

Ignorable Theme: Sharing the Limelight

This topic is near and dear to my heart and my GMing style. I make a very conscious effort to make sure every player has a say, every player is given the opportunity to speak and act, and every player feels that I am not playing favorites. I do this by very systematically asking each player what they are doing and interacting with them one-on-one, if necessary, in front of the group. This does not mean that every scene is shared equally nor that plots are egalitarian, but it does mean that I portion out the limelight in both the short-term (session) and the long-term (campaign).

As a player, I try to do the same and I quickly become very frustrated with GMs who do not. I do not think it is a responsibility of the game designer or game system to monitor the portioning of the limelight; I see it as a responsibility of each and every person in the game. Some players hog the limelight and the GM's time. This can be a conscious decision because they think their issues are more important or it can simply be an unconscious eagerness to be active, not realizing they are being scene hogs. As a GM, I treat both the same way: I move on to the next player around the table. As a player, I may hand over my turn (assuming I ever get one) to another whom I see as getting ignored.

Some players are more passive, preferring to watch rather than to act. Some actively shy away from the limelight, and this is fine. For these players, I make sure they know that they have every opportunity to do something and all they need to do is ask, but I will not force someone front-and-center if they do not want to be. I will also not tolerate players bullying others into a passive position.

Generation Zeta FAQ¹

General

How is this world different from ours?

Up until December 2004, the world was the same as ours. In particular, the attacks of September 11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq all occurred as we know them. But in December of 2004, the Scourge came and changed everything.

What date is it?

It is now October 2024, nearly twenty years after that event.

Where is it?

Santa Rita is a medium-sized city on the Central coast of California with a population of roughly 750,000 once all neighboring communities are taken into account. It has all the features of a generic comic book city.

¹ And other questions are welcome. I am developing the world as the campaign progresses, filling in blanks as we go along.

The Scourge

Who are the Scourge?

The beings known as the Scourge are a technologically advanced, alien race who have developed the ability to cross into alternate realities (aka alternate dimensions or timelines). Physically, they bear some resemblance to of demons and devils as described in both western and eastern folklore. This leads some to the conclusion that the Scourge either existed on (our) Earth in the distant past. The lack of archaeological evidence suggests that they are not a species native to Earth, which leaves the possibility open that they visited Earth during human history.

Why did they come to Earth in 2004?

By all accounts, the Scourge use reality-travel as science-fiction writers often described futuristic human space travel. Rather than find new planets, the Scourge moved to alternative Earths. Once they arrived, they would subjugate the local population and begin terraforming the planet. Whether the terraforming was an end-goal or simply a by-product of their ruthless acquisition of natural resources is not clear. Presumably, they came to Earth with these same goals in mind.

How were they defeated?

The initial Scourge incursion was to establish a foothold on Earth and establish a beachhead of sorts for the remainder of their fleet. Fortunately, the Original Four (living legends who came to be known as Shaper, Tank, Firefly, and Psion) were able to disrupt the invasion by a calculated act of sabotage on board one of the Scourge vessels. Their expert timing caused a chain reaction that destroyed the rest of the fleet, including those already on Earth.

Is there any Scourge technology around?

They had highly advanced technology including personal arms and armor as well as giant floating fortresses. Though they were defeated and left behind many artifacts, strides to understand and utilize their technology was very slow and painstaking. This is because they are known to be telepathic and only mentalists can use their devices. Some claim the government has purposely held back technological advancement.

What advanced technology is there?

One can assume that technology has advanced considerably in the past 20 years following standard trends. Moore's Law continues to be stretched as the atomic barrier is breached. Medical advances are kept in check (at least in the U.S.) by a failing infrastructure. And the average human condition on Earth has only improved marginally. But perhaps the single biggest breakthrough from research performed on Scourge-based technology is the development of true anti-gravity. The U.S. military has been using it for a decade now in its most advanced fighters and the technology has finally trickled down to civilians in heavy industry and the first "AG" Lexus, Hummer, and Land Rover SUVs.

BMW and Honda have announced AG sedans and motorcycles to reach dealerships next year.

