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ALLIANCES

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the gaming magazine

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Future
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The ninth in a series of
collectible encounters
presented in

#9

arcane

CUT & KEEP
ENCOUNTERS



RACKMODULO INC.

You can have complete privacy, total anonymity, and you can
get up to whatever you want inside the confines of the
RackModulo complex. Providing, of course, you can afford it...

by Ken and Jo Walton and Graydon Saunders

arcane proudly presents another 11-page encounter that you can use with any sci-fi or cyberpunk RPG.

RACKMODULO INC.

Advertisement

Even with the coat, I'm cold.

It took two days, but a little bug climbed down from the roof of number four tower and laid a square millimetre of careful ceramic on the corner of module 8-6's window. It's perfectly clear to the eye, and the exact same refractive index as air – even the window washer will never know it's there. To the 3,000 angstrom x-rays the laser beside me is putting out, it's a quantum trap and a perfect mirror.

The laser whines and hisses and creaks, old and cold in its bath of liquid helium. The helium boils away, scavenged, replenished and recondensed, but the seals are old, too, and the clever membranes of the coat can't do anything about vapour in my lungs. Cold, the whole room, frost on the screen, the mirrors, white ice in the small bathroom sink.

Little pulses, quarter-nanosecond slugs of light not as long as the width of my hand. A cosmic-ray counter in the corner feeds random numbers to the stack of chips running the laser, so they leave with no pattern. Another stack of chips does fearsome statistics on the returning light, to see how the window rattles, ever so faint, with the motion of the air in the room behind.

Twelve hours worth of data, and coffee tastes like burnt grease. No water; the one working bathroom tap feeds the hose to the heat exchanger cooling the laser's helium bath. Nothing from the window but an endlessly repeating old recording. Behind that, a little chatter and a 60 hertz hum and an old style electromagnetic speaker stuck to the metal window frame somewhere, the statistics say with tape. Their hum matches my wall current perfectly, so it's probably a real speaker after all, not a spoof.

Whatever they have to hide in there, they've got a sense of humour about it. Database says the recording is 'The Chipmunks Sing the Best of Michael Jackson.'



The System

You're bound to notice that, even though we present character descriptions for the people you find in the RackModulo complex, we don't provide you with any stats. This is a deliberate decision – you're supposed to be able to use this encounter with pretty well any science fiction or cyberpunk RPG, and to provide stats for all of them would take up way too much space. That shouldn't be a problem for you – just make up the stats for these characters yourself. Same goes for other 'system' details – make them up to fit your campaign.

You're a corporation, or part of a government, a small business or just possibly an individual researcher. You're looking for workspace. You don't want to build your own with all the associated hassles. You don't want the bother of dealing with environmental laws and all the individual utility corps. But you do want somewhere secure and attractive, where you can work without anyone looking over your shoulder. You're busy people, you want to get on with your line of work, whatever that may be. You want the peace of mind that comes with knowing that your business is nobody's business but your own. And you can afford to pay for it.

RackModulo can help

We own thousands of modules, set in delightfully landscaped parkland. Each module is safe, secure and utterly private. RackModulo Inc. is not interested in violating the confidentiality of our customers. We don't care what you're doing, we just want to help you get on with it. Your business is not our business. We don't even care who you are. The interior of your impermeable module is yours to do what you want with, as long as you pay your single bill. All utilities, including data feed, full environmentally effective waste reclamation and excellent reactive security, are included as part of the RackModulo package.

For more details about the service we can provide, including details about your nearest RackModulo Park, click here. Offer subject to appropriate credit. If you have to ask, you probably don't want to know.



RackModulo Inc. sells governments, corporations and individuals peace of mind; it provides utterly private workspace. This space comes in the form of building frames that serve as racks for industrial activity modules. It also provides full utility hookups (including broadband data feeds) and a very simple non-pollution requirement.

The client gets two extremely important things: complete privacy and comprehensive anonymity. As long as nothing leaks from the module and nothing from the very short 'can't cope' list is dumped into RackModulo's waste processing system, absolutely no-one will express the least bit of interest in what's being done in any particular module. And to get all this, all you have to do is keep paying your exorbitantly high rent. Naturally, such services do not come cheap. RackModulo quite happily accepts anyone as a customer, just as long as they can prove they can pay...

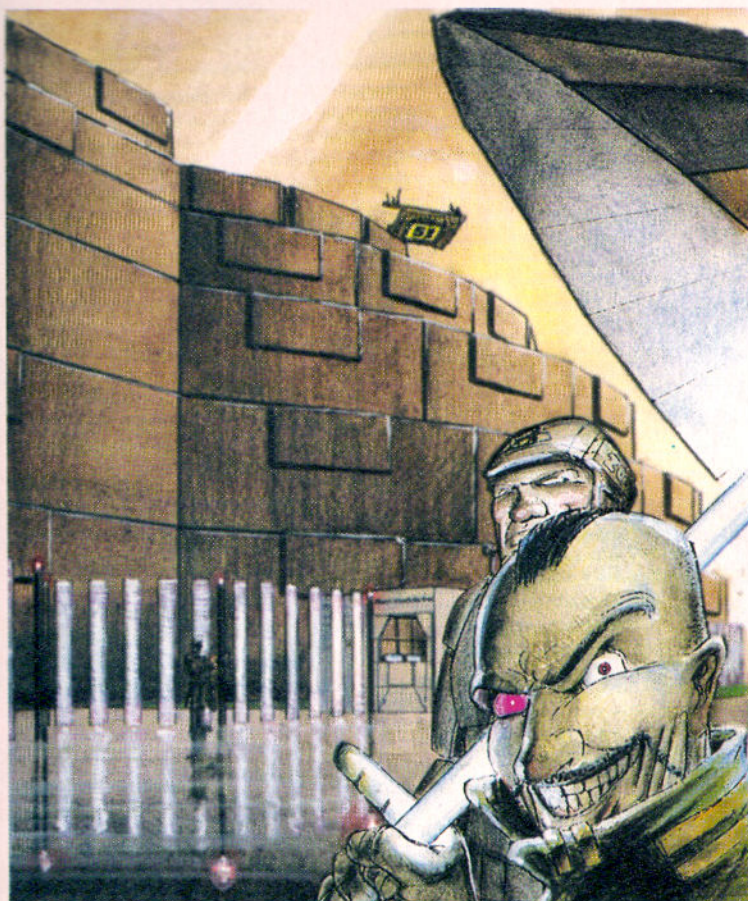


Illustration © Simon Gurr & secant

The Complex

Physically, RackModulo complexes follow a common plan: a 250m by 250m square base, set with industrial parkland, with a stepped series of mega-modules forming a pyramid. These mega-modules each houses a series of rented modules within, of varying sizes, from small office-sized ones to huge research centres. Each module has its own elevator access and plumbing connections. The 2m wide tubes that hold the elevators are filled with an inert gas – light comes in, but no noise and no information. Access to the elevators is via a maze of twisty passages, all alike. A system in the frame office opens the necessary doors and monitors progress.

The Waste Processing Centre

In the centre of the complex is the buried waste processing centre. There are eight separate processors, running in parallel. The ground over the processors is attractively landscaped wooded parkland. RackModulo prides itself on its green environmentally-friendly image. The facility has considerable passive security; the walls are very thick synthacrete, and access is very tightly controlled at the bottom of the 8m elevator shaft – anyone can take the elevator down. However, getting back up, for unauthorized visitors, can be extremely challenging.

The Modules

RackModulo makes all the module exteriors, and you must buy or lease the exterior from it when you rent space. This

exterior is extremely tough, resolutely corrosion proof and intensely soundproofed. It is possible to rent as many modules as you want as long as you can afford them. The interiors may be outfitted in any way you please, and RackModulo Inc. will not express concerns about your decisions. The only thing it insists on is the zero emissions requirement. Everything leaving a module must go through either RackModulo's ventilation and filtration system, or out of the standard 50cm disposal pipe hookups. This requirement is contractually enforced with a vengeance, and the ventilation system runs at less than the ambient atmospheric pressure, which prevents even accidental external venting.

So, what's going on in there?

Anything you like.

Anyone who wants a little privacy and a straightforward working environment can be a RackModulo customer. There are corporate customers, both overt and covert, private researchers who are able to afford the steep leasing fees and a number of medium security businesses – patent lawyers, private detectives and data retrieval experts. There are also medical facilities ranging from the entirely legal and proper to the completely unlawful, various light industrial customers – chip fabrication, biologics and anything else you can grow in a small vat or want to keep quiet – a number of hackers, techs and weirds (most of whom live with their work, whatever that may be) and any number of black projects – governmental, industrial or private. A RackModulo module is definitely the perfect place to conduct research into germ warfare, neurotoxins, or just to keep the files for a distributed infiltration attempt.

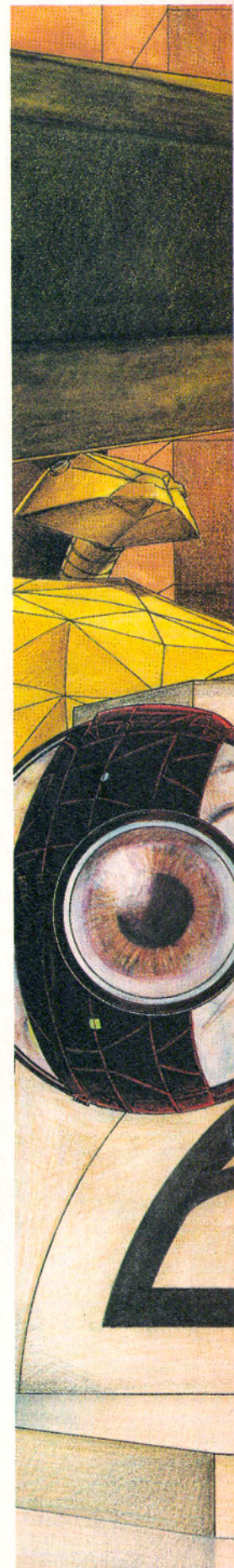
Research tends to be something that can be done by a small team – seldom more than eight people – and the topic investigated can be anything that will fit. Very specific topics are the norm.

Getting in: Ways and Means

RackModulo Inc. runs a large groundline data feed into the complex. It surfaces in the buried, highly secure, reprocessing centre office, and from there cables in well-armoured conduits snake outwards to the four module frames. The cables are labelled, but unfortunately in cryptic codes that only RackModulo's security and maintenance devices can make any sense of. The actual customer files (which are in fact surprisingly thin, essentially a credit reference and a leasing history) are maintained entirely off-line. There are duplicate copies of the customer files in all four frame offices, in destruction-rigged filing cabinets. There's also a set in the central office, as well as duplicate sets in the RackModulo corporate headquarters.

Asking People

You could always try the good old-fashioned solution. You can attempt to bribe a disaffected or greedy worker, make friends with a RackModulo maintenance tech, or spend some time doing a lot of background investigation on a known researcher. This approach works fairly well, so long as you have enough time on



your hands and RackModulo's general security overview doesn't notice you.

Information Gathering Devices

You might want to try using bugs and taps on the datalines, or sending in tiny micromachines to observe. These are all possible options, but difficult. It's hard to get past the RackModulo front desk, and the use of such a device on the highly impervious outside of a module is impractical, so it has to be an inside job of some description.

