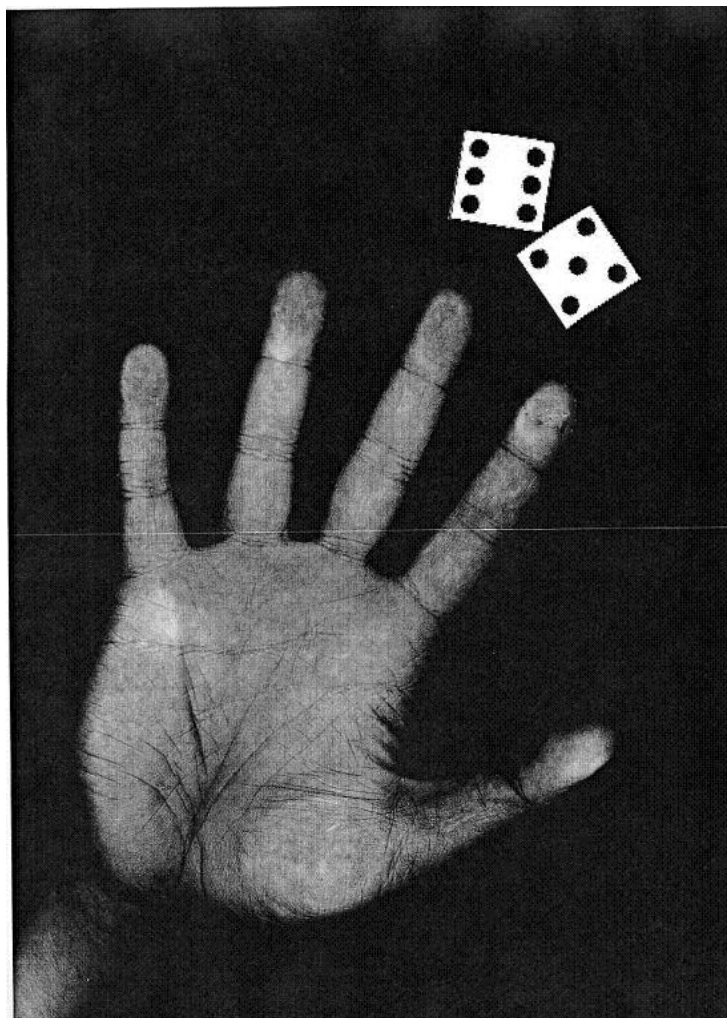# FSG
ODDS

The Tabletop Roleplaying E-Magazine

Issue 2 –November 2008

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Whose side are you on anyway? Different GMing styles
6 Tips For Creating Aliens For Sci-Fi Games

ODDS
Issue 2
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FRONT COVER: I Just Photocopied My Hand! *by Jonathan Hicks*
Interior artwork by Jonathan Hicks

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Issue 2 of ODDS magazine.

So, what does the title ODDS stands for? Well, when I decided to restart Farsight Games I designed a roleplaying system that used a single six-sided die for every aspect of the game that I intended to release free of charge. ODDS means *One Die Determines Success*. After a little playtesting I put the game to one side, as it didn't work out as well as I'd hoped.

When it came to deciding what to call this magazine I went through a few titles – predictably, FARSIGHT and DREAMER were two titles I considered – but I couldn't decide on what to use. I was trying to release an emagazine that utilised old or unused articles, basically the *odds* and ends of old work.

So there you have it – the articles in this emagazine are the odds and ends of old material. ODDS.

I'm very excited about this month's issue, and not just because I actually made it to issue 2. In this issue we have an interview with the excellent Bill Coffin, who very kindly agreed to take time out to answer some questions. It's a pleasure to have him grace these pages.

I've been asked if I intend to include reviews in this mag but I'm not sure I honestly need to. With the internet community growing every day there are dozens of places to go to for reviews and news regarding upcoming games, new games and old games. This mag is specifically for material the reader may find useful to help them in their own games. For now, I'll just stick to generic tabletop roleplaying articles.

I have done the two articles and the artwork in this issue. I find that a real shame because that basically turns this emagazine into my own personal soapbox, and allows me to bleat out what I think makes for good advice and ideas. As the mag is designed to house old or discarded articles, essays and other material, please get in touch if you have something written you want to give a home to. Not only will I make the article available to other avid roleplayers worldwide, it'll also get your name, your own website and your talent out there for others to see. You'll be advertising your skills, and the articles don't have to be long, either – a thousand words will do.

So get to it! Dig into your hardrives and shovel out those old articles!

Keep on rollin',

JONATHAN HICKS
Editor
Director of FARSIGHT GAMES

THE BILL COFFIN INTERVIEW

And so here it is – an interview with industry (dare I say it) *legend* Bill Coffin. Bill was gracious enough to take some time out and answer some questions about roleplaying, his work and his involvement.

Hi, Bill, and thank you for taking the time out to do this interview. To begin with, tell us a bit about yourself outside of roleplaying. A short biography, if you will.

I was born in 1970, which makes me not quite one of those first-generation, old skool grognards you hear about, but I'm pretty close to it. I grew up in Easton, Pennsylvania, home to both Crayola Crayons and Larry Holmes, who was both my neighbor and the world heavyweight boxing champion for a long time in the 1980s. I graduated from a rather posh private school in nearby Bethlehem, Pennsylvania before going to college at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. I graduated in 1993 and became a financial writer that summer, working mainly in the insurance and risk management industries.

I am currently the publisher and editorial director of a magazine called *Risk Management*, which I suppose sounds terribly boring, but I rather like it. I have a great staff, and we work really hard to make our book something anybody might want to read. Still, my RPG days are never far off – we often hire artist Ramon Perez to do illustrations for us. In fact, he did the cartoon of me that runs on my editorial page each month.

