INTRODUCTION

What Is Brainwaves?

Brainwaves is the second in a series of **Aberrant** sourcebooks that examine the potential and the ramifications of Mega-Attributes in the Nova Age. **Cult of Personality** looked at the effects of Social Mega-Attributes on the world of **Aberrant**. This book looks at the effects of Mental Mega-Attributes, particularly Mega-Intelligence.

Brilliant novas have helped to transform the world of 2015 with their inventions and innovations. Thanks to them, the environment is clean, the cities are safer, and virtually any kind of information or entertainment is available instantly to anyone in the world via the OpNet. But these novas have also created new weapons, designer drugs, and technology that may take away human freedoms and privacy, leading Project Utopia to step in to regulate technological development. Now Utopia controls some of the most advanced technology in the world, it only remains to be seen what they will do with it.

There are also concerns over the impact of nova mental abilities on society. Some novas are stronger and tougher than baselines, some of them able to lift tank and bounce bullets. Many novas are more beautiful and popular than baselines, making them media icons and objects of worship, but what about the novas smarter than baselines? How long are these nova "masterminds" likely to allow their intellectual inferiors to continue running the world? Will they inevitably take over, running the world openly or behind the scenes and, more importantly, what if they've already begun?

Gadgeteers in Aberrant

A popular type of character in the comic books is the "gadgeteer," the super-inventor, a scientific genius who creates gadgets and devices far beyond the ability of modern science. From Iron Man's suit of power-armor to the endless array of fiendish devices dreamed up by Lex Luthor, comic books are full of strange technology.

In the world of **Aberrant**, Mega-Intelligent novas are capable of duplicating some of the feats of their comic book counterparts, but they have to deal with some limitations that gadgeteers don't usually operate under.

The first is that nova inventors find their work limited by the laws of science. Sure, a nova's M-R node grants the ability to bend the laws of science as we know them in all sorts of interesting ways, and some novas can do the same thing when they're coming up with new gizmos. The problem is that the gizmo only works because the nova wants it to work, and bends the laws of physics enough to make it so. If the nova wants an invention that can benefit everyone, it has to obey the same physical laws as baseline technology (although nova powers are often useful in creating things much more quickly and efficiently than baseline inventors).

Second, nova inventions have the potential to radically change the world. Comic book characters rarely put their scientific skills to work solving environmental problems or finding cures of diseases, but novas do. They also research alternative energy sources, explore space, invent new materials, and plumb the mysteries of quantum reality. In less than twenty years, novas have helped transform the world, and the pace of nova invention only continues to accelerate.

Brainwaves looks at the implications of nova inventors and scientists, provides guidelines and rules for research and development, and looks at how baseline society is controlling the pace of technological advancement through Project Utopia's Science & Technology Division.

How to Use This Book

It's fairly easy to see how physically powerful or socially influential novas can fit into an ongoing story. It's somewhat more difficult to involve novas whose primary abilities are cerebral in an Aberrant chronicle. Brainwaves provides some guidelines on how to use and include characters with Mental Mega-Attributes in your games.

Take a look at Chapter One for an overview of the mental "landscape" of the world of 2015. If you're a player, check out Chapter Three for information about playing a gadgeteer character and Chapter Five for more information on Mental Mega-Attributes, including new Enhancements and Aberrations. If you're a Storyteller, read through Chapter Four, which has advice on how to handle masterminds in your Aberrant chronicle, story hooks, and even ideas for

chronicles focused on Mega-Mental characters. Then look through the other chapters for additional material you can use in your games, and give some thought to which abilities you want to allow, based on the advice in this book and your vision for the chronicle.

Breakdown

Chapter One: The Thinkers covers some of the greatest intellectual and technological factions in the world of 2015. This includes Project Utopia's Science & Technology Division, DeVries' Dr. Rachel Alinsky, the criminal Kuro-Tek, Hong Kong's Novelty Consulting, and a number of other masterminds and organizations that may become allies, antagonists, or backdrops for your game.

Chapter Two: Inventing Fun talks about gadgeteers and inventors in **Aberrant**. It focuses on how to play a gadgeteer character including possible pitfalls and how to avoid them.