Interrogation of the Principals

This ranges from attempts to make friends through to good old-fashioned kidnapping followed by chemical interrogation. It can certainly get you some good information, but it's extremely risky. Hardly anyone can be a RackModulo customer without having at least a little paranoia in their personality, and the effective forms – chemical or sorcerous interrogation – tend to be wildly illegal and you need to be prepared for some interesting consequences.

Sorcery

In a world where magic really does work, RackModulo's sorcerous protections are every bit as good as the physical ones. This means that they can be bypassed, but not without extreme care, competence, a degree of forethought and detailed planning.

Security

One of the things that RackModulo Inc. is selling is privacy. It has a comprehensive passive security system throughout the complex, which extends everywhere except inside the customers' modules. If you want to have the players investigate a module customer on RackModulo's behalf, you should keep this information in mind – they will be extremely concerned to deny their involvement.

This security system has several components:

Passive

Despite the careful open look, everything in the RackModulo complex is made out of very tough composite and synthetic materials. It would, for example, take a good sized bomb made by someone who knows what they're doing to blow in the 'glass' doors to the module frame offices. All the cables are deeply buried in heavy conduits and the power supply is internal (solar from space receptor, nuclear reactor, or cable to the local utility – there is at least one backup power supply good for a couple of hours).

Reactive

RackModulo Inc. has a contract with a local security force, which is sure to be competent, but not exceptionally tough or particularly well armed. The security force is certainly good enough to deal with the typical street samurai, but unfortunately it's not up to handling armoured vehicles, combat cyborgs or major demons.

Module Security

Remember that the customers are paranoid, mostly. The relatively decent RackModulo security is there to keep the rabble out, but the typical customer will take steps on their own. It's important to think about this in advance – any competent lethal security is quite able to reduce an infiltrator it catches to 50 kilos of medical waste and a lingering bad smell. Make sure the players are fully aware of this, or else use less lethal options. They might get more than a bit grumpy with you if their characters consistently die in increasingly gruesome ways.

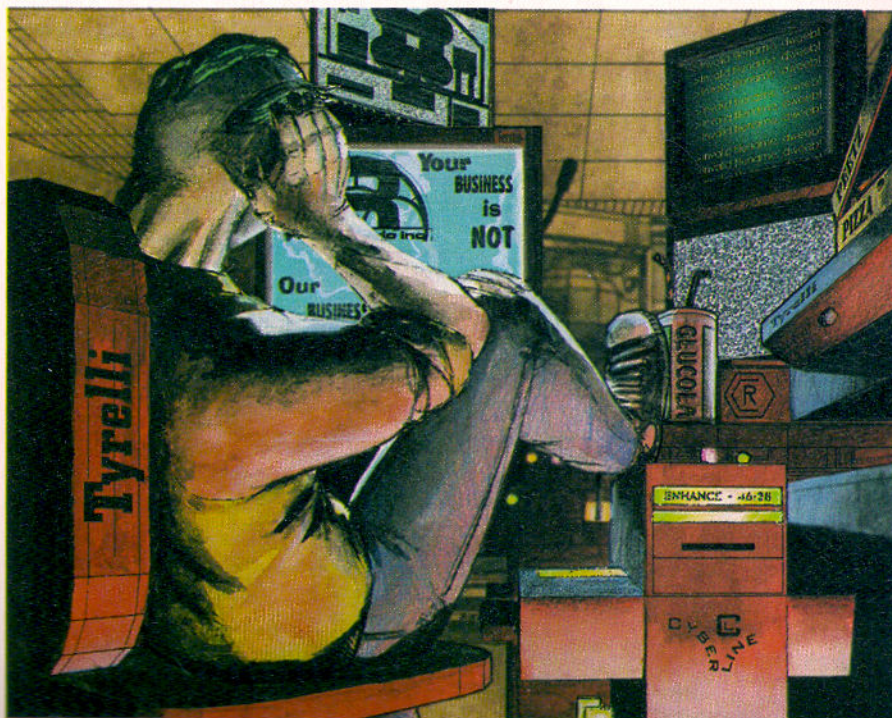
Automatic Machinery

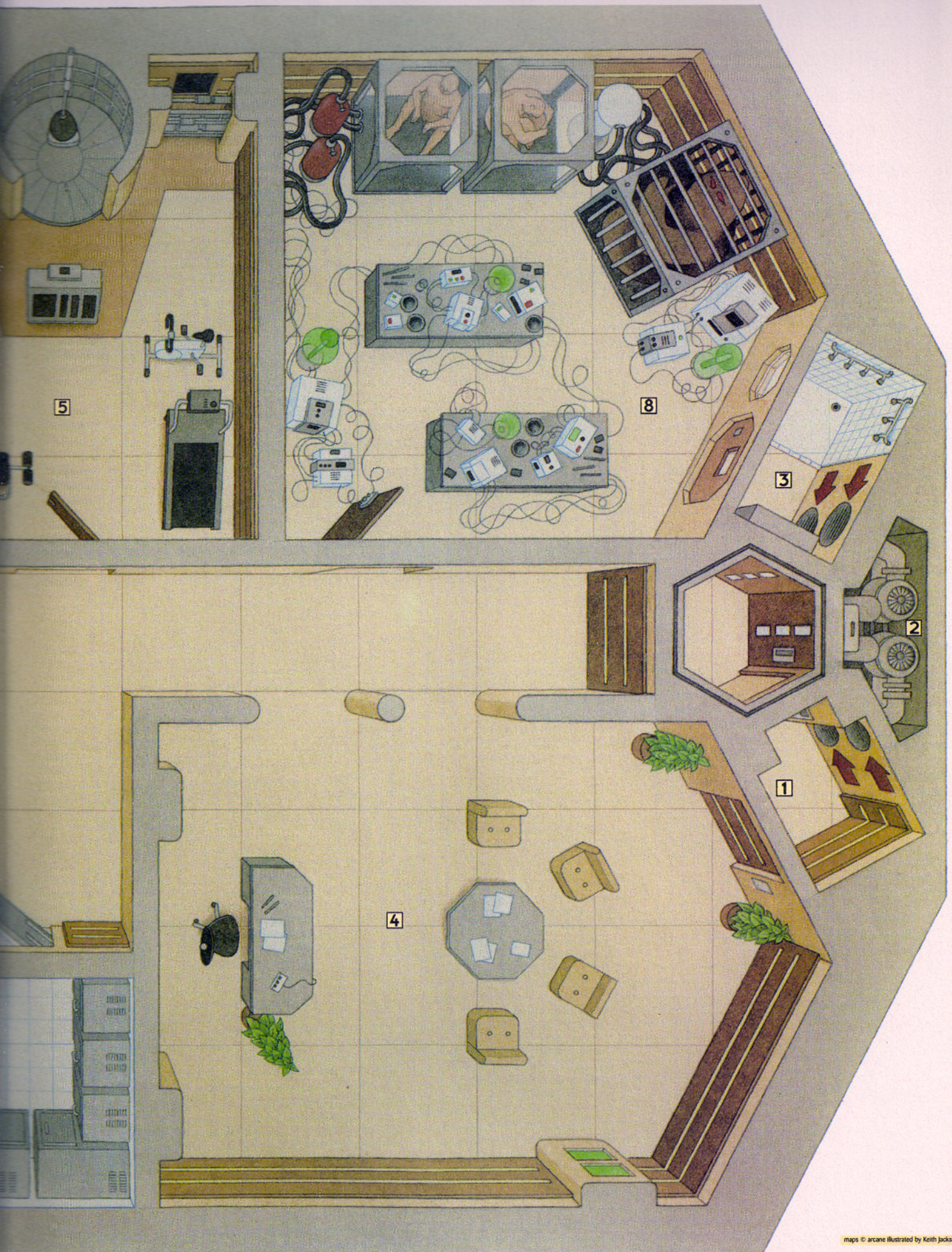
If the machine doesn't think you belong there, things happen – this ranges from the door not opening to directional mines, biowarfare agents and neurotoxins. That's if the person responsible for the machine is in a straightforward mood. If they are sneaky, it lets you in, drugs you and then sticks you in storage until the owner comes back. Or maybe it lets you in,

gasses you and grinds you to a paste – the central waste handling facility can certainly handle ground data-thief. Of course, they might also have use of an experimental subject for everything from a brand new recreational hallucinogen to a neurosurgical procedure.

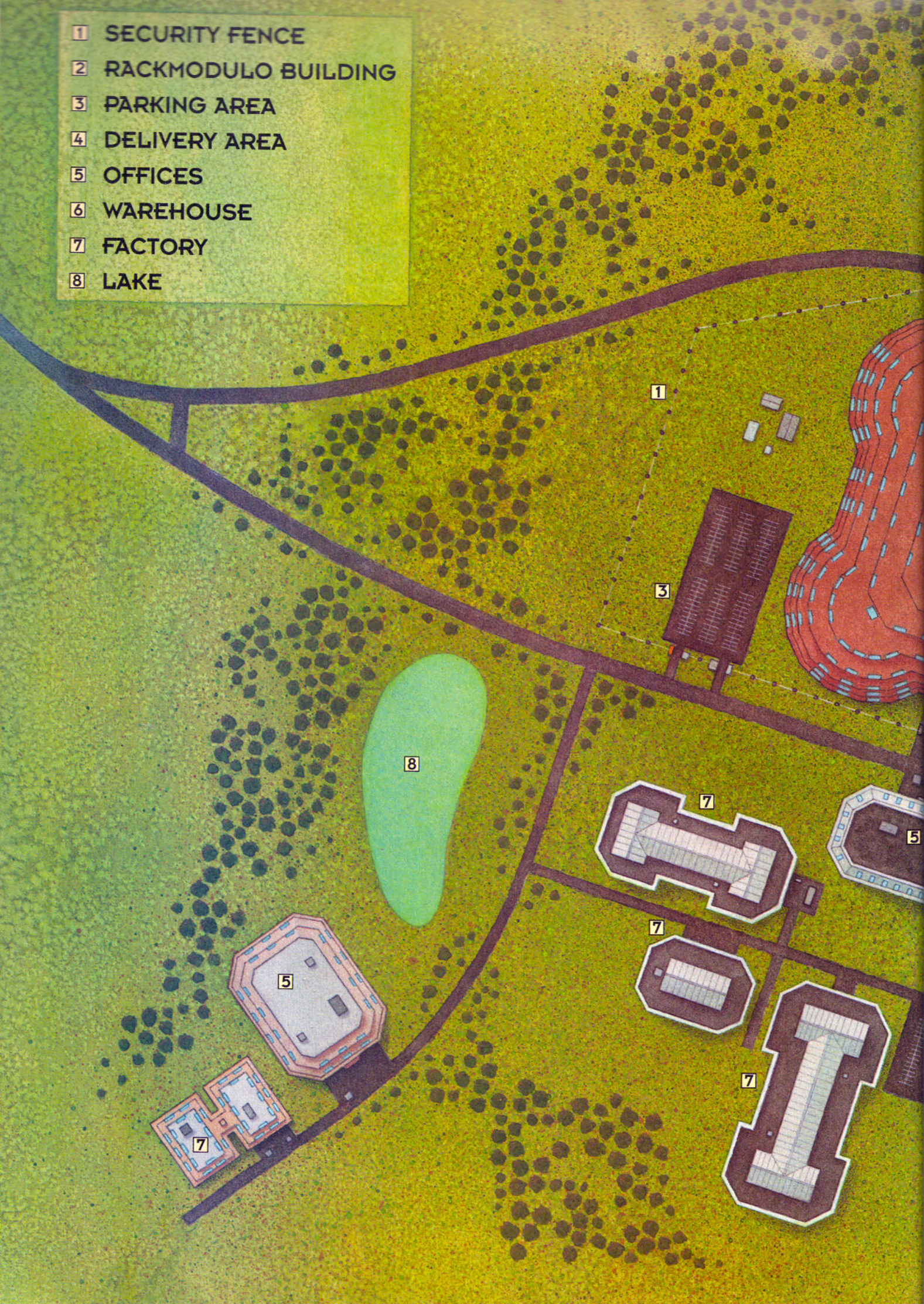
Inadvertent

Think about how much trouble you could get into if someone let you walk around the shop floor in a steel mill. RackModulo's customers are industrial on a smaller scale, but there are any number of nasty things in a module. There might be 5,000 psi live steam in there, an electric arc furnace, plasma welders, annealing ovens full of boiling hydrofluoric acid, or almost anything else you can think of. If the person attempting to sneak in and find stuff out doesn't know