Most importantly, though, is my family. My wife Alli and I recently celebrated our tenth anniversary, and we have two terrific kids – Fiona (8) and Connor (5). Fiona is a natural born artist. Connor is the writer. We live in Oakhurst, New Jersey, which is on the shore, though I still commute by train into Manhattan every day for work. It's a long trip, but my office is within walking distance of two terrific comic book shops as well as the Compleat Strategist, a really great gaming shop.

So, I'll get the obvious question out of the way right now – what got you into the roleplaying hobby? What was the attraction, not only to play but also to design and write for gamers?

What got me into playing RPGs and what got me into writing them are two different things.

I got into role-playing right around when Advanced Dungeons & Dragons came out. It was a phenomenon, and a kind of recreation nobody had really seen before, so it hit me and my peers like a freight train. I was already a pretty imaginative kid – growing up without video games and a ton of TV will do that to any child – and to immerse myself into a world of knights and dragons and orcs and treasure…it was mind-blowing. I remember

> *"What got me into playing RPGs and what got me into writing them are two different things."*

also the big parental pushback when folks (including my own) worried that this game would damage the minds of those who played it. To my mom's credit, she got me my first RPG – the red box Basic D&D set. And not only that, she had me help her roll up a character. She instantly realized this thing was harmless and that it was not for her, so she just let me run with it.

I played RPGs pretty intensively for my entire childhood, both with friends and with my brothers. AD&D was the game of choice, but we also played the hell out of Classic Traveller (a GREAT game; one of my all-time faves), the original Champions (the first, and worst superhero game, I think), Star Frontiers, Marvel Superheroes (the best superhero game, I think), Gamma World, Boot Hill and Top Secret. We pretty much stuck to TSR games until 2nd Edition AD&D came out. That really ticked me off, as I had no problem with the rules, and the whole thing felt like an artificial measure by TSR to make me buy new books I did not need. I was so mad

over it I turned my back on Dungeons & Dragons entirely, and did not return to the game until a few years ago, actually. It just so happens that at that time, I stumbled upon Palladium games and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness. I played that game with a vengeance until I discovered Palladium Fantasy. I then played Palladium Fantasy almost exclusively for the next dozen years or so. I tried a few others like Vampire and Shadowrun, but they never took. Great games, but not for me. I could never get into the predation of Vampire, and the system of Shadowrun didn't turn me on. Nor did Elves with cyber-attachments, really.

Like many gamers, I always wrote up my own stuff. And as I developed novel-writing skills, I always built the world first and the story second. When I wanted a break from writing novels, I thought, writing sourcebooks would be like a novel, but just the first half of the project. And for me, it was, which is why sourcebook writing came so easily to me. I submitted to Palladium because at the time, they were the only company whose games I played and because they had an open submissions policy. I did not expect anything to come out of it. But, they responded quickly, paid well and published promptly, which are all things that can not be said for many freelance writing gigs at all.

Once I began writing games, it became very hard to stop. It was just an immensely rewarding experience, not least because there were a bunch of really great fans who were not just reading my work, but they were incorporating it into their own games. That's what I like most about game writing – that your material really and truly takes on a life outside of your control. That's quite neat to see. When I'd go to conventions, players would always come up to me and want to tell me stories of their exploits in some setting I'd written up. And I loved listening to it. I really did. Some writers for other companies I'd met had a kind of disdain for that. I remember seeing one guy wearing a shirt that said something like *No, I don't want to hear about your character."* That mentality still boggles me. For a fan to a) pay for your

book and b) actually play it and c) like it all so much to want to share the experience with you is an extremely powerful compliment. How can you not get fired up over that? That kind of reaction is a special part about the RPG crowd, and I will never stop loving it.

You've had a very active career from Heroes Unlimited to Palladium Fantasy and Rifts, to your work on Systems Failure and your novels. Which of your many projects was your favourite to work on?

Overall, my collective work on Palladium Fantasy is my favorite work for Palladium. There are a bunch of reasons for that, not least of which is that I played that game perhaps more than any other, so I have a special investment in it. But when I began writing for it, nobody had supported that line in years, and I was blown away by the reception my first book, The Western Empire, received. Palladium Fantasy fans welcomed me like a returning hero; they were just so grateful that somebody was giving their line some attention. But what was also cool was that Kevin Siembieda was

> *"…welcomed me like a returning hero…"*

thankful to have somebody who didn't want to write Rifts, so he pretty much let me do my thing with the Palladium Fantasy world. I eventually developed about half of the territories in the world, which was immensely rewarding. Of course, Kevin and I had major differences of opinion over the Land of the Damned, and I suspect nobody will ever see my manuscript for the third Land of the Damned book, which is a shame, since I really liked what I did for it.

I am also rather fond of my work for Heroes Unlimited, though it only is two books. Still, Century Station and Gramercy Island were my effort to create an entire, self-contained comic book universe rich enough to launch an entire comic book company off of. I don't know if I was successful in that, but the fan reaction to the books was terrific. Kevin once paid me the high compliment of saying that Century Station was nearly the

perfect sourcebook. I do think I kind of captured lightning in a jar on that one. Crunching the stats for all of those characters was no small job, though.

Systems Failure is also worth noting because it was such a weird project. We did that whole thing in the space of a month, but really, half of that was me retyping and reformatting the guts of the Palladium system to fit in as little space as possible. The essence of that game I wrote in two weeks. I'm amazed it came together as it did, but that was a good example of just letting yourself go and letting inspiration strike. The reception to that game was pretty cool, too. I got more than a few letters from militiamen here, there and everywhere thanking me for not portraying them as crazy people. I thought I had portrayed every character type as somewhat oddball in the book, but I guess those militia guys are so used to being villainised that my treatment came off as high praise. I do know one guy wrote me to say that he kept his copy of Systems Failure in his bunker. That, my friends, is life imitating art imitating life. It does not happen often.