Chapter Three: Storytelling offers advice for the Storyteller on how to handle masterminds and how to integrate them into a chronicle. It also includes ideas for running specialized **Aberrant** chronicles focused around the activities of mastermind characters.

Chapter Four: Knowledge is Power takes an in-depth look at all three Mental Mega-Attributes, and provides new Enhancements and Aberrations related to each, along with how these extraordinary abilities are seen by the rest of the world and how to roleplay mastermind characters.

Lexicon

Brainwaves introduces and uses a number of new terms relating to novas with Mega-Mental Attributes and things and organizations in the world of 2015 that involve them.

biotech: Technology based on, derived from, or affecting biological life forms. Many researchers in the 21st century are turning to biological models and techniques for developing new technologies, although this raises concerns about "tampering" with nature.

blacktech: Any technology declared illegal or restricted (usually by Project Utopia). So named because it usually turns up on the black market via sources like Kuro-Tek.

brainiac: A nickname for novas with Mega-Intelligence. Other common nicknames include brains, eggheads, Einsteins, geeks, techies, and smarties.

gadgeteer: A nova who develops devices based on quantum powers and usually requiring the quantum energies of a nova to operate. Contrast with inventor.

inventor: Someone who develops new technology. Novas with Mega-Intelligence are among the foremost inventors in the world of 2015. Unlike gadgeteers, the work of inventors is replicable and usable by anyone with the necessary resources.

mastermind: A general nickname for novas with Mega-

Mental Attributes (Perception, Intelligence, and Wits), simultaneously arrogant and somewhat derogative.

metasensory: A nova ability to sense beyond the range of the normal five human senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, usually applied to quantum powers like ESP and Telepathy.

nanotech: Technology based on the creation of very small machines or robots, often microscopic (or at least insect-sized). Molecular-scale nanotech has the potential to revolutionize all areas of technology, although it has not yet been developed.

quantum tech (AKA nova tech): Technology based on the quantum energies or abilities of novas, either to duplicate their abilities or to detect, enhance, or suppress them.

quick-thinker: A nickname for novas with Mega-Wits. Others include wits, mega-wits (or mega-witty), razor (or rapier) wits, and Wildes.

sphinx: A term used to refer to Mega-Intelligent novas who manipulate people and events on a wide scale to suit their own particular agendas. Some theories suggest that becoming a sphinx is a matter of choice while others say that novas above a certain threshold of mental ability can't help but become sphinxes, and that they manipulate the world around them almost instinctively. Those who subscribe to the sphinx theory are often concerned about the potential for conspiracies of nova masterminds.

TecReg: The Technological Regulation Department of Project Utopia's Science & Technology Division, the part of that organization in charge of regulating nova created and derived technology world-wide.

watcher: A nickname for novas with Mega-Perception. Others include peeper, seer, sentinel, visionary, and voyeur.

Introduction to the Online Version

Brainwaves was intended to be one of three "Mega-Attribute" books for White Wolf's Aberrant game. The first, Cult of Personality, focused on the Mega-Social attributes, and the third, Brute Force (the working title), would focus on Mega-Physical attributes. Ultimately none of the Mega-Attribute books were published.

Although I'm making this material available online I'm not giving up my claim of ownership to it, so I'd ask that it not be reproduced except for personal use. It's not intended as any challenge to White Wolf's ownership of Aberrant. This material includes all of my work for Brainwaves. I'll note that it has not been developed. This is the first-draft text that I wrote. It is in no way "official" or endorsed by White Wolf in any way.

With all that said, I hope you enjoy this sample of what might have been.

-- Steve Kenson

Chapter One: The Thinkers

Project Utopia's Science & Technology Division

What many people think of as Project Utopia's "Science & Technology Division" is actually only a sub-department of the Hardtech Department of said Division, the Technological Regulation (or "TecReg") Department. This is the branch of Utopia given the tremendous responsibility of "protecting baseline society from the potentially harmful effects of unchecked nova science and technological development." And TecReg takes its job very seriously, because it has seen the potential of some of that "unchecked nova science and technology" which, quite frankly, scares the hell out of them.