Otherwise, any technological advancement that seems reasonable in a comic book universe is available with the approval of the GM and other players.

Zetas and the World

What is zeta radiation?

Zeta radiation is not electro-magnetic radiation in the way gamma rays or x-rays (or even radio waves and visible light) are. Rather, zeta radiation is a vibrational mode of space-time itself. The presence of zeta radiation represents an “excited state” of the fabric of the universe, re-writing many of the laws of the physics as we knew them twenty years ago.

Is it dangerous?

As with electro-magnetic radiation, zeta radiation is extremely dangerous at high frequencies and high intensities due to its ability to disrupt organic molecules. In the initial burst of zeta radiation did cause injuries and death, but the current background zeta levels on earth are not considered dangerous, much like the background levels of ultra-violet light zeta radiation. Experiments performed using high levels of zeta radiation are shielded with high density materials, not unlike those used for electro-magnetic radiation and do not pose a greater environmental threat.

What are zetas?

Super-powered humans, or zetas, represent the worst and best of humanity—both proof and counter-proof of Lord Acton’s postulate. The nature and effects of zeta radiation are poorly understood. Why some people are affected and others are not is a profound mystery. Why others choose to use their powers for evil is perhaps no mystery. There are also those who choose to use their powers for the betterment of society, though what they consider “betterment” may not agree with what society wants.

Why do some people become superhuman “zetas” while others don’t?

The exact mechanism is still unknown, but studies have indicated those who display superhuman abilities have a higher incidence of genetic mutations, presumably caused by zeta radiation. Though worldwide levels are essentially even, North America was the center of the initial burst of zeta radiation and thus has a higher incidence of these mutations. Within one generation, it is expected that fewer zetas will be born and those that are will be randomly distributed around the globe.

How have zetas changed society?

Superhuman powers have brought out the best and worst of people. Many, if not most, with the appropriate abilities, use their powers for personal gain. The rates in violent crime have increased as a result. This has put a considerable strain on law enforcement. Some have zetas have stepped forward to oppose these so-called supervillains, but there never seem to be enough. The public attitude towards zetas is generally

positive in those regions with active superheroes; otherwise, the opinion polls show a slight, but distinct negative disposition toward zetas. Fear and mistrust breeds contempt and hatred, it seems.

What about sports?

Because there is no single test for the presence of superhuman abilities and the great variety of those abilities, professional and amateur sports have adapted their rules and modified their statistics to account for zeta players. For example, the NFL has created a rules regulating the maximum height, weight, and altitude of players on the field.

What is the legal status of zetas?

In California, the state supreme court has thrice ruled against discrimination against zetas. Two of those overturned legislative initiatives. As such, a person is entitled to full rights and access to public services regardless if they are a zeta. Only in those cases when such a person poses an immediate and eminent threat to public safety can an exception be made. Just as a person cannot scream “Fire” in a movie theater, someone who is on fire may be barred from a government building or given “special treatment.”

Similar rulings in California federal district courts have been overruled upon appeal, so that there is no federal protection of zeta rights. The passing of a zeta registration act has so far been narrowly defeated in the U.S. Senate four times, usually on the grounds of such legislation being too vague and too widely applied. There is no effective test for the presence of zeta powers and studies have shown that between 30% and 50% of the population may show signs of genetic change due to zeta radiation without possessing any “powers.”

Is there power-suppression technology?

Yes, but they are not widely used outside of federal jails and prisons. No portable device, such as collars or handcuffs, has yet been devised. However, there are many rumors about proactive steps being taken by the government to suppress (or enhance!) zeta powers without public knowledge.

Do DC & Marvel comics exist?

The world before 2004 is as it was in ours, so yes. Since then, DC and Marvels have continued, but have also been joined by “real life” comics that follow the exploits of zetas, heroes and villains both.

Do zetas run around “wearing their underwear on the outside?”

Generally, zetas who use their powers for good or ill use functional outfits as befits their powers. Leather and Kevlar is more common than spandex or bare skin. Some choose to keep their identities a secret, others don’t.

To be continued...

Hazel Bascombe

Welcome!

