P R I M E M A T E R I A L

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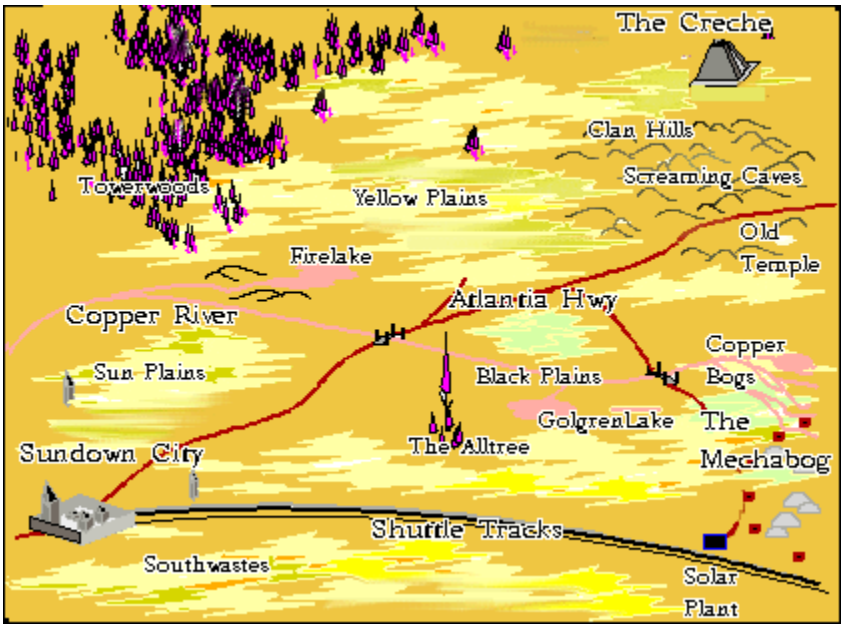

Exploring My Lost World: Czarlords of Venus

In 1994 I did freelance work as a BBS door programmer, designing and coding two games for Brass Brow Software, a company I started in Dallas/Fort Worth with my friend Mark Terrano.

Our $180 in sales was the first time either of us had been paid for game design – and my last. But Terrano went on to be the lead designer of Age of Empires II and founder of the computer game developer Hidden Path Entertainment.

For Brass Brow, I wrote Czarlords of Venus, a multi-user dungeon that took a fantasy game called Illusions and put a science fantasy setting on top of it.

The game was text-based and ran on eSoft BBS software, which could support several dozen users connecting simultaneously, making multi-user gaming possible. Players interacted with each other and NPCs, and by interacted I mostly mean killed.

Czarlords launched that year and was bought by a few large, multi-user BBSes right before the Web came along and drove them out of business.

Though it was a financial flop, I was more bummed that it didn't get played much. One BBS in the northeast kept it running for several years and I got a few emails from players there, but I was hoping for an opportunity to expand the setting in a feedback loop with avid players.

I still have the game's source code and the dBase database that held the setting. For the

project, I wrote around 23,500 words of descriptive text, primarily of places.

I'm thinking about reviving it as an RPG supplement.

This Brass Brow promo from that year provides details on the setting:

> Czarlords, a new scenario for Illusions in a science fantasy setting, is currently in beta testing on GW Associates BBS. To give you some idea of what it's about, here's a preview:
>
> Czarlords, set on the planet Venus in the far future, has 552 rooms, 175 monsters and NPCs, 111 items and two new gaming features: character aging and monsters that carry items.
>
> In the game, you can play several races: Trueblood, the remaining genetically pure humans who have established the colony of Sundown; Mutates, humans who have been changed by exposure to the planet; Basilor, snakelike humanoids who live inside a hivelike pyramid called the Creche; Ambots, sentient robots devoted to the extermination of other species; or Clansmen and Plainsmen, humans who live outside of Sundown.
>
> Occupations in the game: Warrior; Drone (normally an Ambot profession though others can mimic its single-mindedness); Shaman; Rogue or Healer.
>
> There are several places to explore in the game: Sundown, the city of the Trueblood, which lies atop a labyrinthine web of sewer tunnels; the Creche, a giant pyramid in which live the Basilor; the Yellow Plains, grasslands along the Copper River; Mechabog, the swamp in which the Ambots hide themselves; and Atalanta Highway, an ancient Venusian road.
>
> There are other nuances to the game, but they'll have to be discovered when the clearance is given to visit Venus and adventure upon its sun-baked clime. If you have any questions about it, feel free to email me at the address [omitted] via Internet.
>
> We hope to have Czarlords in full release by Nov. 15.
>
> **– Rogers of Venus**

The illustration that accompanies this article is an unreleased map created by Terrano.

As I entertain the idea of a revival, I'll be digging through my files on the game for future mailings of A&E.

I'd like to find an interesting RPG for which to adapt the setting. It doesn't have to be an RPG created for pulps, though they were the direct inspiration.

