MIKE ABBLEY

You are the stereotypical antisocial computer programmer type. You love talking to machines, but people have always been more trouble for you. You've been working for the past ten years on a shoestring budget to build some new interactive software that will revolutionize the way people see computer games. You're hoping to get funding to market and produce it properly here at the convention. You just hope that your arch-nemesis, Simon Kane, doesn't somehow find a way to edge you out like he has on every other project you've ever worked on.

You built your first board from scratch back in junior high. You never had much interest in talking to real people. You remember there was this girl, Wanda Phillips, you hung around with a bit, but she was too weird for you -- interested in magic and psychic powers and non-scientific stuff like that. Then there was a really embarrassing incident that you've largely blocked out of your memory involving the prom queen and the cafeteria, and you didn't see much of her after that.

You and Simon Kane were assigned to be roommates your freshman year at Cal Tech. He was everything you weren't -- popular, good-looking -- plus he was a good programmer too. Not as good as you, but very good. You quickly became best buddies. You helped him with his programs, he helped you get dates.

Things started to get rough when Simon got the job as assistant to your favorite professor that you wanted. Then you both went out for the same graduate fellowship to MIT, and he got that too. You think that his acceptance may have had a lot to do with a program you both worked on when you were teaching him about VR. Instead of MIT, you ended up going to the University of Minnesota -- OK, but not MIT.

One good thing did happen to you here, though: you got a girlfriend. You still can hardly believe that a girl this terrific would pay you any attention, but Charlotte Worley started talking to you at the computer lab one night, and the two of you really struck up a friendship. She was a grad student in psychology. She even started taking you to parties. Interesting things, parties. Complex mathematical dynamics.

After grad school, you got a decent job at Open Software. You were able to get a few small grants, and things were going OK. But even though Simon was halfway across the country, the problems kept getting worse. It seemed like every time you came up with a way to make a program better or faster, Kane somehow came up with the same thing, and published or got a patent first.

One time you tried suing, but you lost. You're sure it's your work, though. Your machine was a custom one-of-a-kind system, and the software just didn't match the visual imagery of Simon's usual work.

You've never figured out how Kane gets your stuff. You thought he might have put some hardware tap in your system, but you must have gone over it a hundred times, and you could never find anything. You even wrote your own operating system to make sure it didn't have a glitch in it. Maybe it's one of those long range mikes?

The last time a particularly nice bit of source code got swiped, you swore you'd get even sometime. You weren't sure how, but you knew you'd think of something. Hackers can be pretty sneaky.

You really, really hope he isn't able to get his grubby hands on your latest project. You're pretty sure it's the best thing you've ever done. It's entertainment software,

but with a difference. It's like an adventure game that customizes itself as it goes along. Based on the responses that the player makes, the playing environment gradually changes to fit the player's personality. If they like lots of hack & slash action, they get attacked more and more often -- if they like talking to people, it networks with other computers -- it can be fantasy, science fiction, modern, or any other genre, based on the user's responses -- it even develops an ideal member of the opposite sex for the user. You had trouble coming up with some of the psychological dimensions of the program, but fortunately, Charlotte was able to give you some suggestions about that.

There's just one problem with your system -- it's all text. With five more years of work, it could have graphics too, which would make it totally awesome. Actually, Kane has a Virtual Reality program he developed for his company that would be even better, but in order to use that you'd need to work with him, and you've got no intention of ever doing that again -- you know what happens. You do all the work, he gets all the credit.

It would be nice if you could get some financing. You've sent info about your program to some major financiers. You were planning to come to this convention anyway, but you got especially enthusiastic when you learned that one of them, Wes Atkins, is going to be here.

You've also heard about the work of a Dr. Jacobs. She's working on a biochip, which a few years down the road might lead to a direct neural interface. That would remove the need for a helmet or glasses with VR. If that was combined with your software and some graphics, it would be really spiffy. You'd like to talk to her if you can.

Anyway, you've finally figured out to fix Kane's wagon. You've brought along a disk that contains the major operating code for your software system. This is what you intend to try to sell to Wes Atkins, a financier who should be attending. You also have an exact duplicate of the program, with a really nasty virus built in. If it is put on anybody's system, it should destroy everything they've got. You intend to talk a lot about your great new program, waving the disk around as you do so. Then you will leave it around somewhere where anybody can pick it up. With luck, Kane should get it and wreck his system. With even more luck, you'll be able to watch what happens and figure out how he's been getting your stuff.

Incidentally, you have a copy of *The Way Things Work* with you here. It's one of your favorite books.