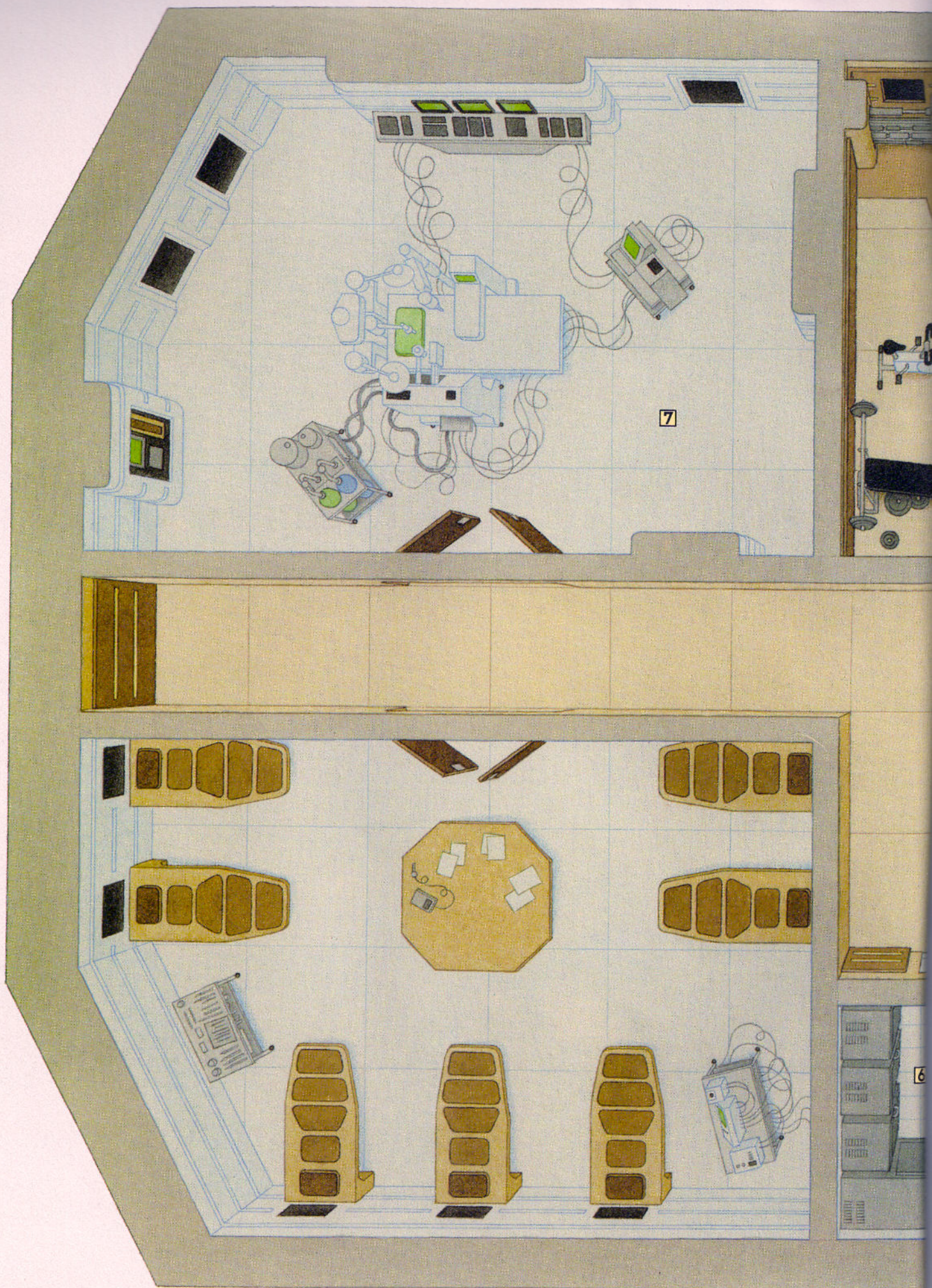




- 1 SECURITY FENCE
- 2 RACKMODULO BUILDING
- 3 PARKING AREA
- 4 DELIVERY AREA
- 5 OFFICES
- 6 WAREHOUSE
- 7 FACTORY
- 8 LAKE







what they're doing, they can get poisoned, burned, dissolved, subjected to carcinogens, mutagens or teratogens, electrocuted, or squished. Even if they manage to avoid all that, they might leave clear signs of their presence in broken, mis-set or tampered with equipment.

People

Jules Cavanagh

Jules Cavanagh is manager of the local RackModulo Park. He's fussy, legalistic and suave. He detests violence and will promise anything. He has useful, but not fast, connections. Jules is

reliable, for a lawyer. He could sell condos in a waste dump to Greens, but he has no sense of humour. He's pretty reasonable at threat assessment, delighted by petty bribery, but buying him out would be expensive. RackModulo is not a particularly large corporation but its customers are, and they could do quite a bit in the way of vengeance.

Tara Smith

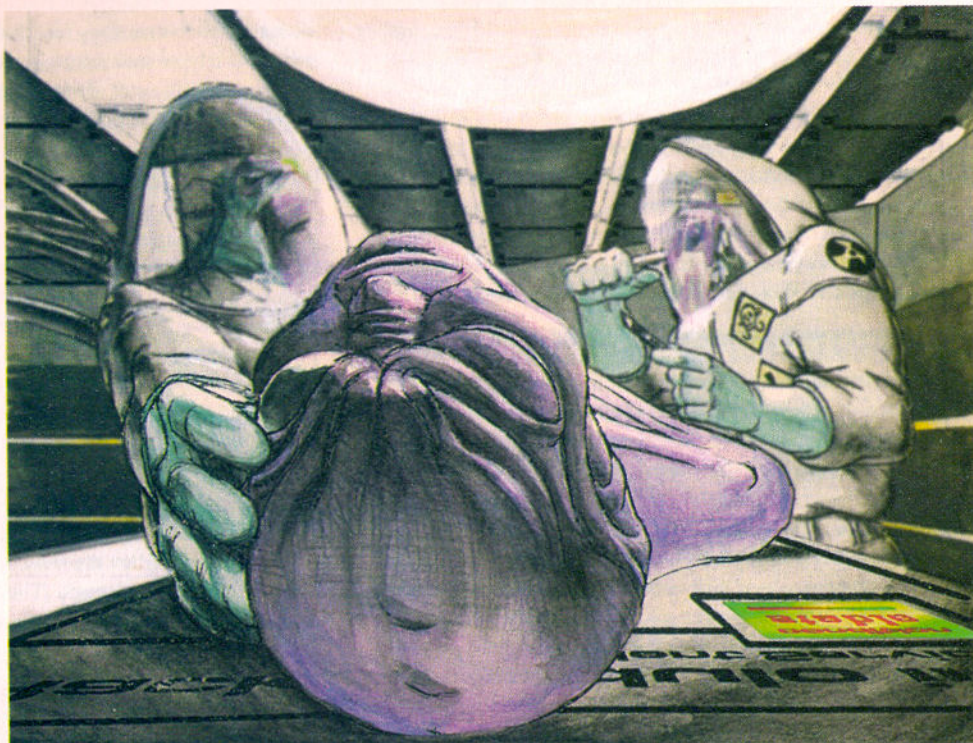
Tara Smith looks like a pretty ordinary secretary, but nothing could be further from the truth. She's chief of security and bad combat trouble in her own right – she can be a shapeshifted demon, an android or modified to the gills, but none of it shows and most of it is lethal. Jules doesn't know that she's security chief for the head office and has separate lines of communications. Jules has his own hired security and Tara handles the difficult and obscure stuff. If she gets on the phone (and the phone is built in) she can have about 30 seriously heavy bruisers there in very short order. She regards doing this as a failure of subtlety and skill because it would blow her cover to Jules. Unless, of course, that much force is required for the job.

Mike Rachet

Mike Rachet is in his fifties, and he is the gardener and groundskeeper for the central park section of the RackModulo complex. In a magic-has-retained world, Mike will have the appropriate magical abilities to be good with plants. In a normally technical world, Mike seems like a St. Francis type, but knows about organics and biochemistry. The parkland and the trees are maintained by the use of clever hi-tech molecular filters and other scrupulous anti-pollution measures. Anyone doing damage to the parkland has to worry about Mike doing something nasty to them – probably later, after he's tracked them down. His revenge is likely to be an effective toxin.

Anastasia Corbin

Dr Corbin is in her late thirties. She looks like a rather prim, slender, dour, 'hair tied back in a severe bun' stereotypical



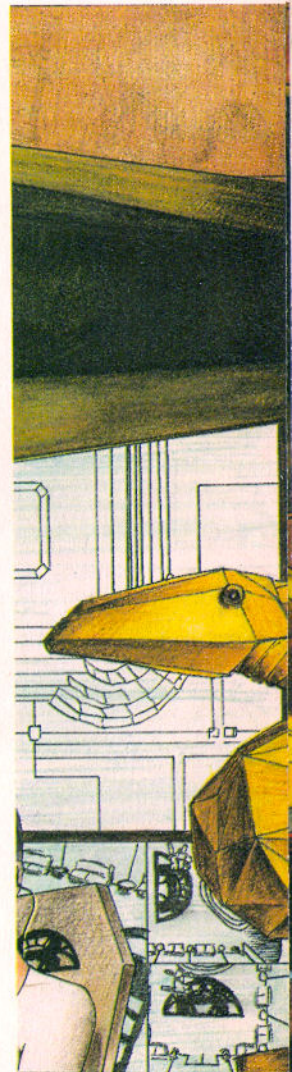
scientist. She is the nominal owner of module 8-5, in which is located a plutonium micromachining facility. Making enough noise to get her interested in her surroundings could be pretty bad – the kind of security she can call on is not going to be believed. She is also the most obvious person to talk to if you want to find out what's going on in 8-6 because the two modules are right next to each other. She has no reason not to tell you, but again, make her feel seriously threatened and you get to deal with the security of whomever it is that wants nuclear bombs in quantity.

Doctor Locke

Dr Locke never gives a first name. He works out of module 8-6, performing body enhancements and modifications. He is definitely expensive, but does good work including the physiotherapy necessary to teach customers how to use their new cyberware. He also does a sideline in organic transplants. He appears to be in his thirties, but is actually somewhat older than that. He supplements his healthy practice in bodymods with biological experimentation, and is always on the lookout for new subjects for the various plagues and new surgical techniques he has developed. He may have some powerful corporate backers who know his secret and give him funds, hoping to benefit from his breakthroughs.