Illusions was a pretty simple game. You moved around, picked up stuff, killed things, and picked up their stuff. A RPG adaptation would mine the original game for the world and races. There aren't any complex combat resolution mechanics I'd be adapting to a different rule set.

The RPG could be a fast-and-loose one from the OSRIC movement or something new and experimental that helps me establish some indie cred.

In hindsight, I'm not sure a swamp is the best place for robots. But they're sentient, so their choice of living environment is no one's fault but their own.

Top 20 eSoft Add-Ons Sold by GW Associates as of March 24, 1995

1. Super Solitaire by Porter Venn
2. Famous by John Schachat
3. SalesMaster by John Schachat
4. ProMenu: TBBS Menu Creation Program by Randy Harris
5. PostMaster by John Schachat
6. Illusions by Kris Land
7. Classified Ad Manager by Tom Faulkner
8. Personal Internet Mail Processor (PIMP) by Jack Rickard
9. Famous Call-Back Verifier by John Schachat
10. Tips, Traps and Techniques For TBBS by TBBS Sysops
11. TwangChu by Garry Grosse
12. **Illusions Expansion Pack I by Brass Brow Software**
13. EventMaster by John Schachat
14. QuickSearch 04-User by Mark Smith
15. EasyMail by John Schachat
16. Card Guppies by Gary Funk
17. Super Star Trek Package by Ed Ng
18. Stax by Mark Chambers
19. MoneyMaster by John Schachat
20. Connex: The Connection Exchange by Garry Grosse

Mailing Comments for A&E 462

Robert A. Dushay: I enjoyed your review of the boardgame Oh My God! There's an Axe in My Head. I had never heard of the Internet meme that inspires the title. Your review makes the game sound a lot better than the name did.

The game seems like one tailor made for KickStarter, since the designers couldn't be budged off that goofy name and the mechanics are unique. When I went looking for photos of the game board, I read one review that called it a great "screw your neighbor" game.

I don't think I'm ready to buy it, but I'll be looking to try it out at a gaming convention.

Lee Gold: My best memories of the original Paranoia RPG also came from reading the game more than playing it. My gaming group in the '80s often read the more amusing passages to each other.

I'd love to know more from Greg Costikyan, Dan Gelber and Eric Goldberg about the genesis of that game.

Jerry Stratton: While skimming your website I discovered that you ran Cerebus the Gopher. I can remember frequenting it in around 1994-95 after finding out about the service on the Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.comics. It's a pleasant surprise to find that it's still around on the web.

I'm in the gopher in two files: a remembrance of *Comics Buyer's Guide* editor Don Thompson after his death in 1994 and a collection of .SIG files compiled by Tom Galloway.

My quote, saved by Tom (and Cerebus) for posterity: "It was as if the spirit of Gary Groth suddenly took over my hands – I had this uncanny urge to grab a thesaurus and find synonyms for 'puerile snot.'"

Spike Y. Jones: Regarding the *Ender's Game* movie, my sons were eager to see the film and completely unaware of Orson Scott Card's ugly comments about gays, so I set aside my personal reservations and saw the flick.

That decision worked out well for me. I thought it was one of the best science fiction films I had seen in years, propelled by the fantastic performance of Asa Butterfield as Ender and Harrison Ford as Graff.

We had a long discussion on the ride home about how much the audience needed to know to properly enjoy the climactic battle scene. They didn't see the surprise coming but enjoyed it anyway.

Messages to the Prime Material

These days, writers need as much help as possible, not only in constructing a good story (novel, short story, etc.), but also where to submit their writing. Myself, I only really know the book publishers and magazines, but there's the online market, and I don't know a thing there.

Self-publishing used to mean vanity press, but now, sell your own work in .epub and .mobi formats for Kindle or Kobo … it's all changed so much.

I would hope that *Writer's Market* would be keeping track of this for you. I would add to Allston's pointers to be knowledgeable about what you're writing about, and if you feel you are knowledgeable, become moreso.

If your writing is shown to be wrong or wrongly sourced, you'll be blown out of the water, and your reputation might be ruined.

My letter … publishing is indeed pretty dead, but I have finally been able to find some work, in advertising. I am working for an agency literally down the street from where I live, and it looks like I will get a three-month contract out of this. Yes, I did …

While many companies who employ proofreaders are finding out, having a part-time, out-of-office proofreader is good and inexpensive, right up to the point where you need him/her, and they aren't available, having found another part-time contract.

Having an in-house proofreader is becoming feasible and necessary for many companies. I sure hope I'm right about this, because I'd been out of work just too long.

— **Lloyd Penney**, Nov. 9, 2013

Congratulations on the gig. When I worked as a freelance journalist (and game design hundredaire), I also copyedited college textbooks for Harcourt Brace.

It was a challenge when I was assigned an 800-page monster, but sometimes the subject matter made the read tolerable.

My favorite was about the Hutterites, an Amish-like society in the U.S. who embrace tech such as computers as long as it enhances their work.

A memorable detail: Every day they enter the dining hall single file, in order of male seniority, then female. The youngest boy outranks the oldest woman.

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