GOALS

Get a new job that lets you work on your project. You've been developing this software mainly on your own time. You'd like to continue developing it someplace new. You'd also like to be paid better, since based on your talent, you're seriously underpaid. Perhaps Wes will have something for you.

Find someone to collaborate with. Perhaps Dr. Jacobs will be able to work with you.

Propose to Charlotte. Up till now you haven't, because your job didn't pay enough. If you get a better offer, though, you'd like to pop the question.

Get revenge on Simon Kane. Maybe the virus will work, or maybe you'll try something else.

Find out how Kane's been getting your programs.

ITEMS

The Way Things Work

Two computer disks – one with your program, one with a deadly Trojan Horse

SIMON KANE

You are a terrific computer programmer and virtual reality artist. You're really on the cutting edge of the envelope. Your software and graphics are the best in the world. Well... so they're not quite all yours. So maybe you stole most of them from your best friend. Hey, that's what friends are there for, right?

You and Mike Abbley were assigned to be roommates your freshman year at Cal Tech. You were everything he wasn't -- popular, good-looking, sociable, outgoing. The only thing he had going for you that you didn't, was that he was a better programmer. Well, you probably could have passed him up, but why work that hard when swiping ideas from him was so much easier? You quickly became best buddies. He helped you with his programs, you helped him get dates. Hey, your side of the bargain was plenty difficult; the guy has the social skills of an aardvark. Fortunately, girls were willing to date him if they got a chance to date you afterwards.

With his lack of social skills, it was easy to do things like getting the assistantship he wanted to his favorite professor. Then you both went out for the same graduate fellowship to MIT, and you got that with the help of a program you both worked on when he was teaching you about VR. Instead of MIT, he ended up going to the University of Minnesota.

That was a bit of a problem. With Mike halfway across the country, you couldn't pick his brain anymore. You might even need to *shudder* work for a change. You needed a way to get at him.

Fate stepped in when you ran into an old high-school flame of yours, Charlotte Worley. This was a girl who'd do anything if the price was good enough. She was trying to get a Master's degree in Psychology, but had run into trouble. Fortunately, you came from a wealthy family, and could afford to invest in your future. You sweet-talked her for a while, and convinced her to go along with your plan. She would go to Minnesota, strike up a friendship with Mike, and find out what he was working on, then send the info straight to you. Then you paid a friend to write a thesis for her.

The plan worked perfectly. Mike always loved tinkering with his programs for years after they were already marketable. It was simple to publish and get patents before he was ready to go with them. Within five years of your graduation, you were running a prosperous software business in Silicon Valley, while he was stuck in a rinky-dink firm in Minneapolis.

He knows you've been taking his stuff -- he even tried suing you once (he lost). He just can't figure out how you're getting it. All he can think of is hardware. Charlotte has told you how he's torn apart every system he's ever had looking for bugs, and wrote his own operating software to protect from viruses, never dreaming that his problem might have something to do with human beings. What a weenie.

Your company, Kane Software, has been doing quite well, and you've been able to hire some other bright people to work for you so you can steal their ideas legitimately. Using the core VR material you stole from Mike back in college, you've put together a state-of-the-art Virtual Reality hardware and software package. It's one of the most realistic things on the market today. No one else is able to get as much detail, as much smoothness of motion into their 3-D goggle displays as you

are. It's basically movie-quality animation on the PC, with sparkling water and rainbows in the waterfalls. The hardware you've made for it is also pretty inexpensive. The only problem with it is, there isn't much interesting to do in your virtual world yet. You can walk around and look at the trees and waterfalls, but after a while it gets pretty boring.

Things were going great in business for a while, but last month they took a serious turn for the worse. You'd been engaged in some, perhaps, questionable financial transactions with the firm's money. A few investments, and since all the books are kept on computer it's easy for you to keep them looking proper. Then, before you get audited, you can put the money back and no one's any wiser. The only problem is, your last investment went very badly. How could your equestrian analysis program have predicted the horse would break a leg? As a result, your cash-flow problem is serious. You have about twenty thousand in your reserves. If you don't get about fifty thousand before your audit next month, your business could go under before you have a chance to market your new VR software. For that matter, you could even wind up going to jail.

Maybe Mike's newest software could help. You haven't gotten anything from Charlotte for a while, but she's told you that he's been working for the last few years on something really big. Whatever it is, you wouldn't mind getting your hands on it, though it still might not solve your short-term cash flow problems. The only problem is, she wants payment in cash -- twenty thousand, your usual price. You've cleaned out the last of your company's reserves and brought them along, but you're hoping you won't need them. Perhaps you'll just turn on the charm, or perhaps you can get the software on your own. You don't want to get her seriously upset, though. She's been saying this will be her last job. After this, she wants to go to the Bahamas. Well, you wouldn't mind renewing your old friendship. Maybe the two of you could go to the Bahamas together? After all, the two of you have so much in common -- you're both completely unethical.