Zo-Zo

Zo-Zo is a lowlife, whose mirror shades are cracked and scratched. Anyone with street-smarts can tell at once that she is addicted to more than one street-fashionable drug. She might be any age from 12 to 30. With her slouching attitude and her long, sharp, visible knife she looks as if she can take care of herself without any problems at all. Zo-Zo can often be seen coming and going from module 8-6, most often late at night. She goes in with large bags, and leaves suspiciously without them. She has no bodymods, and thinks nothing of telling people how much she hates them. She is, in fact, supplying the Doctor with used cyberware, which she has cut from her numerous victims.



Adventure Seeds

Most of the time, nothing all that interesting happens at a RackModulo complex, at least not that anyone notices. There may be major breakthroughs happening in there weekly, but you don't hear the champagne corks. However, if there are breakthroughs happening, you can be relatively sure that someone wants to know about it.

Being Hired to Look Into It

Almost anyone might hire a skilled party to find out what is going on inside a specific module. It might be a rival – personal, corporate or inter-corporate. Or a government agency of some description – revenueurs, the patent office, military intelligence, occupational health and safety. Or RackModulo Inc. itself, getting a little nervous about just what is going on in some module and wanting to do a little discrete checking. A curious data-thief may wonder if information worth stealing is in there somewhere. Or a customer of a specific business may want a verification of what they've been told about the state of their research. There might even be relatives, friends or loved ones of an employee or researcher prepared to pay to know what their nearest and dearest is up to in there. Or somebody with one of these reasons for investigating may have disappeared, and their friends and family might be interested in finding out what's become of them.

Specific Information

The usual way to become involved is to be hired to find out specific information or to obtain a specific object. In almost all cases, this can only be considered a success if it can be done anonymously. If it isn't done anonymously, probable responses range from being followed (tangibly, sorcerously or electronically), fed false information, being set up at the

exchange (of course, they can always just get you to hand it over, and let you and your erstwhile employer argue about exactly where it went), to being subsequently assassinated or simply killed out of hand.

Being Paid

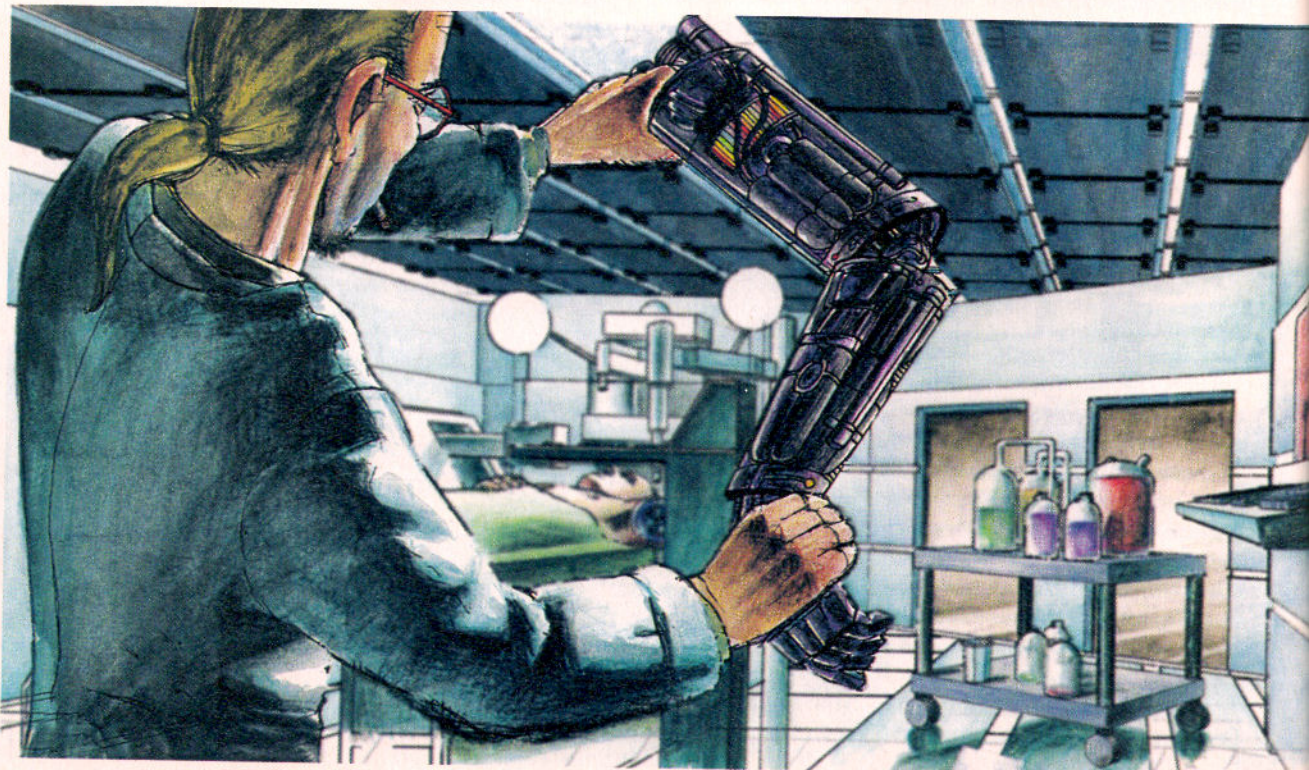
If you are asked to investigate a RackModulo customer, payment for your efforts is likely to be quite informal. It might be the cancellation of a favour the investigator owes, repayment in kind with goods or information, cash, or the acknowledgement that a favour is owed. Payment by either RackModulo Inc. or a RackModulo customer can be a rather more formal affair (if the work done is reasonably legal) or just as informal if the work done is of questionable probity or legality, or if anyone involved wants to be able to deny that they did it.

Discovering it Yourself

RackModulo's facilities are very easily tailored to suit any given set of player interests. The possibilities of what may be going on inside a module are endless. Any kind of party can trace some enemy or rival back to a RackModulo module, and consequently feel it necessary to get inside. They could discover that this is the legitimate business address of a company they are currently investigating. Or, on the other hand, they might even discover that this is the secret headquarters, or secret research station where they can find out what is really going on.

A Patron at RackModulo

One of RackModulo's customers might well need the services of the party for any number of reasons. The party could visit the site and become reasonably familiar with it, being given various jobs and paid for them. This is a good way of making them realise how heavy the security is. Then the patrons could disappear without warning and the module locked, possibly still



owing money to the party. What has happened? Are they still inside? Will the PCs break in to find out, and what will they find if they do? A variant on this is the key to the module left waiting for the party at the frame office, but the security is not disabled, or a mutual enemy is waiting inside. Or the party could inherit a module from a patron, thinking this is a wonderful place to hole up until the first monthly bill arrives. "How much?!"

Renting from RackModulo

Wealthy parties may have reason to hire a module themselves. RackModulo deals with anyone who has a sufficient credit rating. This can be particularly good if a group is looking for somewhere to do something illegal. It can also entangle them with their neighbours in the nearby modules. This works well with a party which is somewhat shady but still has a fair degree of morality left. Someone could come to it with a series of truly horrific allegations about what is happening in the module next door. This might of course be the truth, or the informer might have their own agenda to fulfil. If you want to stop your party renting from RackModulo, all you have to do is make sure it is far too expensive.

Making a Mistake

Semi-legitimate outfits such as body-modification clinics operate in modules, and these can be identified only by their numbers. If a party decides to visit one of these outfits, but has been given the wrong number (either accidentally or on purpose), it could quite easily find itself next door and in serious trouble. This can be a very interesting way to set up a new adventure.

Interrupted

Any group which manages to get past all that security intact can feel extremely proud of itself – at least until the owners get home.

Module 8-6

Module 8-6, illustrated, is owned by the mysterious Dr Locke. The good doctor specialises in body modification, but rumours abound that he also does illegal transplants and strange experiments. These rumours are actually all true. By day, the place is a thriving clinic, at night Dr Locke performs his experiments. The surgery will be deserted at night, but Dr Locke always sleeps in his lab, and is used to meeting Zo-Zo most nights after midnight.

A party can become involved with Dr Locke in many ways. One of them may get a cyberpart from him which may later turn out to be identified as coming from a murder victim. Or they may discover the activities of the mysterious Zo. Or they may be hired to

discover the whereabouts of the last person who tried to investigate him.

1: The airlock entrance to the module. Cycle time is about 15 seconds. With careful cramming, ten people can fit into the 5' by 5' space, but this only happens on exit, and the elevator only works if just one person is in it in any case. The inside controls allow the airlock to be cycled to vacuum.

2: This space is the airlock machinery.

3: The safe room, which can undergo complete air replacement in seconds, and which is equipped with a chemical spill emergency shower and various other first aid supplies. This is a very secure room, although the door can, however, be overridden from the outside with the proper codes, making the thick, tough walls less useful to a holdout.

4: This is the reception area. In the daytime this room contains a secretary, several computers, some chairs and customers waiting to undergo various procedures. At night it is completely deserted but for a camera. The security procedures can identify anyone entering through the airlock and have been ruthlessly set to gas anyone they do not instantly recognise, and set off an alarm in the laboratory. Anyone found gassed will then become one of Dr. Locke's experimental subjects. If people entering the area do not fall to the floor within just three minutes, yet more lethal measures are enabled. Dr Locke will not, however, call for outside security in anything but a personal emergency.

5: Physiotherapy chamber. This room contains both physical equipment and a whole body computer set up. It makes heavy use of virtual reality technology. Particularly nasty referees may wish to contemplate the results of a character getting stuck in something very much like a holodeck, which is insisting that the character learns to use a body part they do not actually possess.

6: Storage. This room is refrigerated because it is used for storing body parts, of both the flesh and cyber varieties, until they are needed. When required the parts are ordered by computer, placed in boxes and moved by robotic helpers.

7: The surgery. This room contains a surgical table with associated computer equipment, such as remote operated knives for example. There is also a console from which Dr Locke operates his equipment.

8: Lab. The laboratory contains all kinds of dangerous scientific experimental equipment. This generally includes a subject or two, who are usually kept caged and sometimes heavily drugged.

9: The recovery room. This is where patients get some rest after their op'.



Next month

We're off to find out what's been found at the dig...



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The Gathering
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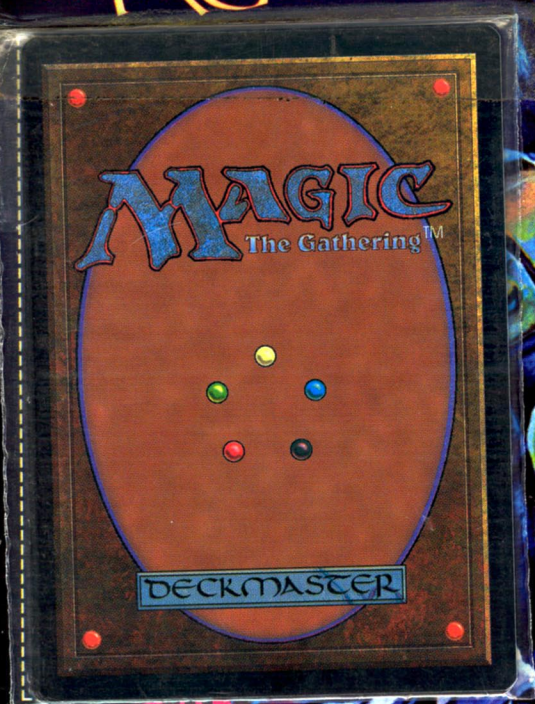
Dragonlance: Fifth Age

TSR's innovative new RPG
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**REVIEWED
THIS ISSUE**

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Fading Suns • Mage: Cult of Ecstasy • AD&D: Hellbound •
Marked for Death • Old Ones • AD&D: Eye of Pain • And more...