TecReg's job breaks down into three major areas, each of them a considerable undertaking: the regulation of new technology, the investigation of violations of technological policy, and direct intervention involving policy violations.
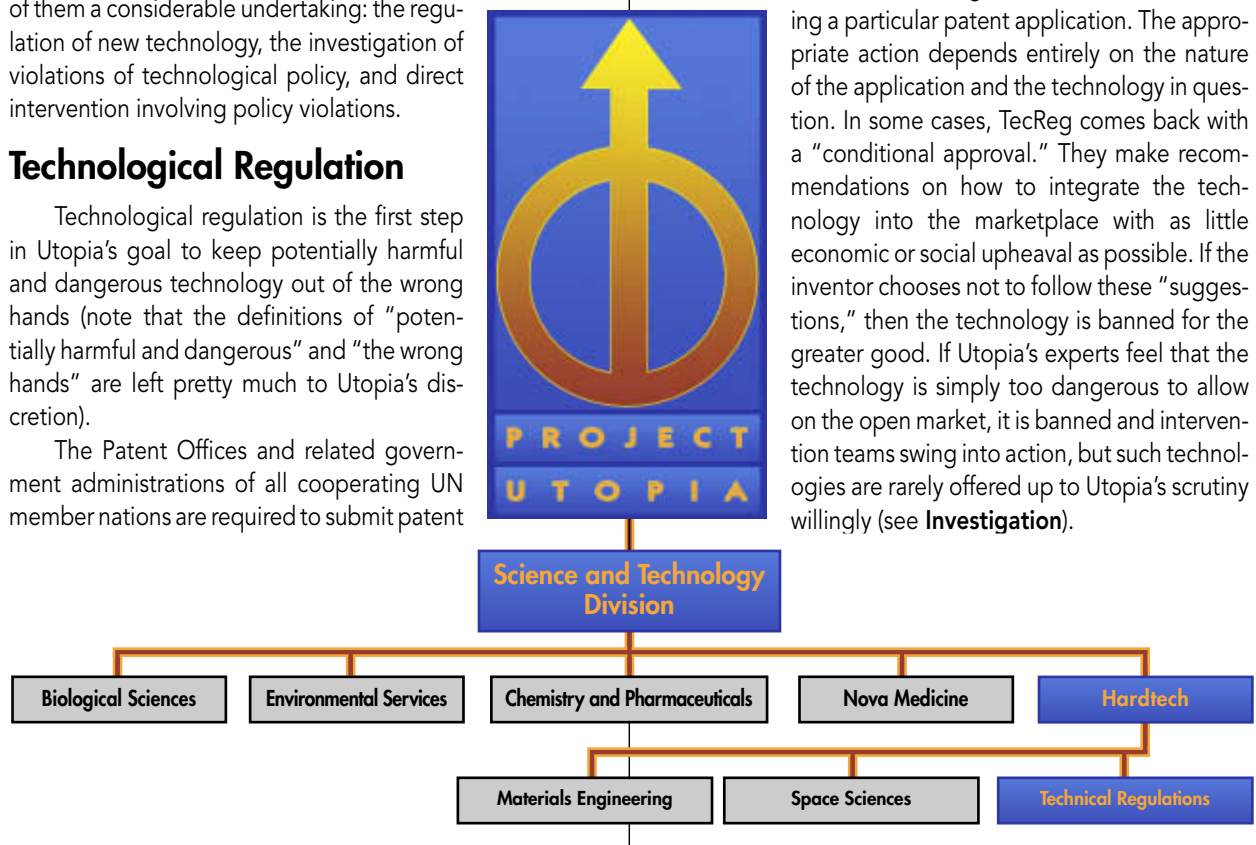
Technological Regulation

Technological regulation is the first step in Utopia's goal to keep potentially harmful and dangerous technology out of the wrong hands (note that the definitions of "potentially harmful and dangerous" and "the wrong hands" are left pretty much to Utopia's discretion).

The Patent Offices and related government administrations of all cooperating UN member nations are required to submit patent applications to Utopia's TecReg Department for review. Utopia personnel carefully review each application, considering its potential technological, social, and economic impact. Most of the time, Utopia approves the application and sends it back to the appropriate government for their review and approval (as a general rule, applications approved by Utopia tend to be approved by the government agency as well).