You were contacted recently by financier Wes Atkins. He is very interested in your current project, and invited you to come to this convention and talk about it. Science fiction, hmmph. However, he also hinted about maybe forming a partnership, or even buying out your company so that you could work for him. If he'll pay you up front, that would be fine with you.

PLAYER HINT>>> You are interested in making money and looking good. You want to be a millionaire CEO as soon as possible. Everything you do -- all the people you borrow artwork or ideas from -- are just the stepping stones to get you where you want to go.

GOALS

Get some money fast. You don't really care how. If you can get Wes interested in your VR software, though, you might be in the clear. It's possible that Wes might want you to work on some project with Mike again. You have no problem with that, as long as you're in charge. Abbley couldn't organize a one-man band.

Get your hands on whatever Mike is working on. Maybe Charlotte will have it for you already, or maybe you'll have to get it yourself. Either way, you feel it's almost a moral obligation by now to market Mike's stuff for him.

Renew your relationship with Charlotte. If she's ready to ditch Mike after all, maybe she'll get back together with you. You'd love to see Mike's face when you walk off with both his girl AND his software. That'll show HIM for scoring higher than you did on that math final when you were freshmen.

ITEMS

Item - Cell Phone. You can call your office on this, or download programs from your mainframe at work.

Item - Portable Computer This one is state of the art. You can hook it up through your cell-phone modem to your mainframe back in California to run your program, or Abley's if you manage to pick it up.

You are a venture capitalist with lots of money. You have been looking into the possibilities of virtual reality and what it is going to be used for. You've managed to round up the top people in virtual reality here at this convention. You think that IF you can get them all to agree to work together, you will be able to put together the best new entertainment program on the market. But that's a big IF.

First there is Simon Kane. He's extremely slick, a real people person and a natural manager. He has his own software firm, Kane Software -- it's small but doing well. You saw an exhibition of his virtual reality system last year, and it frankly blew you away. It's the most realistic thing on the market today. No one else is able to get as much detail, as much smoothness of motion into their goggle displays. The hardware system he's got is also pretty inexpensive. The only problem is, there isn't much interesting to do in the virtual world yet. You can walk around and look at the trees and waterfalls, but after a while it gets pretty boring. He needs a more creative software writer.

That brings you to Mike Abbley, the stereotypical antisocial computer programmer type. He loves talking to machines, but people have always been more trouble for him. He's apparently been working for some time now on a shoestring budget to build some kind of new interactive software system. He sent you a sample, and you were quite impressed. It's entertainment software, but with a difference. Rather than being a standard game with fixed goals, it apparently customizes itself as it goes along. Based on the responses that the player makes, the playing environment gradually changes to fit the player's personality. You want to get more details, but it sounds quite innovative. The only problem is that it's all text.

Now, you figure that if you could combine Abbley's text game and Kane's virtual reality system, you'd have a VR setup that couldn't be beat. The only problem is, rumor has it that they don't get along very well with each other. In fact, Abbley even sued a few years ago over some software Kane had marketed. It will need all your diplomatic skills to get them to work together.

The final person is more of a problem. It is Dr. Helen Jacobs, your ex wife. You've been split up for about five years now, and you haven't seen each other at all during that time. You were extremely impressed by her back in college -- she was brilliant, and intensely focused on whatever she was doing. You were also impressed by your strong ideals and belief in doing the right thing. It was only after you'd been married for a few years that you realized that between her work and her ideals, there wasn't much time for you.

For a while everything was wonderful. You were going to help her with grants and research promotion, and take care of the business side of her breakthroughs. Together, the two of you would change the face of medicine.

Then, you began to get more and more distant from each other. It seemed like she never came out of the laboratory for weeks at a time. And when she did come home, the two of you fought more and more. She thought you were too mercenary -- too caught up with money. She kept asking you where the old ideals were that you had started with. You explained that those had been when you were younger -- you had a more mature outlook now. You said that the money you were earning with "evil

capitalism" was paying for a nice house, and she didn't seem to have any problem living there. She said fine, and walked out.

One thing that the two of you particularly quarreled about was your taking of a government software contract. She was a bit of a rebel, and against the military-industrialist complex and everything it stood for. Well, she was right there. You got bogged down in trying to fulfill so many niggling, contradictory specifications that you fell behind schedule, got fined, wound up in a legal battle, fell farther behind, and got fined again. Working with the government is something you intend to avoid in the future.