In the case of someone like Graham, how do you separate quirky player behavior versus roleplaying a quirky character? Was not wanting to leave the cauldron behind a character-level or player-level decision? It might have simply been good roleplaying, though I suppose one might accuse him of always playing the similar character quirks, which I think you are. :)

Unknown Armies moves towards a system of dealing with character trauma from violence, the supernatural, helplessness, etc. But since such trauma is rarely present in action-adventure movies, novels, or comics, it is probably inappropriate for action-adventure games. But if the genre demands it, the game should support it (whether it is character trauma, over-the-top action, moral dilemmas, or what have you).

Myles Corcoran

Truth & Justice pretty much has preferred behavior defined and rewards hero points for protecting the weak, stopping crime, making sacrifices, and acting "with great integrity, loyalty, or modesty."

In Generation Zeta, one of the challenges I have ahead of me is not allowing the teachers, veteran super humans with more power, from handling problems that the PC students should be. One way I addressed this was to give the teachers powers that are less applicable to superheroics and/or giving them a narrow focus compared to the PCs who were built to be superheroes.

Lee Gold

I can see why Don Juan's player was asked to leave. What did Carlito's player say of the incident?

What incentive does the power company have to replace transformers before they blow?

If you define a thief as one who steals, and good as one who cares for other people, then you can have good thieves, though their victims may disagree.

Whether AD&D or OD&D, mainstream readers (even sf/fantasy) will not notice the technical details.

Spike Y Jones

I understand what you mean by Truth versus "truth." The issue of remorse as a factor in sentencing, parole, and especially executions is something that bothers me.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Given that the Canadian price of the book was printed on the cover, the retailer is not necessarily "gouging." It depends on what they paid for the book.² What is the percentage difference between US and

Canadian dollars on similarly priced hardbacks, such as coffee table books?

The incentive for jury duty should be civic duty. I distrust any justice system that provides direct incentives to jurors or uses professional jurors. Can paid jurors truly constitute a jury of my peers? At some point of juror compensation, why not just use judges who at least have had legal training and experience?

When I let the xenogames domain expire, the transition was not entirely smooth. www.sinisterthings.com/xenonzines/ works, but you have to be sure to include that last slash.³ I also added all my old zines back to #64.

While reading *Fantasy Traveller*, I had to keep reminding myself that you were not going for "D&D with *Traveller*" and thus excluded several tropes of D&D. For example, the *Traveller* character creation system is designed to make a party of PCs with a spectrum of ability levels who then do not necessarily progress. This is very different than D&D.

I do not know about other races in *Traveller*, but the Droyne had their own "classes." I think if you try to do too much with an "UxP" code, it will end up looking like a geek code. Two tables named Advanced Education Table?? It was not clear to me on the tables that multiple versions of skills "stacked," increasing the level of the skill. A fire-and-forget magic system seems very un-*Traveller* to me.⁴ While cute, I only see complexity without benefit from the geometric approach to spell selection.

Lisa Padol

FtF is slower? I find the opposite to be true.

I tend to find monologues in PBeM and PBP games annoying. They feel so unnatural to the normal manner in which people talk. They are also a prime opportunity for aggressive players to steamroll over other players.

Brian Rogers

I do not think government regulations prevent space exploration. The high costs, high risk, and low returns do. Billionaires in our world have better ways to spend their money. Why would they fund Mars base when they could cure diseases, fund education, or eliminate world poverty?

In Generation Zeta, there have only been twenty years since the development of super humans and the introduction of alien technology. The latter can only be operated by telepaths, which severely curtailed its utilization. High tech superheroes are not only few and far between, but also the majority of them fall into the "power foci" camp. It is similar to the Wildcards universe in this respect. Even so, I cannot resist introducing anti-gravity vehicles, which are just coming into the market after a decade of only being available in military vehicles. See the GZ FAQ in this zine.

³ Without the last "/" you see the page put there (presumably) by my webhost.

⁴ But I am too lazy to look up the *Traveller* psionics rules and suggest a fantasy equivalent.

² And book retail is very different from other types of sales, given right to return and other such factors.