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KICK OUT
THE
CORPS

Mention cyberpunk to most gamers and all they can think of is *Bladerunner*, but there's a whole lot more to this gritty, on-the-edge genre than many of us give it credit for. Antony Johnston takes us far into the future...

GENRE



KATION N HES

When William Gibson wrote the words, "The sky above the port was the colour of a television, tuned to a dead channel," he was starting something the enormity of which perhaps even he couldn't have possibly imagined. He was kick-starting a brand new genre in science fiction, a hard-hitting glimpse into a future that's all the more real because we're slowly creeping towards it.

Later in his first book, *Neuromancer*, he coined the term 'cyberspace' – a term which is now commonly used with reference to the Internet (then, in 1984, the Internet was, of course, still a marginal rather than mainstream utility), and from this term came another, 'cyberpunk'.

Cyberpunk is the word which is now used to describe

the entire sub-genre of SF that Gibson helped to create (yes, there were others – see below). It's a genre which has spilled over into film, theatre, music and, of course, roleplaying games. There are a number of roleplaying systems which cover this dark vision of a near future, where mega-corporations rule the world, and people are seen as little more than a commodity just waiting to be exploited, and throughout this feature we're going to be telling you exactly why you should be playing them. But first of all, what precisely is cyberpunk?



JACKING IN

Cyberpunk proper started in the early 1980s as a literary movement. The most famous novel of the period is indeed

Neuromancer, a hellish vision of humanity losing its way and of the evolution of the Matrix (a kind of Internet come to life). But while Gibson deserves credit for bringing cyberpunk to the masses, there were others before him, such as John Brunner's *Shockwave Rider* and *Jagged Orbit*, or Niven and Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty*.

Gibson, along with Sterling, Cadigan, Maddox, Rucker and others, brought us what Gardner Dozois eventually coined 'cyberpunk': gritty, hard-edged SF, based not on the utopian visions of Hugo Gernsback or the interstellar space wars of L Ron Hubbard, but instead on a dystopia, a near-future nightmare of dehumanization.

The governments have surrendered control to the Corporations, because profit



SOME CYBER- IDEAS FOR CYBER- SCENARIOS

The best inspiration for cyberpunk scenarios is life – watch the news, pay attention to how people interact with one another, listen to opinions and views. Twist a news story slightly, put it in a cyberpunk context, and see what comes out the other end. Or take an opinion and follow it to its logical conclusion, regardless of practicality or morality. The best cyberpunk material rings of familiarity, but twists perceptions and attitudes. Try these for size:

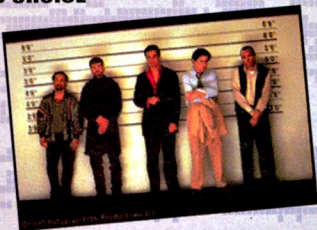
MYSTERY MACHINE

The PCs are hired to guard a truck as it makes its way from their home town to another. The second city is notorious as an anarchist state, and their employer is concerned that the truck's contents ("sensitive medical experiments") don't fall into the wrong hands.

But the crates in the truck are empty – it is the driver who is important. He's a government agent, a one-man army sent to bring down the anarchist leaders, believed to be execs working for the Corp the truck is headed for.

If they arrive without realising the driver is more than just a trucker, they'll be paid and told to make their own way back while the agent starts cracking heads. If they do work it out on the way, the agent might just decide to just waste 'em and to hell with the cover...

NO CHOICE



Ever seen *The Usual Suspects*? Surely the PCs have done enough in their time to merit the vengeance of a Kaiser Shohze-type criminal overlord, who coerces them into doing One Last Job for him...

WE CAN BUILD YOU

One of the PCs is in hospital for some cybersurgery. Going to the bathroom unattended, he hears a totally inhuman sound from the stairwell. Opening it, he sees a pale, hairless humanoid dragging itself up the stairs. It reaches for him but is shot by pursuing security guards, who then open up on the PC!

This could turn into either *Die Hard* in a hospital, or a full-blown corp espionage scenario. What was that thing? Why didn't the guards want the PC to see it? What exactly are they hiding?



rules and the Corps basically Know What You Want far better than you do. In fact they *tell* you exactly what you want. If you want any security in this world you work for the Corporation, live in their apartments, sing their hymns, send your kids to their schools, buy their products and even watch their television shows.

Because here in the future we can quite literally rebuild you. Technology, particularly that of miniaturisation and medicine, has advanced at an alarming rate, too fast for the average person to be able to comprehend. So you let the Corps think for you. You let them keep enormous databases on your eating and drinking habits, as well as your TV-watching habits. You get married to another Corp worker, then let the Corp choose your children's names. Well, everyone needs security.

But you're not average, are you? You're different. You've got that small but indomitable sense of pride in you that says whatever happens you won't break. You'll use their own weapons – the mass media, the hypertechnology, the information overload – against them. You'll subvert the masses, sabotage the Corp and bring the truth to the people, because you live on the edge, the periphery of society. And from here you can clearly see the rotten core.

 One of the most quoted lines from *Neuromancer* is, "the street finds its own uses for things." Bear this in mind. A nailgun is just as effective as a pistol at point-blank range.

"The heroes of cyberpunk are not Buck Rogers or Zorro. They are you and I, normal people trying to survive in a harsh, uncompromising world without losing their identity."

You have the power – the subversive power of the desktop printer and personal global communications. You know that you can make a real difference. The heroes of cyberpunk are not Buck Rogers or Zorro. They are you and I, normal people trying to survive in a harsh, uncompromising world without losing their identity.

Sounds like a great starting point for a roleplaying game, doesn't it? Thought so – but before you chose a system to play with and get your players hooked on the idea, you should first immerse yourself in the genre (see the *Techno* books and *Cyberflicks* columns on pages 26 and 27). Then carefully consider what *type* of game you want to run – are the PCs struggling street anarchists, rebelling against the authorities, or are they a professional merc team (popular choice), hiring themselves to the highest bidder? Perhaps they're Corporate workers themselves, consumed by an overwhelming lust for power. The might form a police squad, desperately trying to protect the increasingly paranoid and violent

 If you have Internet access (and every good cyberpunk should) check out these newsgroups: alt.cyberpunk rec.games.frp.cyber and alt.cyberpunk.chatsubo

populace from themselves. Or perhaps a nomad biker family roaming through radioactive mid-America. The possibilities are simply endless.

Once you've decided on your theme, it's time to buy a system (see the Which system? box on the right), and make sure your players (and the proposed types of characters) are agreeable to all concerned. Take some time to carefully weave your PCs into the world you have chosen. Be sure to give them families, friends, enemies, acquaintances; they should have interesting lives in this world, with duties and commitments to make them consider the consequences of their actions and distract them at inconvenient moments!

RUNNING THE EDGE

Regardless of whether you're running a Corp extraction, a covert netrun or a celebrity scandal, there are certain things that can make or break a cyberpunk game.

The first of these has to be attitude. The PCs should always be looking over their shoulders. NPCs won't fight to the death – they're not stupid! Stand up to the PCs and give them a hard time. A few failed charisma rolls here, a few hostile reaction rolls there...

don't be lenient. If they break into a warehouse, have a passing local phone the cops. If they turn up at a murder scene, ignore them. Don't have the police dole out information to these nobodies; make them work hard for it.

Second, and closely related, is paranoia. They really are out to get the PCs, and 'they' can be a varied bunch...

Anyone with a known reputation as a hard-ass pipe-hitter is going to be challenged by much lesser guys wanting to gain respect from their peers. A top flight fixer should have that many deals on the go, and such a complicated web of contacts, that *anyone* could bear them a really bad grudge. Medias make enemies as part of their job, and as for nomads and deckers – well, can you say, 'the authorities are looking for you?' Thought so.

Keep the PCs under fire all the time, literally if necessary – they aren't the only ones walking round with jobs to do. Mug them, let them hear vicious rumours about how the dealer they double-crossed last



week has put a contract out on them. They should be sweating profusely every time they turn a corner.

Third is plot twist. Linearity is an all too common criticism of many cyberpunk scenarios, and you should be doing your best to make sure this isn't the case in your games. Say the PCs are hired by a Big Corp to eliminate a biotechnician. But when they do their research, they discover that he's working on a miracle breakthrough in nanotechnology medicine. They decide to make it look like he's dead and collect their fee, but actually let him alive. Here's the twist. The Big Corp put a 'sleeper' in the laboratory several months ago, and this guy tells the Big Corp of the PCs' plan when they approach the biotech. Soon the PCs are going to be dug into that lab, wondering who sold them out. But that's not all. The Big Corp anonymously tips off the lab owners that the biotech wants to defect to the Big Corp. So, now the PCs will be under fire from all directions.

Remember, there are at least two sides to every story. Always think through the various alternatives, even if you then return to the very first idea you had. Things are rarely what they initially seem, so always think about your options wisely.

The last consideration is technology. The level of technology in your world will make a huge difference to the game, regardless of which system you use. At its most basic, cyberware and/or heavy body modifications are the staple feature of cyberpunk – enhanced hearing, electronic eyes, reflex boosters and cyberlimbs abound. These should be easily available but not necessarily cheap. Many backstreet 'ripperdocs' are all too willing to give you the new Nikonoptics for half price – and half the chance of the operation being a success.

Computers are the next dilemma. Many cyberpunk games feature 'neural jacking', the process of hooking your brain (via a Cybermodem) directly into the Net, or Matrix, of computer systems worldwide. While there are some excellent cyberpunk novels where computer operation is still done through a keyboard and monitor, the cinematic 'cyberspace runs' are a definite favourite of most players.

Then there are the AIs: sentient computer intelligences which roam cyberspace, akin to gods in their unfathomable machinations. And then there are androids and space travel. Androids will be either slave machines like modern computers, or fully autonomous AIs, which in turn leads to all manner of questions regarding their rights and treatment by humans. If they're fully sentient, and subject

to the same laws as us, are they equal citizens? And if they're not subject to the same laws, why not? Check out the film *Bladerunner* for a pretty good set of scenario ideas dealing with androids and their position within society.

Most cyberpunk space travel is

"Cyberpunk is a dangerous game, and the players should never feel entirely at ease."

restricted to our own solar system or even just our own moon, but interstellar travel is an option some take. Just remember to think your logic through: cryogenic 'hypersleep' chambers for long hauls to the nearest star (which would take over four years to reach, even at lightspeed) are more likely than faster-than-light travel. And what the hell do they use for fuel?

UH-OH, IT'S THE MUNCHKINS

Whichever of the technological levels you decide to incorporate into your game, make sure you don't let the PCs too near it all. Munchkinism, a cute name for powergaming, is a problem for many a cyberpunk referee. With body modifications so readily available and firepower so, well, powerful, it is easy for a referee to be confounded by players who arm (and armour) themselves to the limit, dealing with every problem by shooting at it.

Don't let them get away with it – there are plenty of ways to dissuade your PCs from 'munching out'. Most PCs with tons of cyberware will trade points from their empathy for chrome. What they forget is that they will become cold fish as they progressively lose their humanity.