> *"I do know one guy wrote me to say that he kept his copy of Systems Failure in his bunker."*

My big regret is that I never got to do Recon: Modern Combat. My situation with Palladium fell apart before I could develop the manuscript. I'm pretty convinced that would have been a great game, though. And given the mood of the country at the time (2002-2003), a hard-hitting covert ops game probably would have sold enough copies to measure in scientific notation. Alas, it was not meant to be.

What are you working on at the moment?

After my job with Palladium ended I returned to novel writing and I spent a full year developing the plotline for what would be an epic, seven-volume space opera called Septimus (sound familiar?). The plot synopsis alone was a whopping 100,000 words (that's the length of a novel itself), and I realised I needed to take on a different project before I took on something of this size. I had published two sci-fi novels (*Overmind* and *Prime Mover*) prior to publishing through Palladium, but still, my novel writing skills were rusty and needed a warm-up. So I shelved Septimus for a while while working on a separate novel project called *Pax Morgana,* which is the story of what happens after the traditional story of King Arthur ends. I wrote my honors thesis on *Le Morte D'Arthur* and have always been fascinated by Arthurian legend, and to me, one of the most powerful passages in literature is at the end of *Le Morte*. Everyone is dead, Camelot is ruined, and Arthur lies dying. He has given his last remaining knight, Bedevere, the duty of throwing Excalibur back into the water. And after Bedevere finally does, he returns to the battlefield to see Arthur borne off to Avalon. But more than that, he sees the local peasantry picking over the dead bodies, looting them. That part brings tears to my eyes, because I imagine Bedevere standing there, the sole witness to the ruin of an entire world. Arthur had built a dream of chivalry and justice in a world of savagery and slaughter, and without him, it all reverted back instantly. How heartbreaking.

Anyway, *Pax Morgana* builds off of that moment. Only in my story, Mordred lives and is triumphant, his mother Morgana is calling the shots, and she is basically harvesting our world for the benefit of the wicked Elves of Arcadia, who are the true power behind Arthur's downfall. Like *Le Morte*, the round table is broken, and just about everyone is dead. But Sir Bors, the last, best of Arthur's knights refuses to throw Excalibur back as ordered. He runs off with it, convinced that if Mordred gets his hands on it, Europa will wallow in darkness forever. Bors thinks that some day, a new hero will arise to reclaim the sword of swords, to overthrow Mordred and Morgana, and to return things to the way they were. As it turns out, Mordred has unknowingly sired a son, who has been spirited away to seclusion, and the heroes of our tale are pinning their hopes on this little boy, the last Pendragon. The question is, does he really want any part of this? Is he ready to

become the Once and Future King? Or will he succumb to the same kind of wickedness that typifies his father, and the same vanity that destroyed his grandfather?

Pax Morgana was supposed to be a small side project – just a one-off novel – to do to get my novel writing skills back in shape. It has, of course, expanded into a three-volume thing. I'm currently halfway through the second volume and I expect to have the whole thing done maybe by the end of 2009. I suspect before I am through with it I'll begin publishing installments of it online for folks to check out before I figure out how to get it into print. What got me going on this was I had originally planned on writing Septimus as a novel, not a role-playing game. Now, Septimus was meant to be truly huge – a seven-volume series. I spent an entire year writing up the plotline for it, and those notes are 100,000 words long, the length of a novel themselves! That was my cue that I was taking on a project I wasn't quite ready for, so I shelved it to do Pax Morgana. But Septimus was always in the back of my mind distracting me, so I thought I'd do it as an RPG and at least clear out that part of my brain. It didn't quite work out that way, as we all know.

Because I am a glutton for punishment, I am taking the month of November off from Pax Morgana and will participate in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo.org), a contest where folks try to write an entire 50,000 word novel in the space of a month. You can conceptualize and write notes, but no actual manuscript writing may begin until Nov. 1. All writing stops at the end of the month. You don't win anything except bragging rights, but I've been dying to do it. The idea I have is basically a mash-up of an action story and office satire. The hero is a corporate assassin who must return to the office after blitzing a bunch of guys to answer his e-mail and fill out budget sheets and the like. It's like if James Bond worked for Wernham Hogg. (Or for your American readers, if Jason Bourne worked for Dunder Mifflin) If you go about the NaNoWriMo forums during November, however, you'll surely see me chatting it up there.

At some point, a friend of mine and I will buckle down and properly develop a role-playing website we have in mind. Basically, it's a web forum, but the whole thing is put forth as a kind of fictional setting, and

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folks are expected to post there in character, either about their take on the setting, or to talk about the wider world, but to do so from the viewpoint of a person living in this fictional world we have created. I have seen things like this before, and I'm not sure how well it will work, but I think it will be fun to develop. It is called Zarabar, but if you got to www.zarabar.com, you're not likely to find much at the moment.

What game, system or setting, is your favourite? What games that are out there at the moment float your boat?

I just finished up a PbeM AD&D campaign that lasted for more than three years. A lot of folks like to knock that old system for all of its strange rules and inconsistencies, but in many ways, that is a very workable system that delivers some very fun play. I am still quite fond of it. It breaks down quite horribly at high levels, however. Once a character gets much past 18th level, the whole system flies off the rails.

I am currently a big fan of the Pathfinder game and its various source material. I must say, however, that while I have bought a bunch of d20 books, I have never actually played a d20 game. It looks like a fine system, I just have never knuckled down to playing it through. Instead, I like mining the vast array of products for it for ideas to use in my own games. To that end, I have gotten a lot of fun out of the various World of Warcraft books as well as Iron Heroes and Iron Kingdoms. IK is just a fantastic effort – I cannot praise it enough. I also like the various d20 Modern books I've bought. One of these days I'll mine them for a truly over-the-top post-apocalypse campaign.

