THE FUTURISTS

You are attending a large convention. You aren't particularly interested in the subject matter of the convention, though; rather, you are here because it is the location of a panel that will be held here. You are part of a group known as the Futurists. You meet occasionally at technical or science fiction conventions. Your goal is to introduce to the general public new ideas and technology in a non-frightening way. Each of you is brilliant in your own way. Your discussions can range from the moral implications of cutting down all the old-growth forests to what the tunnel connecting France and England will mean to the European Common Market.

The focus of this panel is on Virtual Reality. Some of you interpret this conventionally: a pair of goggles that give an illusion of three-dimensionality, and a glove and belt or other sensing devices that give feedback to the computer. Others have more exotic visions, from biofeedback, to direct neural interfaces like in William Gibson's Neuromancer, to things like Star Trek's holodeck. Others see it as the future of teaching, shopping, even working.

There are several panelists who will briefly discuss their current projects, and then turn the panel over to questions from the audience. There is nothing else scheduled in the room afterwards, so many of you expect to stick around for a while and mingle.

Will Virtual Reality be simple entertainment, or will it become the jumping-off point for human evolution? What lies ahead in the Future?

TODAY'S PANELISTS:

Simon Kane: President of Kane Software in Silicon Valley, Kane is rumored to be ready to unveil one of the best conventional VR systems on the market.

Dr. Helen Jacobs: Has been doing research in neurology and gene splicing.

Mike Abbley: A native of Minneapolis, Mike is reported to be working on some kind of interactive interface.

Wes Atkins: A financier interested in developing new VR systems.

NEPENTHE

Over twelve hundred years ago, the ancients in their pride believed they had tamed the world forever with their Engines. Even today, in the year that by their numbering system would be 3224 (1211 New Era), traces of their achievements remain. The huge, fire-ravaged cities of fallen buildings where rats roam. The arrow-straight roads, which are said in legend to have been a greater cause of death even than War. There are even said to be a few, isolated enclaves where Engines are still tended and kept alive. But, in the end, the Engines that were the pride of the ancients became their downfall. In the height of their glory, they created Nepenthe, and Nepenthe destroyed them. Within ten years of its creation, 8 of every 10 people on the planet lay dead from the invention some called the Scourge of God.

The Wars of Cleansing that followed the Dying Days wiped out all known traces of Nepenthe, along with most of the Engines that had made its creation possible. Beyond their zeal to destroy the actual scourge, however, they also managed to destroy its memory. In their zeal to stamp out Nepenthe, many regions passed laws which not only punished those who had come in contact with it, but also those who simply discussed its creation or the way in which it had operated. Legendary materials like books and papers -- not just scientific, but on all subjects -- were gathered and burned by fearful mobs faithful to the New Teachings, for if books survived, someone might use the knowledge they contained to rebuild the dreaded Engines, and Nepenthe might return and take the rest of the race with it.

So thorough was the cleansing that, today, we have only guesses as to what Nepenthe actually was. Some think it was a new form of Engine itself, possessed with an evil intelligence and roaming the roads like packs of wolves to feast on humanity. Others believe that this is simplistic, and that Nepenthe was a product of Engines, created with the power they provided. Perhaps it was some new strain of disease, for the ancients could create and destroy even the invisible germs. Many ancients were addicted to chemicals of various kinds, and perhaps their own addictions betrayed them when a new and deadly mixture was developed. Perhaps a wave of despair gripped them, and they committed suicide. It all happened a very long time ago, and no one can read the few records that survive, as the art of reading has been lost.

A very old poem written during the Dying Days and passed down orally may be one of the only remaining clues to the nature of the Scourge:

The dark mistress calls me, she calls me back
Back to her hidden rooms, her pleasant turnings,
    her shining-mirror-doorways,
    her paths printed on the folds of my brain.
The shadow-streets are empty, dead already or dying,
But in her shining reality, I meet again my true people.
Without her I am a stretched string, an empty eggshell,
    a handful of dust.
She fills my hollow corpse like rainbow fills a prism.
Her sharp teeth gnaw my guts -- I shall not live long;
Her lips burn like fire, but oh, her kiss is sweet.

TIME LINE

(old time)
2003: Nepenthe is perfected.

2004: Nepenthe spreads rapidly through all parts of the world that make heavy use of Engines. As it claims its first handful of victims, a few individuals band together to stop its spread.