Characters like this will be impossible to relate to, and behave in a computer-like way. Normal people will feel unnerved by them and shun them accordingly. They will be completely unable to gain the trust of these uneasy people and will consequently be alienated by society.

Racism is a rare thing in cyberpunk (though it's tackled particularly well in the *Shadowrun* system), but human instinct leads us to fear what is different, and the majority of people won't have more metal than meat. Make sure they react in a fitting manner. Men who look more like robots should not be able to persuade complete strangers to lay down their life for them. If that isn't enough (and unfortunately for most munchkins it isn't), just remember there's

Always Someone Better Than You. Whizkid deckers don't stand a chance against a decent AI, and hotshot mercs can always be beaten by someone more cunning who doesn't oppose them with brute force.

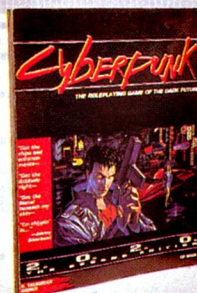
Steal their gear, burgle their apartments. If they treat a young gang member badly, have the whole gang come down after the PCs – that's the whole point of being a brother, right? Frame corporates for decisions they didn't make. Rig mini-mines under the solo's mattress. When he's wise to that rig them to go off if the mattress is lifted rather than sat on. Short-circuit a black market chip in the decker's cybermodem. Don't let up. →

WHICH SYSTEM?

So you're hooked, and you want to play. But which system should you use? This isn't an easy decision – there's so much scope in the cyberpunk genre that it really does depend on your style and tastes. Sensibly, though, you have the following choices:

Cyberpunk 2020

by R Talsorian Games. The original and best, though not necessarily for novice roleplayers. *CP2020* is widely supported and is positively bursting at the seams



with hard attitude. It deals with the downside of life; the imagery prevalent is reminiscent of the film *Bladerunner* and PCs are generally hard done by. A 3rd edition is in the pipeline.

Shadowrun (2nd edition) from FASA.

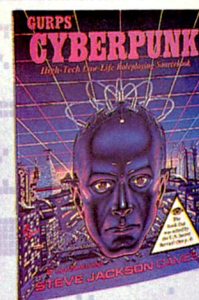
Probably better supported than *CP2020*, the main difference here is the setting: fantasy creatures of old have been re-awakened, enabling PCs to play elves, dwarves or even orcs, and magic co-exists with cybertechnology. *SR2* cannot be played as a 'straight' cyberpunk game – many of the



concepts and rules simply don't work without the magical element. Its flavour is generally a little lighter and PCs are more powerful than they are in *CP2020*.

GURPS Cyberpunk

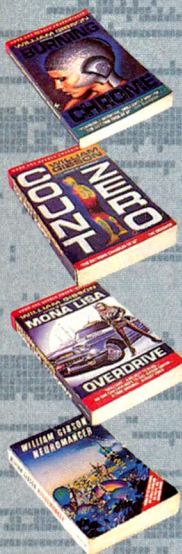
from Steve Jackson Games. Of course, this is absolutely ideal if you already use the *GURPS* system, but it's worth checking out as a sourcebook for other systems too. This is the book that got Steve Jackson Games into hot water



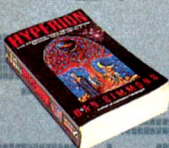
with the US Secret Service (you can read all about it at <http://www.io.com/SS>) and, being from the Illuminated Ones, features conspiracy theory everywhere. The game is certainly realistic and it's also extremely thoroughly researched.

Try to adapt an existing system. There are some other 'pure' cyberpunk systems available, but frankly none of them really cut it in terms of design or support. Fortunately, so long as you're familiar with the genre as a whole, adapting a system you know to cyberpunk isn't difficult at all. Give it a go.

TECHNO BOOKS...



William Gibson **BURNING CHROME • COUNT ZERO • MONA LISA • OVERDRIVE • NEUROMANCER • VIRTUAL LIGHT**



Dan Simmons **HYPERION • THE FALL OF HYPERION**

John Brunner **JAGGED ORBIT • SHOCKWAVE RIDER**

George Alec Effinger **WHEN GRAVITY FAILS**

Bruce Sterling **ISLANDS IN THE NET • SCHISMATRIX • CRYSTAL EXPRESS**

Rudy Rucker **HARDWEAR • WETWARE**

Pat Cadigan **SYNNERS**

John Sterling **MIRRORSHADES: THE CYBERPUNK ANTHOLOGY**

Peter F Hamilton **MINDSTAR RISING**

Walter Jon Williams **HARDWIRED • VOICE OF THE WHIRLWIND**

Neal Stephenson **SNOW CRASH**



Jeff Noon **VURT • POLLEN**

CYBERSPACE COWBOY

"Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data..."

William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

In cyberpunk, the Internet has mutated into a vast, virtual world in which people roam from city to city, represented by their own personal computerised icon, doing business, researching or just visiting. An icon can look like almost anything and is fully animated, moving as you will it to. If you want to appear to be a ten foot grizzly bear on the Net, go right ahead.

But the main purpose of cyberspace (at least in cyberpunk games) is as the domain of the decker, the netrunner, the cyberspace cowboy. All these terms mean just one thing: someone who uses the Net to crack computers to which they don't have any legal access.

What they do with those computers, or data fortresses as they're commonly known, is up to them. Most steal data and try to sell it to rival Corporations. Some use it for their own research. Some just trash it, destroying wantonly to sabotage the Corp's work. But they're all there to cause havoc.

That's where ICE comes in – Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics. ICE is the data fortress' way of keeping deckers out. It can do this in a number of ways – tracing their line and reporting to the cops, dumping them out of the system, or just blocking access.

Black ICE is the killer, though. Black ICE is usually illegal, but that doesn't stop the Corps using it. Black ICE will fry your brain and leave you flatlined by overloading your neural sensors, causing a complete seizure, or even screwing about with your deck to cause a short circuit that electrocutes you.

If you're playing a cyberpunk game, you'll have to deal with decking at some point. Some referees deal with it by disallowing PC deckers, relegating them to NPCs only. They say netrunches take too long and the other players get bored while the decker sits on his own playing virtual chess with the ref, but it needn't be like that. Streamline your rules, reduce the number of programs available – you can't order ICE



breakers from Argos, you know. Wing a few dramatic rolls so as not to slow up the action and make sure the other players get involved. A common mistake many refs make is to model their runs on those depicted in *Burning Chrome* and *Neuromancer*, where the action all takes place in cyberspace and the other characters just hang around.

"The essence of punk is change. Out with the old, in with the new, and then out with that when it gets boring. Chaos, a perpetual mutation."

But those characters didn't have people playing them. Yours do, and those players will want to *do* something. So change the script; make sure the run takes place in the heat of the action, during a riot or helping the solos to enter the target's premises without tripping the alarms. Or have the non-decking PCs 'social engineer' the run – that is, create a decoy or distraction to buy time for the decker.

Above all, be cinematic. *Cyberpunk 2020's* system is often criticised for being too much like a wargame, with subgrids and 5-square movement limits. *Shadowrun* wasn't much better until the release of *Virtual Realities 2.0* which contained much better rules that rely more on the decker's abilities than on his equipment, and slim down the number of rolls required to bypass systems. Let's just hope that *Cyberpunk 3*, which is due out sometime soon, will do the same thing.

Treat netrunches like you would a car chase – the last thing you want to do is stop halfway through to scour the manual for a table or rule. Keep it fast, fluid and manic. No single netrunch should take more than ten minutes, real time, no matter how complicated the task.

CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere is important in all games, but especially so in cyberpunk. Dimming the lights can work, but extremely bright lighting is just as good for a stark feel.

Encourage your players to dress the part, and bring props – an old PC keyboard is fine for a deck (heavily painted and modified if you really want to go for it), and mirrorshades are a must. Corps can slick their hair back and wear a suit. Solos, don full leathers (or as much as you've got). Nomads, tie a bandanna. Techies should go

for overalls and have a toolkit handy. All these things are clichés, sure, but if used sparingly they can really help.

Music is important to a good cyberpunk atmosphere. Opinions on the perfect cyberpunk soundtrack differ vastly, but my preference is for modern techno-ambient (Autechre, Biosphere, FSOL) for street scenes and decking, classical

(Mahler, Rachmaninov) for Corp meetings, dance (Prodigy, PWEI) for chases and clubs and the obligatory industrial (NIN, Ministry, Fear Factory) for fights. And check out *Cyberpunk* by Cassandra Complex – six years old and still as relevant as ever.

Don't play them too loud (unless you want to really simulate being in a club) – just enough to be heard clearly. And don't be afraid to experiment. Change your tunes regularly, or the players will get too used to a soundtrack and start to become complacent. Shock them.

Deny the players easy refreshment, too – as Mike Pondsmith (*Cyberpunk 2020's* designer) says, "this is the dark future here; and it can't be accurately portrayed with milk and cookies on the table." Above all, stay sinister. Cyberpunk is a dangerous game, and the players should never feel entirely at ease.

BUILDING A CAMPAIGN

A word about Mr Johnson. He is the mysterious guy in the black suit with mirrorshades and a briefcase who offers the PCs a job. For your first few games, using Mr Johnson is fine as a way to kickstart the scenario, but he soon wears thin, akin to the old, 'you're all sitting in the Dragon's Head when suddenly...'

Use the PCs own lives to instigate scenarios, after all, who could refuse to help his or her own brother when he gets into big trouble with the Corp/Mafia/gangs? (And for more on how families can be involved in roleplaying scenarios, check out 'It's a family affair' starting on page 58.) If your dealer picks a girl up in a bar, have a jealous ex-boyfriend who just happens to be an executive for a large military Corp start on him. Or sell the fixer some dodgy chips – how many fixers actually check the gear



they're selling? They will after a few angry customers come knocking. See the scenarios ideas boxout on page 24 for some more suggestions.

As for campaigns, cyberpunk can be the easiest or hardest genre in which to run one. The main problem is that cyberpunk PCs, by their very nature, are survivors who tend to trust no-one. Trying to find a new hook that will involve a media, decker, solo, fixer and nomad in every single scenario is not only tough work, it's restricting.

One solution is to make the PCs be part of an established team, whether that be a mercenary unit, a private investigation firm, a news crew or a rock band. There's nothing wrong with this and it certainly works, but be careful because players can often feel 'railroaded' by this approach.

So how do you keep a group of extremely diverse PCs from either killing each other or just wandering off? Probably the best answer is to give the PCs a common enemy (or bond) which unites them despite their differences. Perhaps they all happen to be at the same club when a cyberpsycho goes completely crazy, zeroing people left, right and centre. After the solo takes him down, the medtechie takes a look at him and discovers a chip socket with a burnt-out chip still in. The fixer recognizes it as a batch that came in last week from Antarctica. When they take it to a decker, he discovers that it contains a proprietary chip from a big military Corp which is based in Germany – the crusade against the Corp really has begun now. To keep them interested you might consider letting them find a hitlist in the Corp's data fortress... with all their names included.

This is where your PC's history comes in handy, too. Work that lifepath to the full – cram in as many coincidences and mutual acquaintances to unite the PCs as possible (for more tips on this, see 'Suds & Sorcery' in *arcane* 9 – see page 57 if you missed it).