I also dig Hollow Earth Expedition, Spirit of the Century, Castles & Crusades (there's that AD&D thing again) and Luke Crane's various work. (Burning Empires is my favorite of the bunch so far.) That's about it for currently published games, though. I still have a great love for Classic Traveller.

The news back in March that Septimus, the D6 System game you had written for West End Games, had been cancelled was a blow to those of us who had been waiting eagerly for its release, no doubt even more so for you. Can you tell us anything about what happened, and how you felt when you learned that the game wasn't going to be released?

When I signed with West End Games, I was guaranteed that Septimus would be published within a certain window of time. Initially, Eric pushed me to finish the game quickly so it could be sold at that year's Gen Con. I missed that deadline, which was bad because the product was both rushed and too late to publish immediately, so Eric hung on to it while getting an editor for it. The manuscript was edited and then… nothing. A short version had been put put earlier for free RPG day, but after that everything went quiet. When we got to about 6 months outside of the publishing window, I had a feeling Eric was never going to be able to publish it, so I exercised my right to terminate the contract. I figured at that point better to retain the rights to the project than to let it get tied up in WEG's fate if the company went under. It looks like I made the right decision.

> *"When we got to about 6 months outside of the publishing window, I had a feeling Eric was never going to be able to publish it…"*

As for how I felt about it, I bear Eric no ill will. He is a nice guy who just wants to put out fun RPGs, and you can't fault him for that. I don't know what's going on with the lack of refund checks to those who have pre-ordered Septimus, but I strongly suspect this is all a matter of mismanagement and bad communication rather than intentional wrongdoing. Some folks have really raked Eric over the coals over this, and I am not entirely sure it has been merited. But, ultimately, it's the sort of thing I'm trying to distance myself from. I still feel badly for the fans who paid money to receive nothing so far.

What's happening with Septimus now? Will we ever see it?

Definitely, you will see…something. I would very much like to put the game out for free, at least to those who pre-paid for it. Those guys are top shelf for supporting the game so early on, and I'd like to make sure they have something for their efforts. I wrote Septimus for the D6 engine because I like that engine and because, frankly, it was the only other set of rules I felt I knew well enough to write for. As I get older, I am not keen on learning new rules, which is why I've dragged my feet on completing a new version of Septimus. I looked at FUDGE quite a bit, because I am fond of it, and when I got turned onto FATE, that seemed a great way to go. Fred Hicks at Evil Hat gave me some very nice encouragement in that regard, so if the game is published with a ruleset, that will be the one, I think.

However, I am increasingly thinking of just putting the thing out as a system reference document without any sort of rules other than a basic role-playing compact found in online, freeform role-playing forums. Playing AD&D by e-mail was a hugely liberating experience for me. That game is very rules-driven, yet in our campaign I never showed my players the rules. They never rolled anything. I handled all of that and let the game be a purely narrative and dramatic experience. The game felt like AD&D, but for them, it was pure role-playing, and it really worked. The dirty secret of the game is that many times I just chucked the rules entirely and did whatever worked best to advance the naturally occurring drama of the adventure. That got me to thinking whether you really need the kinds of rules we expect out of most traditional tabletop RPGs. Or rather, whether I am interested in developing such rules. Increasingly, I feel that I am not, which is why I am leaning strongly to writing Septimus in a

freeform format. I think that will turn off a lot of gamers, but the truth is, I have always written games according to how I liked to play, and now, I'm really getting a lot of fun out of playing without a net, so to speak.

You've no doubt mixed with other great names in the roleplaying community – do you have any stories or anecdotes to share? Any horror stories? Be as frank as you like!

Well, my public rants toward Kevin Siembieda are well known, and I hope that my public apologies for them after the fact will eventually become as well known. To that end, Kevin, if you are reading this, I apologize for those things I said. It was hugely unprofessional of me and you deserved better, especially after the many kindnesses and generosities you and Maryann showed Alli and myself on so many occasions. I wish Kevin and Palladium the very best. I really do. I keep hoping one day Kevin and I can correspond again, but I would not hold it against Kevin if he never wanted to hear from me again.

Nowadays, my circle of compadres is pretty small, really. I keep in touch with two ex-Palladium freelancers who have struck out on their own, Jason Vey and Steve Trustrum. Both are great guys who are always working on some really cool projects. Jason just released an awesome redo of OD&D called Spellcraft and Swordplay, which I strongly encourage folks to buy. Steve is working Misfit Studios and always has a few irons in the fire. Check his crew out, too.

As far as war stories, I don't have many to share because I don't have many to tell. Most of my contact with folks in the industry has been positive (especially where fans are concerned). I have seen a few acts of arrogance on the part of writers and publishers to their fans at conventions, though, and this boggles me. There can be no higher compliment from a fan who buys your work, reads it and then internalises it enough to make it part of his own personal imaginary landscape. That's the difference between RPGS and novels, that level of interactivity. With RPGS the fans become much more invested in the work, so the fandom can run very deep. When writers and publishers scoff at that fandom, it gets me mad. I once saw an RPG writer wearing a "No, I don't want to hear about your character" t-shirt. What an utterly boorish thing to do. I mean, really. These are the people underwriting your career. They deserve respect, and we ought to show it to them.

If I can tell one personal story, it would have to be the time I attended a conference in Rochester, New York. It was right after a book of mine came out, and Palladium paid me for it at the conference, along with a nice bonus, too. A female fan of mine had gone all the way to the con just to hit on me all weekend (despite the fact that my wife Alli was right beside me). And at the con, when I introduced myself to a fan, he responded, wide-eyed, "You're *the* Bill Coffin?" Later that weekend, I spoke on a panel about working in the RPG industry. One of my panelists immediately started off by trying to deflate the romance of the industry by saying that if you wanted to write RPGs for money, women and fame, you were going to be sorely disappointed. I thought on that for a moment. Money, check. Women, check. Fame, check. I couldn't speak for anyone else, but the whole RPG thing was working out alright for me. That was a pretty funny moment.