Since then, she has evidently been working on some kind of biochip. It's still in its early stages, but you're willing to fund some long-term research. Eventually, it may hold the promise of allowing people to jack visual images directly into their brains, doing away with the need for bulky gloves and goggles. This thing has dynamite commercial applications if you can get the bugs worked out, so you're willing to swallow your bile and ask her to come on board. Hopefully you'll be able to do it without actually needing to talk to her too much. You've got plenty of money to offer her, but she probably won't go for it. You may need to make up some sanctimonious garbage to try to sell her about how your project will be for the good of all mankind. You may even need to sweet talk her a little.

If you could combine all three inventions, it would be like creating a whole new form of reality for people to inhabit. It's a big vision, all right, but you think it's achievable.

You have a certain amount of discretion over what to invest in, but you also have some partners who get final say in what you do. You met them yesterday and went over your plans. They agree that the combination looks interesting. They want you to form a new company, hopefully with all three of these creative people involved. Your partners don't think that any of these projects are likely to come to much on their own, though -- they want all three together. The company would be called Atkins research.

You will also need to choose one of the three to be in charge of the technical aspects of integrating their operations, since you aren't technically oriented yourself. The obvious choice is Simon Kane, an excellent "people person" as well as a talented VR designer.

You are authorized to offer salaries of $60,000 each to everyone working on the project, and $120,000 to whomever you choose to be leader. If someone signs the contract, you are allowed to advance them up to six months salary.

You've actually put quite a bit of your prestige on the line that you'll be able to swing this deal. If you can't get all three of them on board, your own position will be rather shaky with your partners. You feel sure you can pull it off, though.

You're also interested in other technology. You have a few small books or magazines here about engines, for instance.

PLAYER HINT>>> You are easy to get along with and friendly, but also devious and unscrupulous when it comes to business dealings. You try to project the image of everybody's friend, though.

GOALS

Persuade all three scientists to work together on your project. You feel sure that the combination of their work will result in a highly profitable product.

Choose one of the three to be project manager. Again, this should probably be Kane.

Try not to get in a big fight with Helen. You'd like to keep your dignity, while at the same time helping her to see how completely unjust she was to you. You don't intend to get into another knock-down, drag-out fight like you did last time. Of course, sometimes the best intentions come to nothing...

Special Ability:

Research. You have friends in high places. Once per game, you may call a friend to find out a great deal of information about a single individual or organization. This takes a while, though.

ITEMS

Cell Phone.

Technology books.

CHARLOTTE WORLEY

You are a bright young woman trying to get ahead in life, by any means at your disposal. This weekend you've got a lot at stake -- a lot of money, and a decision about what you're going to do with the rest of your life.

You found it easy to get through school; you just found some bright guys to hang around with, and somehow homework and tests were never a problem. One of the bright guys was named Simon Kane: a real charmer, very self-assured for somebody into math like he was, and not particularly ethical. You had a lot in common, actually. Somehow, though, the qualities that you see in yourself as being forthright and independent, make him seem like a real slimeball. You kept on his good side, though -- his folks had money, and you could tell he was going places.

You got a job that would send you to grad school, and chose Psychology as your field. You got through the first year without too many problems, but during the second year you were expected to produce a thesis, and you couldn't get one approved (of all the bad luck, your advisor was a woman). You thought your life would end.

Then you ran into Simon again (a grad student at MIT, of all places). He told you that he could get you a job, and possibly help you with your thesis. There was just one little catch. That catch was Mike Abbley, an anti-social computer nerd at the University of Minnesota. Apparently Simon had been roommates with him at Cal Tech, and had gotten a lot of good ideas from him. Now he wanted you to get friendly with Mike, and pass Mike's ideas on to you. After a brief renewal of your old romance with Simon, you agreed.

Simon helped you transfer to the U of M, and pretty soon you were being paid for information and programs you got from Mike. The only problem is, now he isn't just a nerd. He actually turned out to be a very attentive boyfriend. You had to teach him how to keep a girl happy, but hey, the guy deals better with machines than with people. However, Simon kept his end of the bargain, and paid someone to help you write your thesis (actually, someone else wrote most of it -- you were too busy with Mike). But you got your Master's degree, and a dull job in a hospital. Simon's payments really help you out. You just wish he would quit drooling over you every time you meet to get paid for the information you give him.