Make sure the players' actions affect your campaign world. If they haven't paid their rent for three months, they might just find the locks have been changed one day, and their gear starts cropping up in backstreet markets at bargain prices. Or maybe the cleaner is a romantic who dreams of life as a tough guy. Don't leave any of your weapons in the apt when the cleaner's due, or you could come back to a large hole in the wall and a very dead cleaner. Try explaining that to the landlord.

Have NPCs react specifically to the PC's actions. Remember, it's a fluid world. Clubs change, people die, kids are born, governments and laws come and go. Take note of throwaway comments players make

about your creations – 'Hey, wouldn't it be cool if...?' Maybe it would, so try it.

CYBERPUNKS ARE DEAD!

So says nutty German noise merchant Atari Teenage Riot. But is the genre merely resting or mutating? That's a cyberpunk's job, to stay on the edge and move with the times. But of late, many people have complained that cyberpunk is no longer relevant. They say it's become stale. But that's all rubbish – how many Tolkien fans insist modern fantasy is dead? Thousands of *Lord of the Rings* carbon copies are published every year. People lap them up.

The same is true of cyberpunk, both in books and games. New faces, such as Jeff Noon and Neal Stephenson, have grasped the mantle and are pushing back the boundaries. These people have even less respect for convention than Gibson or Sterling did in 1982, and they'll convince you that the attitude is still relevant.

There's been a bit of a resurgence in cyberpunk-style games recently, too. The success of White Wolf's *World of Darkness* games and *The X-Files* has revived interest in darkness, conspiracy theory and paranoia. R Talsorian is about to release *Cyberpunk 3rd Edition* and FASA is releasing boatloads of material for *Shadowrun* 2.

But scratch the surface and you find some excellent new stuff, too, most of it from small companies – true to the cyberpunk spirit. *SLA Industries*. *Conspiracy X*. *Netrunner* (okay, so it's a CCG, but it's still a game, right?). Ianus has been quietly building the *Night's Edge* series for *Cyberpunk 2020*. More will surely come.

The essence of punk is change. Out with the old, in with the new, and then out with that when it gets boring. Chaos, a perpetual mutation. As technology races forwards at breakneck speed we have to constantly re-assess our lifestyle, our attitudes, our outlook. You can fly anywhere in the world within 24 hours, and send a message to Australia – complete with graphics, sound and even animation – in five minutes. Truly this is a global village.

But there will always be misanthropes, those who feel outcast from society. And there will always be criminals, corruption, narcotics and poverty. When all these factors collide with the cheap, widely available technology of the future, how will they react? As the world changes, so does cyberpunk, perpetually re-evaluating theories. So don't throw out those mirrorshades just yet, put 'em on, play some cyberpunk, and prepare for what is to come.

...and cyberflicks

Here is a short list of some of the most relevant films in the cyberpunk genre. There are, of course, many more titles available. Best book your optics in for a service.



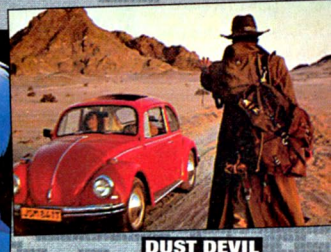
BLACK RAIN



BLADERUNNER



CYBERCITY



DUST DEVIL



GHOST IN THE SHELL



TERMINATOR



JOHNNY MNEMONIC



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Cthulhupunk
campaign

Arabian Nights

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and desert raiders

**MORAL DILEMMAS
ON THE MEAN STREETS
OF MODERN GAMES**

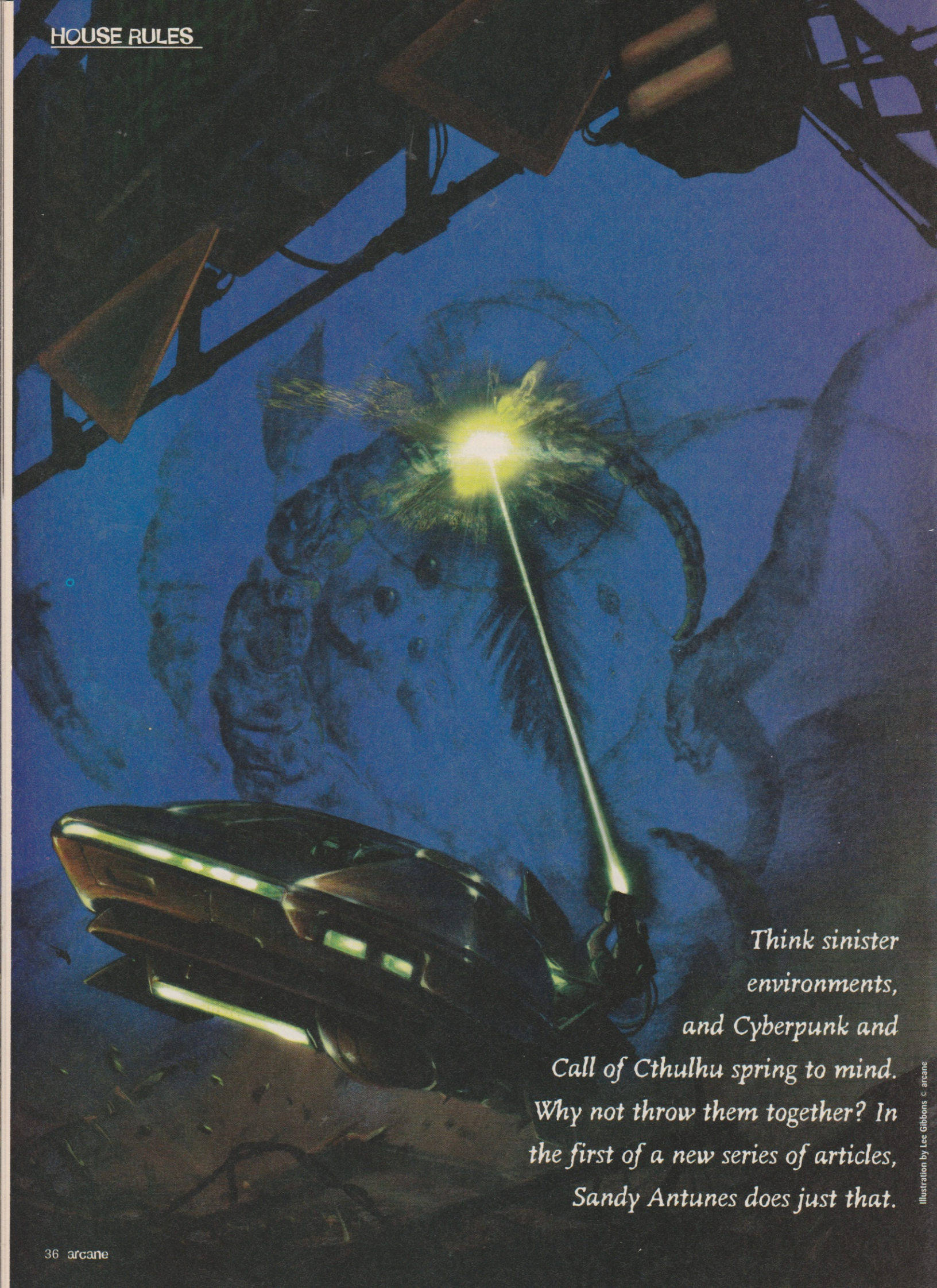
HEROES ON THE EDGE

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*Think sinister
environments,
and Cyberpunk and
Call of Cthulhu spring to mind.
Why not throw them together? In
the first of a new series of articles,
Sandy Antunes does just that.*

Illustration by Lee Gibbons © arcane

THE CALL OF CYBERTHULHU

WHY CYBERPUNK?

Let's start by explaining why Cthulhu and Cyberpunk are meant for each other. *Call of Cthulhu* is a great game on its own, but it ties in neatly with William S. Gibson's twisted visions.

Though the world of cyberpunk is dark, the Mythos is far darker, and it's up to the characters to sort through the grey miasma and decide what's true. Gone are the masquerades of an ordinary life; instead, characters begin living at the edge and can fall further.

The cyberpunk genre is all about a darker tomorrow. Everything has gone just a little bit wrong, but society hasn't quite crumbled yet. Power and control seem more important than sanity or life, and senseless violence is common.

The Mythos fits into this world seamlessly, its own corrupted nature finally matched by the surrounding human society. Still hidden behind the scenes, the various threats and cults have even more areas to hide, and even more bargaining chips to play. Both street life and corporate culture can become their pawns.

Dangers also face the Mythos, however. Their secrecy is challenged by the rampant flow of information through the 'net. Although advanced, human technology is still no equaliser to beings that literally defy reason; humans are ultimately tool makers, and the tools have gotten better. So there is a constant struggle between the growing capability of individual humans, and the overall downslide of society in the cyberpunk world. The Mythos cultures have more decadent and greedy pawns to work with, and the Investigators have fewer morals and more of desire to do damage. It about balances out.

A 'typical' cyber story will start with an innocuous lead through a newspaper, contract, or story on the street. The lead will turn darker as it's investigated, the Investigators realise they're on their own, and they'll likely get caught in a double-cross or two before they figure out the score.

Once they have a clear picture, though, they'll try and burn the threat back (either cleverly, by manipulating the media or police forces, or by charging in personally).

They'll succeed, or come close, and generally never be appreciated for it. They'll question their own motivation, consider just giving in or walking on past; at that point, a good Keeper will toss them a few extra reasons to continue, such as foreshadowing the end of even this downtrodden society. And the cycle continues.

CHARACTER GENERATION

The characters should be from different background, with different ultimate goals. Since

there's always a war going on somewhere, ex-military veterans are a good source as both NPCs and for characters.

Middle class types (data thieves and programmers, 'riggers' who operate remote machines, and techies of all sorts) are a second class to draw from. Detectives, doctors (either legal or black market), and scientists would have likely hooks for getting involved in early Mythos investigations. Media stars and politicians are another common cyberpunk proto-hero.

The standard *Call of Cthulhu* statistics still apply, though Education can be more broadly defined and include street smarts as well as straightforward schooling.

COMBAT

Most new weapons are just modifications and improvements on the classic old ideas of the gun, knife, and club. 'Staff/Stick' (10%) includes stunning billy-clubs and cattle prods. 'Blackjack' (25%) refers to use of a blackjack or cosh (for rendering people unconscious). 'Bite' (20%) becomes useful for people (especially pseudo-vampires) who augment themselves, as does 'Claw' (25%).

Long range weapons may be added as desired, including: 'Tasps' (20%), which are weapons that jolt to the pleasure (or, if designed, pain) centre of the brain from a distance; 'Lasers', for just about any beam weapons; and 'Launchers', a catch-all for the rocket/grenade-launcher class of weapons.

Combat in cyberpunk tends to be fast and nasty. To add more tension, characters and NPCs should have to make their 'to hit' rolls by more than the opposing dodge roll (if they are able to dodge at all). This gives a very big edge to the faster player.

Give everyone two 'actions' per combat round, usually attack plus a dodge. If they want to do anything complex (driving, fixing stuff), they can do that plus dodge at half their usual skill. Aiming would count as a complex action that takes up the entire round and half of the next (with no dodging), but that attack the next round will (dice and Keeper willing) go where the player or NPC aimed it.

Combat junkies can do all-out attacks, with no dodges but getting two attack rolls instead. By the same token, a coward can just dodge and run,

and have a better chance of getting out alive.

Which brings up the idea of cover. Any non-mercenary type in combat quickly learns to keep down. Just use the percentage of the body covered as the chance that a 'hit' will miss the character and impact the terrain instead. Ducking behind a car hides about half of you, so there's a 50/50 chance even a good shot will miss you. For most people, this is a good deal better than dodging bullets out in the open.