> *"…I introduced myself to a fan, he responded, wide-eyed, "You're* the *Bill Coffin?"*

The tabletop roleplaying hobby has been through a lot changes over the years and it seems that its death-knell is always sounded when newer hobbies come along, such as collectible card games and online computer games. It still seems to be able to hold it's own, though – what do you see happening to the hobby in the future? What changes, if any, do you think will have to be made to ensure its survival?

Wow. That's a great question. I must admit, I never got into the card game craze, but I am currently a big World of Warcraft player (Skhurge, 70 Warrior, Ner'Zhul), so I completely see the appeal of online RPGs. I can also see why they pose such a serious challenge to the tabletop RPG hobby. If you're mainly into playing a game that enables you to kill monsters and take their stuff while also interacting with your friends, you can do that quite well through something like Warcraft. In fact, Warcraft is so well designed that you can play like that very intensely for months on end before you really begin to hit the limitations of the game, and even then, there are other things you can do in it. It used to be that this sort of gameplay was the exclusive province of tabletop RPGs. It is not anymore. But more than that, the automation of games like Warcraft make the monster-killing and questing aspects of fantasy role-play a much more passive activity. When you're playing at the tabletop, it takes real effort to bring a game together. Not so when you're tapping away on your computer all night long. (Believe me, I speak from experience.) So here's the problem the tabletop hobby faces: a lot of gamers are just looking for lazy entertainment. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but if you don't feel like putting forth any real mental effort, then you're going to gravitate to online computer RPGs rather than tabletop games. It's the same reason why the viewership for any given season of American Idol is probably greater than the total attendance of the Metropolitan Opera over the last 20 years. One requires effort; the other, not so much.

That said, I do not think that the tabletop hobby will ever die. There is a clear audience for the high-end, high-level, high-intelligence entertainment that tabletop role-playing provides. The activity on sites like RPG.net and the Forge are clear indicators of that. But I think it is also clear that the hobby's glory days of the 1980s are long gone. The hobby has settled into a deep niche, and I don't see much reason why it might ever emerge from it. I mean, you have to consider the cultural phenomenon that was Dungeons & Dragons (and by extension, all other role-playing games) back during the early 1980s. It was this weird new way for kids to entertain themselves. And like any other popular new medium, it scared adults in power, which is why the Patricia Pullings of the world campaigned so hard against it. Radio got the same flak, as did television and video games. It's the hazing any new kind of popular entertainment medium must undergo before it can settle into its rightful place within popular culture. But I digress. The reason why D&D scared people was because it was so freaking popular; that's the real point. The game was part of a national discussion. Every kid in America was either playing it, knew somebody who was playing it, was prohibited by their parents from playing it, or knew somebody who fell into one of those three previous categories. For crying out loud, Steven Spielberg even referenced it in E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, which goes to show you just what kind of cultural touchstone D&D and role-playing was to popular culture in the 1980s.

> *"…it scared adults in power, which is why the Patricia Pullings of the world campaigned so hard against it."*

We are not there anymore, not as a hobby and not as an industry. We will never get there again, not even if some crazed D&D player dressed as a Elf and shot John McCain with a crossbow. Any why not? Because popular culture fundamentally understands what role-playing is, who it appeals to and what its purpose is. It is not scary anymore, it is not unknown anymore. And frankly, it only appeals to a relatively narrow audience of people willing to pay what RPG books cost and go through the considerable effort it often takes to assemble a group to play

and to meet often enough to get a campaign off the ground. Like I said, this hobby requires effort, and most folks simply don't want to go through with it.

Now, don't get me wrong – D&D is still a huge game and you can find copies of it in many major bookstore, along with a bunch of other RPGs. Role-playing is much more mainstream than it was when it first got started. But I don't think you're getting the broad cross-section of people trying it out because there is a curiosity or a novelty to it. It's become the province of heavily invested hobbyists, who just happen to be numerous enough to justify selling D&D in Borders. I could be wrong here – I hope I am, in fact – but I just don't see a huge number of people entering the hobby. I see a lot of people who grew up with D&D as kids who are now gaming adults and can afford to drop $50 at the gaming store if they want, and that retention is great. But I'm not seeing a heck of a lot of new blood enter the hobby. Not any more than the attrition it experiences, anyway. So I think we're in a state of the hobby dwelling within its niche and realizing its limitations of audience.

So here is the big question… is this a bad thing? I suppose it is if you're trying to make money off of all this. But if you are a gamer, this is a really good time. I think the quality of products available to the modern role-player is well above what has ever been before. I go into my local game shop and I am dazzled by the choices before me. And many of these games are really, really good. The level of thought that goes into game and world design is light years beyond what I grew up with during the hobby's high point in popularity. I think that is what is most interesting about the hobby – its mainstream popularity and the quality of its products do not seem to feed directly into each other as much as one might assume. Curious, that.

I've kind of talked myself into a circle here, so let me try to sum things up. I think the hobby is hitting a state of equilibrium. It's small, but I doubt it'll get much smaller, or much bigger, either. It's filled with dedicated hobbyists who have the benefit of some of the best games ever designed before them right now. It's a great time to be a gamer, even if it's probably harder than ever before to actually find people to game with over a tabletop. If you're like me and have dedicated yourself to playing traditional RPGs by e-mail, then this really is a terrific time.

One more thing: the RPG industry could collapse entirely and it would not kill the RPG hobby. That is an important thing to remember. The industry sells gamers on the notion that games need to be constantly updated to be viable, which is a load of hooey. There are tons of "dead" game lines that are as playable and as enjoyable as the day they were first printed. Just because they stopped putting out supplements for Anthrophage: the Digesting or they came out with a second, third, fourth or fifth edition of Mushushusth Comes to Dinner doesn't mean that any of those older games have somehow been disqualified from use. I have an entire library of old games that are still current to me, and I hope that my fellow gamers do not lose sight of that.

