

Wolfe physics

The Urth list — 7 messages, 6 voices, 19 Aug 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4172>

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William Ansley — 19 Aug 2003, 03:10

At 8:05 PM -0500 8/18/03, Michael Buice wrote:

On Monday, August 18, 2003, at 07:38 PM, Alice K. Turner wrote:

No, you haven't. It's just a consequence of GW's having tried to cobble several sf traditions together that sensibly shouldn't be cobbled. NS not only has FTL effects, but the ship, through some post-Einsteinian doodah that makes my head spin can get there before it started. LS has traditional (in sf) generational travel, and seems pretty well thought out. SS has instantaneous magic flights to other planets that hark back to Burroughs. What's not to be confused about? Sometimes I think you guys spend a lot more time than the author did trying to make sense of all this.

IMHO, Wolfe "cobbled" rather well. One of the many things I appreciate about Gene Wolfe's writing is the way he deals with science. Since none of the major "authors" in the Sun universe are scientists themselves, we're to expect some confusion in the relation of the deeper workings of things. I've always been impressed with how realistic most of it seems, having been filtered through the "lay-brains" of Severian, Horn, etc. Ever read a "popular" book on Quantum Mechanics? I've yet to see one get it right. I've NEVER seen any science fiction in which it's down right (that is, when people try to dig deeper than Severian ever does).

Michael Buice,

I'm with you on this one. IMO the seams really show where Wolfe tried to sew the New and Long/Short Suns together. And I'm not really sure what the fact that Gene Wolfe is very good at presenting science from the point of view of a non-scientist has to do with his trying to combine too many disparate elements together, which I think he did, especially in Short Sun.

(BTW, did you really mean to put the H in your IMHO? <g> I'm sure you didn't mean to imply that you and only you have the absolute grasp of physics necessary to judge if it is used properly in popular science writing and SF, but you came across that way in your last two posts. rather.)

William Ansley

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Michael Buice — 19 Aug 2003, 03:57 · follows William Ansley

On Monday, August 18, 2003, at 10:10 PM, William Ansley wrote:

(BTW, did you really mean to put the H in your IMHO? <g> I'm sure you didn't mean to imply that you and only you have the absolute grasp of physics necessary to judge if it is used properly in popular science writing and SF, but you came across that way in your last two posts. rather.)

Sorry about that; to me the 'H' has always seems more or less self-mocking, displaying an awareness that the speaker is as much of a buffoon as the next person. I do have strong opinions about how science is both delivered to and perceived by the public but I did not intend to present an insistence that all must without question accept my opinion as truth. I Humbly apologize for any offense.

I'm with alga on this one. IMO the seams really show where Wolfe tried to sew the New and Long/Short Suns together. And I'm not really sure what the fact that Gene Wolfe is very good at presenting science from the point of view of a non-scientist has to do with his trying to combine too many disparate elements together, which I think he did, especially in Short Sun.

I may have lost the thread of the conversation, but I thought the discussion of inconsistencies stemmed from the 'One Ship' discussion which had been (to me) well-argued out of existence. The trouble under discussion seemed to be the whole generation starship/FTL idea and which type the Whorl could have been based on the available technologies, etc. Perhaps I'm the one whose sloppily sewing together disparate threads. :)

Perhaps we could continue in manner more useful to all thusly:

What specific instances in the Sun books do people see as being inconsistent as far as science and technology are concerned, in particular with respect to differences between the major works?

Michael

James Wynn — 19 Aug 2003, 04:41 · follows Michael Buice

William Ansley said:

I'm with alga on this one. IMO the seams really show where Wolfe tried to sew the New and Long/Short Suns together. And I'm not really sure what the fact that Gene Wolfe is very good at presenting science from the point of view of a non-scientist has to do with his trying to combine too many disparate elements together, which I think he did, especially in Short Sun.

Crush disagrees (he thinks):

Two things:

ONE - I'm not sure the seams show between the NS and LS/SS or anywhere else because I'm still not certain (nor do I think anyone else is) what kind of garments he is intending or who he had in mind to wear it. With Tailor Wolfe, it can be hard to tell a seam from a cuff. To change analogies, Wolfe's writing is so plot-oriented (the characters' behavior seem so precisely blocked), yet Wolfe has so much of the narrative taking place behind the scenery (whether we are talking about NS, LS, SS, Peace, Pandora, or The Fifth Head). I simply cannot imagine what audience Wolfe could have in mind when he is writing? "Look, the architect carved a little flourish behind these baseboards! Wait! That no flourish, that looks like a supporting beam!"

TWO - I think Wolfe's ease with a having a generation ship share the universe with a "post-Einsteinian" monstrosity like Tzadkiel is exemplary of Wolfe adeptness at World-building. He has criticized works that have a single culture on an entire planet (ala Star Trek); well, how realistic is it suppose that the existence of a FTL ship would render generation ships obsolete? Even a single one? That would be like saying that after the invention of the jet airliner, no one on the same planet would ever think or regularly moving freight by train, let alone horse and cart. But neither of these conveyances are on the verge of being eliminated.

I'm not sure this argument really even applies since Tz. moves in and out of Time and Space -- sharing the universe with an Urth before Europe discovered America, let alone Typhon's Urth.

-- Crush

Chris — 19 Aug 2003, 05:47 · follows James Wynn

I don't think that's the important point in the generation vs. FTL argument. I think a more accurate analogy might be that while the existence of jet airplanes do not preclude the existence of triplanes on the same planet, you are extremely unlikely to find a jet triplane.

In any event there is very little reason in my mind to equate Tzadkiel's ship to the Whorl, or even to posit any relationship between the two. Putting an argument together against the possibility seems unnecessary, but an ample number of them have been supplied.

-- Civet

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-- Crush

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matthew.malthouse — 19 Aug 2003, 08:29 · follows Chris

On 19/08/2003 04:57:13 Michael Buice wrote:
What specific instances in the Sun books do people see as being inconsistent as far as science and technology are concerned, in particular with respect to differences between the major works?

Typhon launching a slow-boat colony seems at odds with his intention of regaining his empire stated when Severian-as-Conciliator meets him.

Given that I'd always had the impression that this was a stellar empire, not just a solar one (which may of course be mistaken), the disparity in required technology jars. It also disrupts motive, but that wasn't your question.

Matthew

William Ansley — 19 Aug 2003, 13:29 · follows matthew.malthouse

At 10:57 PM -0500 8/18/03, Michael Buice wrote:
Sorry about that; to me the 'H' has always seems more or less self-mocking, displaying an awareness that the speaker is as much of a buffoon as the next person. I do have strong opinions about how science is both delivered to and perceived by the public but I did not intend to present an insistence that all must without question accept my opinion as truth.
I Humbly apologize for any offense.

No offence was taken, by me at any rate.

You seemed to me to be bragging enough about your knowledge of physics that the "Humble" in "In My Humble Opinion" seemed a tad ironic, so I couldn't resist twitting you on it.

But I should have resisted. It really amounted to nothing more than a cheap shot and I apologize, especially as I know from personal experience how tough graduate programs in the sciences (or I am sure in any field) are.

As for the rest of your message, that will have to wait for later.

William Ansley

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James Jordan — 19 Aug 2003, 16:16 · follows William Ansley

If Whorl was intended to make a sleau circuit and return to a post-Flood Urth/Ushas, that would provide an explanation for its slow speed in a culture that had FTL capability, no?
Assuming Wolfe IS consistent, then this might be another line of evidence for the circuit theory.

Nutria