Of course, aimed shots never hit cover, and it is difficult to get better than 50% cover. Most attempts to use cover and fight (from around a corner, for example) are worth only 20-30%. Actually trying to hide and avoid combat can push this up to 60%, and still let you keep track of what's going on.

Rigging

A rigger is a person who hooks themselves directly into a machine to use it. Through a standard socket jack, the person becomes almost one with the machine, increasing their ability and speeding their response time.

This mix of person and technology gives the rigger an edge over the manual operator. The most common use of rigging is driving; truck, motorcycle or pursuit cars in particular benefit from the options and speed of rigging.

Another big use is lab technicians and cashier clerks. It isn't glamorous, but having a wireless hookup to your work gear can really boost productivity.

Rigged items can be controlled from a distance, and if they have their own cameras, from a very great distance. Their senses are passed along to the rigger, so the rigger becomes the radar unit, the floating video camera, or the electron microscope.

In addition to gaining the intrinsic functions of the gear, riggers have a bit of programming that improves their ability to use the kit, bumping up the skills quotient. Rigging allows you two attempts to succeed at any relevant task. First, you roll against natural skill; if this fails, you roll against rigging to see if the machine/person interlink is able to force a success.

Quite simply, having a direct hookup means you don't screw up as much. This is why riggers are a very marketable commodity. You can also

The Essential Cthulhupunk:

 *Call of Cthulhu* core rules (any edition, 5th being the latest.)
A deck of cards, and some dice.
Neuromancer, by William Gibson – the classic cyberpunk world.
Snow Crash, by Neal Stephenson – realistic yet whimsical, with a metaphysical plot.

"Despite advances in technology, most Mythos beings are just as unstoppable as before"

HOUSE RULES



Recommended for Cthulhupunk:
A visit to a web site
using a writer's
perspective:

<http://w3.one.net/~wronk/cybrpunk.html>

Delta Green, from
Pagan Publishing
— sourcebook for a
secret agency that
fights the modern
era Mythos.
Bone Dance, by
Emma Bull — good
cyberpunk/voodoo/
mystic mix.

Count Zero and Mona
Lisa Overdrive, by
William Gibson
— finishing out
his trilogy.
Mirrorshades, edited
by Bruce Sterling
— many different
views of cyberpunk.
Max Headroom, a
perfectly cyberpunk
British TV series.
Blade Runner, a
future-noir movie by
Ridley Scott.
Akira, a mainstream
post-Tokyo crash
Japanese animated
movie



Useful for Cthulhupunk:
Many novels and
movies, listed in the
Alt.cyberpunk FAQ:

<http://bush.cs.tam.u.edu/~erich/alt.cp.faq.html>



Background music.
Tastes differ: techno,
movie soundtracks,
classical, and metal
are equally fine.
Remember the future
is not a quiet place.



R. Talsorian's
Cyberpunk 2020
rulebook. Has
great character
generation ideas.



Chaosium's Cthulhu
Now, for modern
era weaponry.

GURPS Cthulhupunk:
mostly Cyber
plus Monsters,
but has some
good points.

try to use a piece of rigged gear even if you have almost no skill in it at all; the gear may be smarter than you.

If you don't want to pay that much attention, you can use another (single) skill while rigging, but you lose that extra 'failsafe' roll. Basically, you're letting the item cruise on autopilot while you spend your attention elsewhere. So shooting, first aid, computer library use, photography, and many other tasks are possible while rigging. But, if you fail either roll, both rolls fail (humans are not so good at multi-tasking.)

If you want to be really complex and keep many units on standby or doing routine tasks, make a rigging roll every time you try to actively use a 'standby' unit. Failure means you can't do anything until you make a rigging roll for each unit you're hooked up to.

Good quality gear is clearly an essential for a rigger. Cars with autosteer can add to your driving skill (10-20%), units with radar or IR can improve your vision, systems with implanted weapons can give you remote striking power, and alarmed units can provide early warning. While most gear is 'stock' and designed for the office rather than a war zone, Keepers can feel free to increase the tech available as characters progress.

NETRUNNING

A 'runner breaks into a system, gets data or runs an illicit program, then tries to get out clean. Thus the whole concept of netrunning is based on theft and guile. So, it's appropriate that we lift a few concepts from another game (Pinnacle's excellent *Deadlands* — reviewed in *arcane* 13) and hack it to fit our needs.

Netrunners have a percentile skill in 'netrunning', plus a deck of cards with both Jokers. The Keeper tells the player what the target hand is and provides an appropriate poker hand that represents the task difficulty.

A Mom & Pop computer system would fall to a bare Jack, while YoYoDyne's mainframe might require a straight flush. The netrunner has to get the target hand or better without drawing any Jokers.

The netrunner rolls against his or her skill, and draws five cards from the deck. If he misses his skill roll, he returns one card for each 10% he missed by, before he gets to look at his cards. For every 10% he beats his skill by, he can choose to draw another card, one at a time.

If the player makes the target hand or better, he succeeds. The better the hand, the better (faster, more secure) his success. If he misses the desired hand, he fails.

Most failures simply lock the 'runner out of the system until he gets a new edge (new gear, new info, stolen passcodes) to try again. He can't just leap in again, after all, since the system's marked him. In any case, the deck doesn't get reshuffled until the 'runner has a good long chance to recoup (as in vacation, or days off). This isn't so much a matter of clock time as how much pressure he's under. So as long as the scenario is in full gear, he's stuck with the deck dealt to him.

The more runs done without a good break, the greater the chance of making an error and having a Joker show up. If the player draws a Joker, his run is ended, and he's been tagged by the system. Whatever the system defence was, it got them. For the Mom & Pop case, this probably

just alerts the police. For YoYoDyne, though, a Joker means Black Ice (or worse) has targeted the netrunner.

Let the player try a Luck roll to see if he can escape intact. 'Success' means that his cover's blown, his run in disarray, and police are knocking down his door — easy stuff to deal with. Blowing his Luck roll has this and more, as feedback from the system security personally targets him. Recommended is 1d6 damage, plus a sanity check and minimum 1d10 loss until the 'runner succeeds in another run of at least equal challenge (since his confidence has been shot.) Mind you, if he had a winning hand before blowing it, his run succeeded even though he didn't make it out.

MYTHOS FUTURES

Despite advances in technology, most Mythos beings are just as unstoppable as before. Mi-go never showed up on photographic films, and by extension are likely to be invisible to video or cyber-eyes. Weapons may do more damage, but most Mythos entities are still bullet-sponges when it comes to (still) primitive slughtrowers or simple nuclear weapons.

While human technology is more sophisticated, it is still millennia behind that of the Elder races. Indeed, most aliens visitors to Earth never brought gear of their own, but just improvised using local materials. Now that the local materials are more sophisticated, the things they can make are *really* scary.

Magic remains a secretive and personal art, still requiring power or sanity to work. Whether spells can be combined with computer programs is a theoretical question; in general, the 'net is a particularly interesting anomaly. Some suggest it's just another dimension for Yog-Sothoth, and perhaps it's also a border to the Dreamlands. You decide.

You can run games as Cyberthulhu, with an emphasis on the high and low tech, the social strata, and cybernetically enhanced citizens. Or you can take the Cthulhupunk route, focusing on the social decay and ambivalent morals of the new age.

Both have a different feel; the tech approach tends to start with overconfident Investigators pumped full of good intentions who quickly suffer catastrophic setbacks, but come back wiser. The punk route starts with cynics and either evolves heroes or angst-ridden corpses.

In either case, it's important to focus on the characters as much as the Mythos-driven plots; the cyberpunk genre is ultimately about alienation and the human condition.

Keep scenes strong and visual, and alternate fast pacing with brief respites. Politics and social interactions should be complex and laced with money, and cheap technology should be everywhere. Street level techies will hack up gear to make new, cool, unreliable stuff, while corporate tech will be slick and polished.

Most crimes will be seen the way speeding tickets are viewed now; it's not wrong unless you get caught. But everything has consequences: kill and you'll be targeted by the law, let live and you've gained an enemy.

And everyone has a price, even your fellow Investigators. With the Mythos, though, there are things worse than living — worse than dying, even. And in the information age, all rumours are true. Welcome to the near future.

CALL OF CTHULHU STATS FOR CYBERPUNK

The following skills, with new defaults, are useful for a cyberpunk setting.

Computer Use (from Cthulhu Now) (25%): required for using any computer, as computers are an integral part of society.

Computer Tech (0%): This includes both software and hardware creation and modification, for computers and cyberwear.

Netrunning (0%): Required for people who will directly link into the information 'net' (ie netrunners). More on this in the main article.

Cooking/Bartending (10%): Bartending is added to Cooking to reflect characters always hanging around in bars.

Interrogation (0%): Always a useful skill, includes detecting lies.

Pharmacology (0%): Important subdivision of Medical, for the cyberpunk world. Default is 0%.

BioEngineering (0%): The equivalent of mechanical aptitude for the field of biotech, bioengineering, or genetics.

Cybernetics (0%): A mix of mechanical skill and medicine, this is required for doctors who actually install or repair cybernetics.

Mechanical/Robotics (20%): This combined skill reflects both general mechanical aptitude and ability to repair or work with the mechanical parts of cybernetics (but not the human part).

Rigging/Teleservos (10%): For people who work as 'riggers', cybernetically linked to the equipment they operate (often trucks, gun turrets, and cameras).

Heavy Machine Ops (10%): A catch-all for operating non-cybernetic heavy equipment.

Battlesuit (0%): The ability to use powered armour, exoskeletons, etc.

Urban Tracking (10%): The ability to find or follow someone in the concrete jungle.

In general, you can use technical skill to fix machines and cyberwear, and medical skills to fix people and cyberwear. Which leads us to the ever-trendy and chic hardware that people can hook up to themselves. Abilities and gear can be added directly to the character's body by spending skill points, just as with buying skills. Some popular items are listed — other ideas would tend to be experimental and thus costly.

Adding tech reduces one's Sanity, because the person is losing a bit of touch with human reality. Drifting from the human standard, cybergear users are (subtly) making themselves both different from, and more than, the everyday mortal. Attitudes of superiority and overconfidence can have disastrous implications in a Cthulhu setting. The exact cost to Sanity by adding cybergear is simply one-fifth (1/5) the number of skill points you spent on the gear.

Some point costs — deduct from your initial percentage points to spend on skills — are below:

Cybernetic Eyes: 25 pts each plus 20 pts per option (IR, Telescopic, UV, microscopic, night vision). Each option adds 5-15% to Spot Hidden in the appropriate setting.

Boosted hearing: 25 pts for a stereo pair, adds +15% to Listen skill. Smell enhancement: 20 pts, +5% to Spot Hidden and +10% to Tracking.

Enhanced reflexes: cost = 20 pts for each +1 added to Dexterity.

Netrunning rig: cost = 70 pts, enables netrunning

Socket jack: cost = 10 pts, allows use of 'skill chips' as well as the ability to be linked into machinery, and is required for Rigging.

Embedded weapon: 20 points if you have a cyberlimb, 40 pts otherwise

Cybernetic limbs: arms and hands add to Str or Dex, legs to Con or Dex. Costs 20 pts/limb with no bonuses. For each +1 to a stat, add 10 pts. Limbs can't go more than +3 each.