What are your plans for the future? Are there any more Bill Coffin works of genius in the pipeline we should know about?

About a year back I started learning how to play the piano. I do not practice nearly enough to be any good, but I have these dreams of eventually getting good enough with it to start composing music. I have already written a few songs over the years and currently have a theme for Septimus already done (I'll see if I can find the MP3 of it for you). Not that any of it is any good, but it is awfully fun to do. Composing is something I'd probably get into quite deeply if I was not so interested in writing. You know that saying that all actors want to be rock stars and all rock stars want to be actors? I don't know if the same is true of writers and music, but it certainly is with me.

> *"I think the quality of products available to the modern role-player is well above what has ever been before."*

Bill – thanks for your time. We wish you all the best.

No problem at all, Jon. This was a pleasure. For anybody reading, if they have any questions, please feel free to contact me at bill.coffin@gmail.com. All the best!

WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON, ANYWAY?

What makes Gamesmasters act the way they do? Jonathan Hicks would like to know, but he can't be bothered to get involved with all that psychological rubbish. Let's have a look at some of the more common styles of refereeing instead. It's much more fun.

Gamesmasters. The very words are enough to strike the fear of the gods into the heart of even the hardiest roleplayer. Why? Well, why do you think? The Gamesmaster (GM) is the one person with the power to allow your well-cultivated character to live- or die.

It's ultimate power. It's the ability to spend a few hours with total control over your group of friends. Nothing compares to the feeling of having all the PC's by the proverbials.

But that's not entirely true, is it? Other than being a dining table god, the GM also has a major responsibility to the players. The GM has to supply an evening's play that the players will enjoy, and if the job is done well they come back for more. But that doesn't stop a few GM's from abusing their power every now and then. So what do you look out for? What are the traits that make the power hungry megalomaniacs stick out?

If you're new to roleplaying, then you may find the next few examples interesting. It may give you an idea of who to avoid. If you're not so new to it all, then there may be a few descriptions you recognise...

The SMARMY GIT GM

GM: Right, you've broken into the warehouse, and as far as you can tell the alarms haven't gone off.
PLAYER 1: I'll sneak to the crates in the corner.
PLAYER 2: I'll cover him.
GM: As you sneak across, you hit a tripwire and a laser hits you in the back, doing damage... (The GM rolls dice secretly behind his screen. As the numbers come up, a slow smile spreads across his face and he slowly looks up at the player. His eyes are twinkling.) Boy, that's gonna hurt. That's gonna hurt real bad.
PLAYER 1: How much damage did I take?
GM: (Shaking his head and pursing his lips.) Oooh, painful.
PLAYER 1: (Getting exasperated.) How much damage have I taken?!?
GM: Oh, do I pity you... etc.

Oh, it makes you mad. Fair enough, the player may have made a mistake or an error in judgement, but there is no reason to lay it on so thick. The Smarmy Git GM will almost sneer at the player as the misfortune piles up, or they'll make the odd comment, such as 'I wouldn't have done that'. Well, of course you wouldn't have done that,

you wrote the bloody scenario! Needless to say, this kind of GM doesn't hang on to players long. It's fair enough the villains of the game laughing in the PC's face when something goes wrong, but when you get the impression that the GM is getting some sort of sardonic pleasure out of your misfortune... well, would you stay in his games?

The BLAND GM

GM: You walk out of the starport.
PLAYER 1: What do I see?
GM: The street. Some people.
PLAYER 1: Anything else?
GM: Yeah, some speeders.
PLAYER 1: Any taxis?
GM: Not that you can see.
PLAYER 2: Any chance of a little enthusiasm, GM?
(The GM shrugs.)

You kind of get the impression that they don't really want to be there. The Bland GM talks in monosyllables, doesn't inject enough energy or description in his GM'ing. In short, they're boring. How can you get that sense of being somewhere when every location is as dull as the last? Games don't last long if the player's imaginations aren't sparked enough for them to visualise their surroundings, or get a sense of individuality from the NPC's. The name of the game is entertainment, after all.

The OVER-THE-TOP GM

GM: The mist swirls around your ankles as you approach the dark building. The trees loom over oppressively, the branches clawing at the sky. As the building comes into view, you see that the metal walls are gnarled, twisting like some architect's nightmare, the sides forming and reforming, as the glass roof appears to oscillate with dark and bright colours. The windows are warped, casting bent reflections across the glade. The mist appears to be pouring from the single exhaust pipe the building possesses, flowing from it like something alive, covering everything around with moisture from it's damp touch. The ground underfoot... etc.
(The players rap their fingers on the table and look at their watches.)

On the other side of the coin there's the Over-The-Top GM. In an almost direct contrast to the Bland ref., the OTT GM can go off on a descriptive tangent about a location, a character, and an object. Although it's good that whatever the PC's are looking at is well described, there is such a thing as overdoing it, and the OTT GM is probably doing the game more to show off his narrative skills than to actually get anywhere. Well designed and described places only work when your players are able to interact with them without having ten pages of prose jammed down their throats every few minutes.

The COMPETITIVE GM

GM: You turn the corner and you see four guards lounging around the door to the hangar, but they have their blasters out. What are you going to do?
PLAYER 1: I'll throw my grenade and hit the deck.
PLAYER 2: I'll take cover in a door alcove and open up on the first one.
GM: Right. Initiative rolls... good. They get the drop on you. They're very good shots. They fire... two hit you, the other one hits you...
PLAYER 1: Hang on; I thought you said they were lounging around. Don't we get surprise?
GM: No, they're professionals, and you'd better deduct some hit points.

