

Wolfe RPGs

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 28 May 1997

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Joel Priddy — 28 May 1997, 14:18

So I was looking at the web page for the New Sun GURPS game, and am very curious as to how it's going. I admit that my first reaction was horror that anyone would even make the attempt. Then I saw that our very own mantis was at the wheel.

Back in the old days, when the internet didn't have visuals and I was in school, a friend of mine and I were given a big chunk of server in order to run a virtual-community project. We were looking at MUSHes at one point, and briefly (very, very briefly) considered a New Sun themed MUSH. One reason we decided against it was that (and this may sound tired to any one who has read enough reviews of Wolfe over the years) the aspect that makes those books mesmerizing has more to do with the style and the atmosphere than the specific attributes of, say, an alzebo or a destrier. And since you can't quantify style, you won't be able to maintain it with all (or perhaps any) of the participants. And without the style to lay over New Sun, a MUSH based on it would look a lot like a MUSH based on Gamma World, or even Thundar the Barbarian. Of course, we didn't have nearly the understanding of the New Sun's environs that mantis has. A major part of that "atmosphere" we appreciated so much was a sense of wonder at all the opaque phrases and names. This is the level on which we (or at least I) was reading the New Sun on: given evocative but largely uncommunicative language, one's own imagination filled in all the details, creating a fantastic landscape that is also highly personal for each reader. (I was neck deep in communication theory at the time, so this idea of noncommunication in order to spark the audience's imagination really appealed to me, and perhaps I leapt too quickly to ascribe everything Wolfe was doing to the single explanation of "closure." Just as I now have to resist explaining everything away as Catholicism)

Later, as I read more about the New Sun books, I learned that in fact the language did represent specific ideas, that there was an idea behind each bizarrely-named creature or weapon or character. The term "destrier" isn't supposed to merely conjure up an exotic or alien war horse, but is a genetically-engineered animal with very detailed attributes. So maybe my reservations regarding the ability to diagram the Urth for RPG purposes were misplaced.

So, What I'm trying to get around to is: how's it going? Is the translation from novel to RPG working? Is the style, spirit and philosophy surviving the process? How many character points does it cost to wax melancholy any given moment?

-cephalothorax-

PS Now, while I considered New Sun an impossible task, the entire time I was reading Long Sun, almost from page one, I was translating it into GURPS format in my the back of my head. This is an old habit that I'm sure lots of people here can relate to.

m.driussi — 28 May 1997, 19:43 · follows Joel Priddy

Reply: Item #5008537 from URTH at LISTS.BEST.COM@INET#

cephalothorax,

Thank you for your interest in "GURPS Book of the New Sun"! As for how it is going as a project, the two easy answers are "slowly" and "please tell us: download the (second) draft, look over it, and send comments to SJGames and/or me."

Re: capturing the mood as key to the experience, I agree with you.

(Urth as a "Gamma World" variant is an especially astute call--bonus points for "Thundar the Barbarian." It is as if you are reading my mind!) If we look at how "Original D&D" was actually played (nevermind for the moment the issue of what was published and how it was presented, etc.), it is hard to believe that Jack Vance's THE DYING EARTH or Tolkien's TLOTR had any sort of influence. Or that =any= "classics" of fantasy fiction did. In fact, the chaotic ooze had no real parentage and, imho, is primarily responsible for computer arcade games like Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, and all their more "serious/blood thirsty" descendants <g>.

However, the RPG industry has been moving ever closer to issues of style =and= substance. "Recent" vampire-mania LARPs, where your local goths get out and literally "do it" out on the streets after dusk, show that "mood" and "context" are both valued commodities. Also the rise, however feeble, of "storytelling" games leads away from the elements appropriated by the computer arcade games.

And there has been a tradition of author-sanctioned games-based-on-fiction, too (as opposed to the r/i/p/o/f/f/ "homage" scenario first pioneered by the first edition of "Gods, Demigods, & Heroes" which "borrowed" material from the works of Moorcock and Lovecraft).

Having writ that, still--given the improbability of a "perfect" game, one cannot ensure that the players will play it in the perfect way. And likewise one can imagine people playing a quintessentially Vancean adventure from such an obviously flawed game as "Original D&D."

Chaosium's "Call of Cthulhu," an excellent rpg based upon fiction, is a good reference point: how can the referee create the suspense and chills of a Lovecraft story when the players have knowingly signed up for a Lovecraftian adventure? (How to keep the usual gaming clowning around from turning it into "Ghostbusters"?) With this kind of self-knowing, can a true "Lovecraft" story take place as an adventure, or will it be more like "Prohibition Era: X-Files"? (Granted, the characters =all= must die or go insane, preferably both.)

Re: "how many character points does it cost to wax melancholy?" LOL. In truth I've added a Fugue State mental disadvantage for those who have Severian-brand Eidetic Memory (tm), for those unpleasant times when you'd secretly rather be lost in memory (roll for hours) instead of dealing with the muck of the moment.

Finally, this anecdote: when Neil Gaiman heard about the project he said (words to this effect), "How neat--a game where everybody tries to figure out who his own mother is." <g>

=mantis=