For the last few years, when Mike comes home from the dinky software company he works at, he's been fiddling on his own with a new program. Actually, the two of you have been working at it together. It's entertainment software, but with a difference. It's like an adventure game that customizes itself as it goes along. Based on the responses that the player makes, the playing environment gradually changes to fit the player's personality. If they like lots of hack & slash action, they get attacked more and more often -- if they like talking to people, it networks with other computers -- it can be fantasy, science fiction, modern, or any other genre, based on the user's responses -- it even develops an ideal member of the opposite sex for the user. Mike did the interactive programming, while you helped him with the part of the program that does psychological assessment and adjustment. Actually, you're very proud of the way it came out. It's the first time you've ever had a major accomplishment using your brain, instead of your body. It's a nice feeling.

There's just one problem with the system -- it's all text. Mike says with a couple more terrabytes of memory and five more years of work, it could have graphics too, which would make it totally awesome.

Actually, Kane has a Virtual Reality program he developed for his company that would be even better, but in order to use that Mike would need to work with him, and he really hates his old friend now because of all the times -- with your help -- that Kane has published or patented things that Mike invented. Mike even tried suing Simon once (he lost). He just can't figure out how Simon is doing it, because all he can think of is hardware, He's torn apart every system he's ever had looking for bugs, and wrote his own operating software to protect from viruses, never dreaming that his problem might have something to do with you. He probably wouldn't suspect you in a million years.

Kane has promised you twenty thousand -- your usual fee -- if you get him the latest program. You agreed, but you're not entirely sure it's enough this time. After all, a lot of the work there is yours, too. You're thinking about upping the price on him. After that, you may just quit this job -- you're getting tired of sneaking around on Mike. You made some flip comment to Simon about going to the Bahamas, and he seemed really interested. That guy is such a jerk.

Of course, you still need to get a copy of the software, too, but that shouldn't be hard -- Mike is always leaving his disks around.

There's one other possibility. One day while Mike was out you got a mysterious phone call, and a guy started asking you all sorts of questions about Mike's work. The whole conversation had spook written all over it. He said his name was Mr. Green. At the time you didn't say anything about offering the program to him, but now you think maybe you should have. Anyway, you told him to meet you at the panel at the upcoming convention. He asked how he would know you, and you said he could ask at the door or leave a note for Mrs. Peacock. You're just interested in seeing if he'd offer you more money than Simon did. You suspect he would.

There was one other interesting thing that happened, by the way, the last time you visited Simon. He left the room for a while, and you poked through HIS computer (you're getting pretty good at that). While you were scanning his business files, though, you noticed some anomalies. Looks like old Simon has been skimming out of his company's funds in a decidedly illegal way. He came back before you could get anything printed out, or any hard evidence, but he doesn't know that. If necessary, could you drop a few hints about blackmail?

PLAYER HINT>>> You've got a lot of leeway in how you play this character, from heartless bitch to heartrending reformation. The character herself hasn't really decided whether she wants to keep on taking the easy way and make a killing, or try to do the right thing for once in her life. Talk to the other characters, and decide what you feel is appropriate.

GOALS

Decide where your loyalties lie. You could talk to Mr. Green, find out what his offer is, and get the software for him if it's high enough. Or you could stick with Simon --

he could get you in trouble with that Master's thesis if you got him angry, come to think of it. If you get the money, you could go off to the Bahamas with Simon -- he may be a jerk, but he's a rich jerk, and you could use a vacation. Or you could head to Australia, and leave him far behind. You could even stay with Mike -- now there's a funny thought.

DR. HELEN JACOBS

For the last several years, you've been working on a breakthrough new concept in the fields of both computers and medicine: the neural chip. Essentially, what you did was to grow a layer of special cells on top of a silicon wafer with circuits printed on it. Eventually, you were able to make the cells grow only where the current was. Then you spliced the genes from those cells into some nerve cells, and grew nerves that responded chemically to the a current being passed underneath them, and which could then transmit those currents through their own dendrites to other cells around them.

The experiment is still in its early stages, but it seems to show vast promise. Why, with this invention, it may be possible to use cameras to restore sight to the blind...hearing to the deaf...bypass severed spinal chords.....probe the final secrets of the brain. Farther down the road it could even cure brain damage, memory loss, depression, and a host of other neurological problems.

The only problem is, your research is still at a very early state. You've been having trouble duplicating all your results, so you aren't ready to publish yet (you have no intention of being another Fleishman and Pons, the cold fusion publishers, and becoming the laughingstock of the biology world).

You are currently working for the NIH, and those shortsighted fools are notoriously skeptical about any real innovative (in other words, risky) research. You've just received word that your grant is going to be cut off. What a bunch of nitwits! Can't they see farther than the bottom of their balance sheets!

Actually, those budget jugglers remind you a lot of your former husband, Wes Atkins.