2006:Nepenthe has claimed enough lives to draw the attention of current world governments. However, it has taken hold too deeply to be stamped out by their efforts. The Dalai Lama of Tibet says that Nepenthe is a sign, and calls for the destruction of Engines.

2010:The Dying Days are in full swing. Many who do not perish from Nepenthe itself starve to death when food is no longer distributed to cities. Self-appointed Guardian groups in the Americas, Europe and Japan begin blowing up power plants and ripping down wires in an attempt to halt its spread. The Hoover Dam is destroyed. These efforts are largely unsuccessful, however, and these areas eventually become almost entirely depopulated.

2011:A number of religious groups in various parts of the world preach that all humans must turn their backs on the Engines that brought about the scourge if they wish to be saved. The greatest of these, Abu Jekara of [] gathers a wide following among the Hindus of his nation.

2013:Eight out of every ten persons alive at the turn of the century are now dead. Most major leaders of the new religions gather in New Delhi; there, the charismatic Abu Jekara forges them together into the foundation of the Church of Free Minds. As its first official action, the True Church declares a War of Cleansing against Nepenthe, the Engines that gave it birth, and the books that would allow the Engines to be recreated. Year 0 of the New Calender begins.

1(new calender): The War of Cleansing is in full advance. Most books, Great Cities, and Engine-built buildings that can be burned are burned. Thousands die, but this seems like a small number compared to the billions who died during the Dying Days.

17:In the Council of Sinkiang, Abu Jekara strengthens his hold on the Church of Free Minds, which by now has absorbed or destroyed most of its competitors. Jekara assembles the bureaucracy necessary for a theocratic world government.

25:Abu Jekara dies. Lacking the Engines used by the ancients for rapid communications, the First Theocracy collapses into dozens of splinter groups, each led by a preacher claiming to follow Jekara's teachings.

26-424:Humanity gradually resettles the depopulated areas. The True Church is almost universal, though its interpretations vary widely and heresies abound. Without engines, news travels slowly, and many areas are still isolated.

424:Su Li, a young girl from Nagasaki, New China, from a congregation with an extremely mystical interpretation of the faith, manifests psychic abilities at an unambiguous level of strength. The local bishop sends her to the Church Headquarters in Delhi. Among her abilities is the power to detect others with heightened psychic abilities. The Church gathers these individuals together, and encourages them to marry and reproduce.

850:Using the psychic powers of its leaders, the Church of Free Minds uncovers a longstanding secret society called the Engineers within its own highest echelons, dedicated to researching and bringing back the still hated and feared Engines of the past. These individuals are purged, but the question remains: were there others who were psychically shielded?

920:Nearly all the leaders of the Church possess some psychic ability. Using their powers of communication and command, they establish the Second Theocracy.

1190:Some psychics have begun displaying the ability to move backwards through time, by possessing the minds of their predecessors. After a few disastrous experiments, the Church severely restricts the use of this talent, and forbids any attempt to change the past.

2210:Evidence again surfaces that the Engineers are still an active group.

1211:The High Council authorizes a time-jaunt back to 20th-century America, in order to research the actual nature of Nepenthe so that the Church can find ways to counter it.

KNOWN PSYCHIC ABILITIES:

These abilities may show up singly or in groups. They are ranked roughly in order of how common they are, from most common to least.

Language Sense You may speak the language of anyone you meet, but may not read thoughts. Only works for spoken language.
Psychic Shielding You may selectively stop psychic abilities from working on you.
Psychic Detect You can sense nearby psychic activity.
Absolute Recall If you glance at anything, you remember it.
Empathy You can sense emotions and auras.
Truth Sense You can tell whether or not someone is telling the truth.
Telepathy You can read the thoughts of others.
Clairsentience You can observe, or hear, things happening at a distance. The range of both these abilities can vary from feet to hundreds of miles.
Psychic Shock You may cause pain over a distance.
Suggestion You can get people to do things and think it was their idea.
Mental Blank You may obliterate a person's memories.
Telekinesis You may move small objects with your mind.
Pyrokinesis You may set things on fire with your mind.
Possession You may temporarily submerge another's consciousness and replace it with your own.
Trans-Temporal Possession (see below)

All player characters possess the abilities of Trans-Temporal Possession, which allows them to temporarily take control of a body in the past. The range of times you can visit is limited. You may not occupy two places at the same, so anything within your own life-span is out. Also, one person can only go back about three hundred years. It is possible to go back farther, but that requires more psychics, to provide more psychic energy. This trip requires more energy than anything previously undertaken, so at least three time-travelers need to concentrate at all times in order to hold the entire party in the past. If one party member gets more than fifty feet away from the rest of the group, they will be unable to maintain the link and will poof back into your own time.