PLAYER 2: Crap.

It's not a game; it's a competition to see if the players can beat the scenario he's designed for them. At least, that's the way the Competitive GM sees it. Roleplaying is not a form of entertainment, it's a set of rules designed to pit players against a GM's creations. If the players don't complete the goal set out for them, they've lost. Hmm. Now, I'm sure I've read somewhere that there are no winners or losers in a roleplaying game, and that the whole group is there for an evening's entertainment and to participate in a game where everyone can have fun. From what I can gather, the GM is supposed to supply stimulating stories for the players to get their teeth into. Oh, that's where I've read it. It's included in every roleplaying game ever written.

The RULES LAWYER GM

GM: So, what was it you wanted to do again?

PLAYER 2: I want to pull my blade whilst grabbing the rope and leaping off the building. If I've judged the length of the rope right, I should swing in through the window and right on top Baron DeGungey.

GM: So you want to draw your blade (flips through pages of rulebook and looks up penalties for drawing a weapon), leap off the building with the rope (looks up difficulty ratings for using a rope in the rulebook companion volume), aim for the window (flips through pages of another supplement for the strength of glass against a swinging human body), and land on Baron DeGungey (consults the book for stats and then quickly noses through the grappling rules in the rulebook). Right, roll for your leap.

PLAYER 2: (Looking at her watch) Actually, I've got to go now.

Nothing is more frustrating than waiting for a ruling from the GM whilst he ploughs through tomes of rules to locate the adjustments for your roll, or to try and find a rule that covers your action. The rules of a particular game should be treated as guidelines because trying to find a reference to every player action takes up too much time. It's also impossible to allow for every idea a player has, but does that stop the Rules Lawyer GM? Oh, no. He'll spend the time looking for that particular rule that decides on the outcome. Even if the rule isn't included in the book, there are several supplements to choose from, no doubt. And even then, the rules will have to be interpreted from an amalgamation of several different rules if the rule isn't there... see what I mean? This is the exact way to stunt a game. GM's should be able to make rulings on the spot, not ruin the pace of a game with their noses in books.

The EGO-TRIP GM

GM: The door to the starship swings open.

PLAYER 1: What do we see?

GM: The figure that strides confidently down the ramp is dressed in dark armour, giving an evil look. The gun slung over one shoulder is huge and powerful. Yeah, this one looks as though he can handle a fight. Mean and moody, with a touch of danger, that's what you can sense.

PLAYER 2: I don't suppose this is your old PC from last year's campaign, is it, GM?

GM: Errr...

Let's skip this one quick, because it is one of the most annoying. The ego-trip GM will bring a powerful NPC into the game, maybe even his old character from an old campaign, and will run it

as one of the group, saving the day and rolling high. And why? Well, this GM gets a sense of pleasure from showing up the party with a character that fits all his ideas of a good PC. You have to ask the question- whose pleasure is the game being played for?

The FAVOURITISM GM

GM: The hatchway looks unlocked, and you know for a fact that the computer centre is down there.
PLAYER 1: I'll make my down through the hatch.
PLAYER 2: I'll draw my pistol and get my flashlight out.
GM: (Ignoring player 1) You pull your gun and descend through the hatch.
PLAYER 1: I thought I was going first.
PLAYER 2: I'll check the floor for booby traps and sensors with my infrared.
PLAYER 1: I'll head over to the computer bank.
GM: There doesn't seem to be any traps or alarm systems, but your eyes do detect a heat trace in the corner.
PLAYER 1: Hello, GM? What about me?

This kind of GM is not too common and good job too. The Favouritism GM will pretty much give most attention to the player whose character he likes the most, or to the character whose player he gets on with better. Players have gone to a lot of trouble to turn up for a few hours of gaming, so can you imagine their frustration at being dealt with for a few seconds every few minutes? The ignored players are the ones that don't return to a game because they don't like the thought of sitting around while other players hog the game. I mean, it's alright for the GM; he'll constantly have a hand in the game. It's not much fun watching others have a better time.

See any you recognise? See any you would avoid at all costs? Do you see any you can relate to as a GM? The examples are nothing but surface observations. It would be way too difficult to postulate on why the GM does certain things in certain ways to certain characters or players. Not only would it relate to how the GM's mind works, but it would also have links to the relationship between GM and player. Once again, the diversity of the roleplaying hobby has bred different views on how a game should be run, but all games should have a common factor - that it should be entertaining to both players and GM's to further the enjoyment of participation and the growth of a healthy campaign. Fair enough, the examples may make you point your finger at your GM and shout, 'That's you, that is!' Just think about the similarities between the script and paragraph and your own games for a moment. Do you think what the GM is doing will ruin the game? Will it stunt the growth of the campaign? If the worst comes to the worst, will it cause animosity between friends? Maybe, as a player, you are used to that kind of GM'ing, and may actually enjoy the way the games are being run.

The examples can be used for three things- as a reference for new players, so they can think about what kind of GM they want to game with, or avoid. For experienced players, so they can be aware of problems in their game. And most of all the GM, who can look at the example and question himself... am I like that? What will happen to my sessions if I don't correct the problem?
It's also a bit of a laugh, so players can point the finger at the GM and say, 'that's you, that is!'

Advertisment

6 Tips For Creating Aliens For Sci-Fi Games

Aliens. When you think of these you immediately think of two things - Star Trek-type rubber faces, or movie-type dark killing machines. But the ecology and personality of aliens are as diverse as the worlds they herald from. Here are a few pointers on how to give your aliens a little more depth than having them look like a man with pointed ears saying 'what is this human emotion called love?'

Appearance

For ease of use, many aliens have a humanoid form, which is handy in the great scheme of things. You don't have to worry how they'll interact with the technology and setting.

But they don't have to be like that. Environment and location dictate the appearance of a living being, not the make-up artist.