You've been split up for about five years now, and you haven't seen each other at all during that time. You were extremely impressed with him back in college -- he seemed to share a lot of your ideals about using your talents to make the world a better place. Your talent was biology, his was business. He was going to help her with grants and promotion, and take care of the business side of your breakthroughs. Together, the two of you would change the face of medicine.

After you married, you began to get more and more distant from each other. A bit of it may have been your fault, you suppose. You tended to go so engrossed by problems in the lab that you sometimes didn't come home for days at a time. You had thought he understood how important the work you were doing was, though. When you did come home, the two of you fought more and more. You suggested some investments to him which would not only be profitable, but also beneficial to humanity. But when you looked over his books, you saw that he had ignored them in favor of some highly dubious firms, including some that made weapons. You realized that he was becoming mercenary -- caught up with money. He seemed to have lost the old ideals that you had thought the two of you had originally shared. He told you that those had been when he was younger -- he had a more mature outlook now. He said that the money he was earning from capitalism and the military-industrial complex was paying for a nice house, and you didn't seem to have any problem living there. You said fine, and walked out.

You wonder now if you were too hasty. You know he had those ideals once. They were probably still there, just buried under too many layers of what he thought a big-shot financier *should* act like. If you had only been able to pay a bit more attention to him when you were married, perhaps he might never have lost that spark.

That is why, when you received an invitation to speak at this panel, you decided to accept. You have no idea what he's up to... probably pulling one of his schemes, no doubt. But he may also have just a sneaking desire to see you again. Well, you'll give him the chance, and see whether or not he behaves.

You know of one other person who should be here: Mike Abbley. He sent you a description of an idea he was working on for feedback in a software program. It sounded interesting, but you aren't particularly interested in computers, and a lot of it went flying right past your head. But it does sound like it might be interesting to combine your two approaches for a kind of psychological dissection tool.

This convention is a lot of fun; usually these panels are at stuffy technical conferences. But there have been a few times when you were shocked by what you see around you. You have not been out much; the last five years have been spent designing and refining your crowning achievement, the neurochip.

GOALS

Stay true to your ideals. Right is right and wrong is wrong, and all the money and sweet talk in the world won't change that. You got into your job to benefit all humanity, and that's exactly what you intend to do.

Get funding for your research. It would be a tragedy if your grant was cut off in mid-experiment, just when the results were looking so promising. Of course, the NIH will keep you on, but all your work might be wasted. It would be very nice to find a new supporter to let you carry on.

Try to help Wes. Perhaps he still hasn't realized just what he's become. Talk to him, and get him to see how he isn't really being true to himself when he puts himself and his money in front of all other considerations. You don't intend to get into another knock-down, drag-out fight like you did last time. Of course, sometimes the best intentions come to nothing...

BANE JOBS

You work for a group in the government called the Business. The goal of the Business is to obtain the exclusive use of the best in high technology for the United States Military. It comes out of the budget of the National Security Agency, and officially that is who you work for. Sometimes you try to recruit top scientists to come and work for the organization. Sometimes you sneak into businesses and labs all over the world. Sometimes you act as a courier. Sometimes you are used as a go-between to negotiate contracts.

Recently another agent for the Business, code-named Mr. Green, had an unfortunate and fatal accident while visiting a North Korean power plant. You inherited his caseload. Unfortunately, he was sloppy about filing reports, and his notes were a mess. Still, you and your superiors managed to piece together most of what he was working on, and they all led you here to this panel. You are here for two reasons.

One reason is that Mr. Green was investigating a researcher who has apparently developed a breakthrough neural chip that interacts directly with nerve cells. Your scientists say that this would have all sorts of military applications, from jet pilots to training exercises to anyone who needs fast reflexes.

The Company is also currently working on a form of mind control, so that agents and soldiers will obey orders without question. They are very interested in Virtual Reality, both as a training aid and a form of conditioning. You may be able to use it both to control minds and to disguise the fact that they are being controlled.

According to Green's notes, there are two computer freaks who are doing important work in this field. One is working on some kind of interactive software that interprets the psychology of the user and adjusts itself to create an environment favorable to his mind. The psych warfare guys are interested in that. The other is someone into virtual reality, but really top-of-the-line stuff. If you could just get all three inventions, the techies think they might be able to combine them into some seriously dangerous stuff.

From the notes, they're all supposed to be here at this panel. The only problem is, you don't know who is which. The inventors could be any of these eggheads here. Some of them may have been in contact with Mr. Green. You also found a note on his desk that says to contact a Mrs. Peacock. Cute.

You are authorized to offer any scientist who wishes to work for you a yearly salary of $80,000 (with the budget cuts, that's all the government can afford). If someone signs with you, you may draw out a six-month advance to give to them (see a GM).