Once you are occupying a mind in a given time period, you must remain there. It is not possible to switch minds again. You will need to rest for weeks when you get home.

The longer you stay in the past, the less concentration is required. If you were to stay for a week or so, it would be possible for you to stay without the psychic support of the rest of the group. However, the plans call for you staying for only a few hours. That should be enough time to fulfill your mission.

Most of you have been on trips to the past before. You all know that it is strictly forbidden to attempt to change anything. If anything is changed, then the future you return to will be a different world.

All players also have the ability of Language Sense, which allows them to speak any language spoken by those around them.

TRIP BACKGROUND

This trip was organized by the uppermost leaders of the church, and by Sanjay Gupta, the senior time-traveler. You all know that you are supposed to travel back to a time in the late twentieth century, before the Dying Days -- the earliest anyone has ever gone. The church has discovered the space-time coordinates of a meeting there at which the groundwork for Nepenthe was laid. You are to find out as much about Nepenthe there as you can. As usual, you are forbidden by the church to attempt to change anything.

Sanjay Gupta placed the time-space coordinates for the meeting firmly in your minds. All of you concentrated, until you located the building where the meeting was to take place. Then you searched around for a suitable collection of nearby minds to possess. Eventually you found a clump of them, and jumped.

When the GM tells you to begin, you find yourselves seated next to a table with some other people. You assume that the others are your friends, but you don't know which is which.

The minds that belong to the bodies you currently occupy are now in your century. They are being kept in safe, nondescript rooms until you are ready to return, and are allowed to observe nothing so as not to contaminate their own time period.

You are really a female, stuck in a male's body. This is a new experience for you, and it's kind of weird. Walking, talking, etc. with the new equipment will take a bit of getting used to. You hope the others won't give you too much of a hard time.

You are really a male, stuck in a female's body. This is a new experience for you, and it's kind of weird. Walking, talking, etc. with the new equipment will take a bit of getting used to. You hope the others won't give you too much of a hard time.

Minneapolis Star Tribune

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GOVERNOR ORDERS EVACUATION
OF TWIN CITIES

FEARS OF STARVATION FOR REMAINING CITIZENS

LAST ISSUE OF STAR TRIBUNE

Governor Arneson announced today that she could no longer guarantee delivery of new food supplies to the Twin Cities area, due to the unavailabity of truck drivers and other personnel who handled food delivery before the current crisis. Accordingly, she has advised all non-essential personnel to leave the city immediately if able to do so. "If there's anybody left out there who still isn't hooked on Nepenthe," she stated, "I'm afraid an urban environment doesn't really have anything to offer you anymore. There are plenty of abandoned farms out there -- go back to the land. Learn to farm like your ancestors did. In case you haven't figured it out, technological civilization has run its course. It's time to start over, people."

In the remainder of her speech to the nearly empty state assembly chamber, she went on to discuss the origin of Nepenthe. "Someday," she explained, "our descendants may wish to know what happened to the most technologically advanced civilization the world has ever known, that it was cut down in the height of its power by what was originally designed as a computer game. It's a little known fact," she went on, "that the original design for Nepenthe was formulated right here in Minneapolis, on April 15, 1994 at the Radisson South Hotel in room

"We all know what happened next. In every technologically-oriented country in the world, Nepenthe became the most popular form of entertainment since television. Few things were more relaxing, and at the same time invigorating, as the pictures and sensations provided by the new machine. (I speak from hearsay, for unlike 99% of my countrymen, I never tried the device myself. If I had, doubtless I would not be here to speak to you today."

"It was several years before the heavily addictive nature of Nepenthe became evident, and by then it was too late. With a few exceptions, most who tried it enjoyed it, but thought of it merely as nothing more than a fun computer game, and went back to work. Only a few noticed how, a year after buying their sets, people were plugging themselves in three or four hours a day, and after three years, every non-working moment. As everyone's lives grew worse, the classic addict's cycle set in -- people escaped because their lives were lousy, and the more they escaped, the worse their lives became. Productivity began dropping, but since almost no one who had tried the machine proved able to resist it, few were around to try to fix things."

The so-called energy terrorists were among the few who fully