Take a few examples from our own world. In the deserts of the equator, creatures have developed a metabolism and appearance that protect them from the searing sun. In the depths of the ocean, fish have developed a physique that helps them glide through the water and breathe its limited oxygen. Birds have developed their form and abilities to exist in the most inaccessible places of the world. Even the human race walks on two legs, which reflects their origins in the tall grasses of the African plains. The world the alien heralds from should reflect their physique.

So, for example, let's say that the planet is a desert world with very few locations where there is water. A single great ocean surrounds the planet's equator like a belt. The aliens would have built their civilisation about this water. Physically, they may be insectoid, with huge carapaces that bend over their heads to protect them from the searing sun. They may be long-legged for ease of moving over the dunes, and have large sack-like growths on their backs to store water, like a camel. Their eyes have multiple eyelids to protect from the UV glare, and they have tendrils over their mouths and nose to protect them from the sand storms. Alternatively, the aliens could be lizards, piscine, bird-like, or invertebrates. They could even be huge gas- filled floating jellyfish!

So, there's the first phase of the creation process: *Environment equals physical appearance.*

Communication

In many respects, people think that to reflect an alien language the aliens just speak differently, as different as English from Japanese, or Russian from Spanish. But this does not need to be the case.

Many creatures on this earth communicate in different ways. Insects use both touch and scent, mammals use growls and calls (like dolphins), birds use a variety of whistles and hoots. Some creatures even use colour to communicate their intentions.

So this could translate into the alien world. How about if the aliens didn't

communicate through speech but through a series of clicks and whistles at different pitches. Or they communicate through sign language. They could even be telepathic. This will make them exceptionally different.

This works well on different levels. If the players encounter them for the first time, talking will be difficult, and will make for an excellent roleplaying opportunity.

Environment

As mentioned before, the world the alien heralds from may dictate their appearance, but how will that affect their interaction with other species? Perhaps the alien needs to be segregated from other species and kept in a room where the atmosphere and pressure suits their biological makeup. Perhaps they have to wear environment suits to traverse other places. Perhaps they simply need a face mask so that they get a quota of gases that can only be found on their own world.

Aliens that walk, talk, and interact normally in any environment are just men with strange appearances. Limiting, or even increasing, their abilities and function due to their biology adds an extra dimension.

Intelligence

Not all aliens have to be a race of super-beings, far beyond the capabilities of the human race. They also don't have to be evil two-dimensional killing machines either.

Intelligence has a large bearing on the function of the alien. A creature of bestial intelligence cannot be considered evil, it is simply doing what it must do to survive or procreate. So, when you land on that planet and a

bunch of razor-sharp ripperlizards come bounding out of the purple trees, they don't want to kill you because they're evil, but because it is in their nature to do so.

It's a simple matter of discerning two things: their diet and their timidity. A vegetarian creature of a timid nature will not be much of a threat to the PCs, but then a vegetarian with an aggressive nature might be. The same goes for meat-eaters.

Intelligence in an alien should not dictate their attitude and feelings towards outsiders. Higher intelligence does not necessarily mean infallibility or greater moral standing. The aliens will have several different levels of intelligence, ranging from the neanderthal to the super- brain, but this doesn't reflect their morals.

Take the Roman Empire, for example. They were the most civilised, artistic, and prolific race of the time in the ancient world. Their Empire is the basis of modern society. Their mathematics and architecture outshone their neighbours yet they still thought it perfectly acceptable to watch men slaughtering each other in an arena. And they found nothing wrong with it. Because they were greater and (allegedly) smarter, they thought this allowed them to do such things.

Intelligence will also affect communication with other species. Lesser intelligent aliens would have little to share or offer, whereas higher intelligence species may have plenty to talk about and discuss. Where species connect on an intellectual level may help determine the outcome of relations.

Morals And Attitude

Talking of morals, this is something that will make the alien far different from other species. They may see violence and death as a natural order and actively seek out species to kill. They may decide that all other species are greater than them and worship them as gods, or that other species are lesser beings and need to be exterminated. As far as the alien is concerned, their morals and attitudes regarding themselves, existence, and other species is completely justified. It is not just the views of individual aliens you must take into account, but the entire continent or world.

So, the aliens may revere life, or hate it, or are indifferent about it. They may have religious overtones or a completely different theory on evolution to suit their existence. Although there is always room for a little variance on the individual aliens, the broader belief system or attitude must be considered as a basic layout for the personality.

Technology

What are the aliens capable of with the knowledge and intelligence that they have? Do they exist in a permanent middle-age society or have they unlocked the secret to interstellar travel? When encountering new races, the PCs will be confronted by not only

the sheer difference of an alien but also what help or hindrance they present. If they land on a medieval world and are treated as the enemy, then they won't be under much threat from bows and arrows as they take off in their starship.

Alternatively, if the aliens have nuclear power then getting whacked by a missile may cause more than a few problems.

Technology need not be limited to the physical boundaries of our own world. The technology of the aliens may be quite, quite different. What if they grew their technology, flew the spacelanes in huge creatures bred for spaceflight? They may even want to use the PCs as raw material! If the aliens have a greater technology to our own, they could be a great help to the future of mankind or possibly a great threat. If they have lesser technology than ours then perhaps mankind could help them grow and increase in ability, or perhaps not...

On a personal note, when I began sci-fi roleplaying I developed something that I called the *'Theory of Mirrored Evolution'* that helped me through my first games. I didn't have to worry about the ecology of the aliens. I just assumed that because the Earth was created due to a galactic chance from the same star stuff that other suns are made of, then why couldn't the other worlds be similar to our own, with differences noticeable enough to make them alien? It was a simple matter then to utilise humanoids with different features and attitudes. This took the work out of alien design so that I could concentrate on the game and get used to the setting. Nowadays, I use the above guidelines and the games have more depth because of it.