Some people are reluctant to work for the government. For them, the Business has set up a special dummy corporation called Eagle Research (hey, no one accused your bosses of being particularly imaginative). Because of overhead, etc, if someone agrees to work for Eagle Research, you can only offer them $50,000.

Of course, some of them may not be interested. In that case, if you can get your hands on their prototypes by other means, that's covered in your job description too. The Business would rather have the personnel to actually develop the plans, but if all you can get is the prototype, you may spend up to $40,000 in order to do so.

GOALS

Get as many plans as you can. By hook or by crook.

Stop any threats to American interests. You never know when something unexpected will come up that will endanger the American way of life.

ITEM

Cell Phone – This is a super-duper spy model. If someone else uses a cell phone in the vicinity, it records both sides of the conversation, so that you can listen in later.

SPECIAL ABILITY

Move unseen. Once, you can sneak right past people's noses without them seeing you. See a GM.

Research. By calling your contacts in the government, you may find out everything that can be discovered about one individual or organization, or a great deal about two people or organizations. It takes a while for them to dig up this stuff, though.

Contacts. You may contact your superiors once to have them do something that a government spookhouse organization might conceivably be able to do, such as calling off a police investigation or auditing someone's tax records. You cannot do something extreme without extremely good evidence, however – if you arrange for someone to be arrested, for instance, and it turns out that they've done nothing wrong, then your job could be on the line.

CHARLES PETRY
or
THE HYENA

All right, so no one really calls you that, but if you told them your real name was Boris, they'd just laugh at you. Well, it's not your fault some stupid cartoon show had a spy with your name. Not exactly your name -- you're Boris Nachenkov. Here in the US, you just go by the name of Charles Petry.

Back in the good old days, you had a wonderful job stealing military secrets from the US for the KGB. Not only was the work exciting, it paid well, and you got to spend most of your time in the United States rather than in Moscow. You are quite good at blending in by now.

When your organization got defunded, you had to put your skills out for the highest bidder. The only ones who were interested were the North Koreans, and they gave you a pay cut. You get no respect at all.

Your job remains much the same, though; locate promising sources of technology with military applications, and get them out of the country. If you can't get them to work for you, you generally try to arrange it so that they never produce their results at all. The Koreans don't pay you for that -- it's just some of your old-fashioned sentimental patriotism. You prefer to do this through roundabout means, rather than directly -- killing people is so messy, and risky too. However, you do carry the means of protecting yourself, if anyone does get on to you.

Your American counterpart is an agency called the Business -- it seeks to collect hard-to-gather technology for the American side. Recently, your Korean bosses caught one of their agents snooping around in a nuclear "energy" research facility. During his questioning, and before his untimely demise, he revealed quite a bit about his current projects. You are one of the follow-up agents sent to check out his leads.

He mentioned that he was quite interested in this panel, at this convention. A researcher has apparently developed a breakthrough neural chip that interacts directly with nerve cells. Your scientists say that this would have all sorts of military applications, from jet pilots to training exercises to anyone who needs fast reflexes.

Less useful to you, you found that the Company is also currently working on a form of mind control, so that agents and soldiers will obey orders without question. They are very interested in Virtual Reality, both as a training aid and a form of conditioning. North Korea isn't really set up technologically to follow suit, but you'd like to stop America from taking advantage of this or any new technology.

According to the captured agent, there are two computer freaks who are doing important work in this field. From the notes, they're all supposed to be here at this panel. The only problem is, you don't know who is which. The inventors could be any of these eggheads here. However, the captured agent did say that he was supposed to meet with someone named Charlotte here. You've always considered yourself particularly good with the ladies -- it's your chivalrous side. Women spies have taken advantage of it in the past.

You have authorization to try to hire the neuro-chip inventor for a $150,000 yearly salary. You have access to a third of this in cash, if you need to put in a down-payment (see GM). If the target signs, he will work for you. Your bosses

have set up a dummy company in Chile where the actual work would be done, and your target would need to relocate (if you operated from America it would be too easy for the authorities to follow the money trail). A little investigation will make it look as though this is a charitable institution engaged in medical research, called the Pan-American Research Institute. More research, such as the government could do, would blow the cover pretty quickly. That's why you have a plane ticket for tomorrow for your target. You need to persuade him with some story about how time is important. Once he's there, it will be too late to do anything, and he'll be bundled onto the next flight to Korea.

If there's one problem you have as an agent, it's these embarrassing little slip-ups you make. Like that time in Switzerland when you accidentally dropped the microdot in the carpet, and tried to persuade the staff you were looking for a "contact lens." You ended up with half the staff helping you search. This time, you accidentally dropped the "toys" you had brought for this trip -- a package of truth tablets -- when you came in. Anyone who swallows one must answer any question truthfully for the next five minutes. Now where did you put them?

GOALS

Find whoever has invented the neuro-chip, and persuade them to work for you. You have three-hundred thousand dollars, but that may not be enough unless you have a plausible story as well.

Get your truth capsules back. If someone finds out what they are, it could lead to embarrassing questions.

Find out more about the Business. The captured agent is likely to have a successor, who may well be here. If you can find out who he is without his finding out about you, you should definitely be ahead. No use killing him, they'd just put someone else in his place -- unless he knows something vital that you don't want him to tell his superiors, like your identity.

Find out about other inventions. Though you don't have a budget to buy these other inventions, you would prefer it if the American military didn't get a chance to use them either. Any way you can hinder them without exposing yourself is good.

Destroy the United States. Sometimes you dream that you could find a way to wipe out everyone in this accursed country, even if most of the rest of the world went too. As far as you're considered, they have already killed your homeland, and you dream of revenge. Just a dream, of course.

Special Ability

Deadly Grip

This was taught to you in North Korea. If you ever get into combat with anyone, you can immobilize (but not kill) them with one stroke. You must yell HEEE--YII at the top of your lungs as you do so. You may not use this ability more than once every fifteen minutes.

WANDA PHILLIPS

You had your palm read earlier week. The palmist told you that you were a person of true insight, and that you were approaching a critical junction in your life. Then she frowned. She said that if you didn't use your powers for good, the world was in terrible danger. Your actions might change the future forever. Way cool! Life has been SO boring up till now!

You think that, when she's talking about your powers, she means that you really are psychic. You've always been really interested in, like, extrasensory powers and junk. You've taken a bunch of tests and things, and they show a definite potential. It's, like, really cool.

Maybe your ability to persuade people to do things is, like, psychic too. Since high school you've always been able to make people see things your way. You just suggest something, and they want to do it. It doesn't work for long, though. There was this nerd, Mike Abbley, you had a crush on back in high school. You don't know why, he was a Mr. Spock type, logical and scientific, and you were more a cross between Shirley McClane and Farrah Fawcett (beautiful but with some different beliefs). Anyway, it didn't work out -- even though you got him to ask you out a couple of times, he always forgot by the time he was supposed to pick you up. You finally got fed up, and in a fit of anger, suggested he get down on one knee and ask the homecoming queen to the prom. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been during lunch, and maybe the singing was a bit too much.

Now, here at the convention, there you were sitting in the Con suite, just enough liquor in you to deaden those stupid voices you sometimes hear. You were flipping through the site program when you saw it: the name Mike Abbley. Your first love. Back it up. Where was that page? Here it is, a panel. "What's Reality have to do with it?" Panel discussion: Mike Abbley, Wes Atkins, Dr. Helen Jacobs, and Simon Kane. You might have checked it out, but you're scheduled to run a game.

You've been happy in fandom for many years. By day you're a simple nurse-practitioner, but on weekends you've got a major fantasy campaign going. It's got, like, lots of elves and unicorns and magic and possession and reincarnation in it. Sometimes you think that you were a sorceress in a previous life, and that's where it's coming from.

You're going to run a role-playing game here at the convention. You've brought all your GM's stuff, and a bunch of cool-looking people have shown up to play.

ONCE THE GAME HAS BEGUN:

You're just beginning to explain the rules to people [note: it doesn't matter what you say, since you're not going to actually play]. At some point, a Nepenthe GM will announce to the group, "It happens." When you hear that, all of a sudden you feel weak, and the air around you seems thick. A simple dizzy spell? Maybe, but you had this feeling once before: when you went to see a shaman at a reservation. Once the feeling passes you notice something really weird about your players.

They (your players) probably won't be interested in your game any more, for some reason. You'd feel insulted, except that you're so curious about what's going on. Also, you somehow sense that they need your help. Well, if you're not going to run your game, you don't have anything else to do.

GOALS

Find out as much as you can about these strange people. You somehow sense that they're connected to what the palmist said. When you're around them you get a tingly feeling like you've never felt before except with the shaman.

Help everyone find out about the unexplained. There's a lot going on in the world that most people don't realize. Why, there could be aliens right here at this convention! Or spirits! Most people don't believe this sort of thing, especially scientist types, but maybe you can convince them. Of course, you have a lot to learn about all this yourself.

Fight the yucky military-industrial power complex. Like, war is gross.

Save the world. It'd look, like, way cool on your resume.