However, even with modern OpNet and computer technology, funneling all of the world's patent applications through Project Utopia has created something of a bottleneck, which can often delay an application for months, if not longer. The "patent pending" label has become more common as companies move new technology onto the market without waiting for a patent.

On some occasions, TecReg must take action concerning a particular patent application. The appropriate action depends entirely on the nature of the application and the technology in question. In some cases, TecReg comes back with a "conditional approval." They make recommendations on how to integrate the technology into the marketplace with as little economic or social upheaval as possible. If the inventor chooses not to follow these "suggestions," then the technology is banned for the greater good. If Utopia's experts feel that the technology is simply too dangerous to allow on the open market, it is banned and intervention teams swing into action, but such technologies are rarely offered up to Utopia's scrutiny willingly (see **Investigation**).

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Science and Technology
Division
├── Biological Sciences
├── Environmental Services
├── Chemistry and Pharmaceuticals
├── Nova Medicine
└── Hardtech
    ├── Materials Engineering
    ├── Space Sciences
    └── Technical Regulations
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Most inventors are willing to abide by Utopia's restrictions rather than having their technology banned or confiscated. Others protest and bring legal action against Utopia and the patent office they applied to. In these cases, Utopia's elite cadre of lawyers are usually capable of keeping the case tied up in court so long that it's easier for inventors to comply and save themselves the time and expense of a drawn-out court battle. Finally, some inventors refuse to comply with Utopia's requirements and go ahead with the sale or production of their technology anyway, which is where the intervention side of the department comes into play.

The TecReg Department also issues "blanket bans" on certain kinds of technology, notably weapons of mass destruction, biological weapons, self-replicating nanites, and other extremely dangerous technologies. These types of technologies are never approved by TecReg and are always confiscated whenever Project Utopia investigators discover them. The specter of another Sao Paulo is enough to convince most people that this sort of regulation is both sensible and necessary.

Anti-nova groups suggest that it's an attempt on Utopia's part to limit "weapons of mass destruction" to nova powers alone, and even to weaken national militaries and maintain the elite monopoly on warfare. Some nations also see it as an effort to maintain the monopoly of powerful nations that already have nuclear and chemical arsenals (although Utopia is working on disarmament as well). For the most part, however, the "blanket bans" are things almost everyone agrees are bad news. It's when more questionable technology comes up that the system starts to break down.

There are a number of issues involving Utopia's technological oversight, regularly debated on the floor of the General Assembly.

Restriction of Trade

The first, and most obvious, complaint about Utopia's TecReg department is that many people and nations don't want their technology regulated. Corporations in particular complain bitterly that Utopia's interference constitutes restriction of fair trade and their innate right to make money selling whatever people want to buy. Utopia counters that many technologies and materials were already regulated by international law before they came along (drugs and weapons being two examples) and what they're doing is just a natural extension of those policies.

Utopia also makes corporations and governments that protest their regulatory policies out to be greedy institutions that only care about profit and have no interest in the welfare of the global community. The counter-attempts to paint Utopia as "technological Nazis" often ring hollow, considering how much the companies stand to profit for unregulated use of nova inventors. Still, the business world pretty much universally resents the TecReg Department as much as they do any other regulatory agency.

Favoritism

It's no great secret that Utopia deals more generously with nations that treat it well and play by its rules, and the TecReg Department is no exception. When the United States government began hassling Utopia about its operations in the U.S., the organization moved its headquarters out of the country and cut back on programs to aid the United States. "It's not our fault," Utopia said, throwing up its collective hands. "The government didn't give us much choice." And the U.S. government ended up looking like the bad guys in the situation.

The same tactics apply to technological regulation. Those governments (and corporations) that "play ball" and cooperate are accorded a certain amount of latitude and trust when it comes to new technologies. Those governments known for being obstinate or violating policy are scrutinized more closely, their applications take longer to process, and things often get tied up in endless red tape. During that time, it's been known for one of Project Utopia's "pet" nations or companies to come up with an extremely similar technology, which is approved quickly, arriving at market well before the competition, even though their application was first. Utopia blames this on the applicants, saying their paperwork wasn't in order, or citing "irregularities" that slowed the process.

Some have accused Utopia of outright piracy, taking technology from one applicant and selling or giving it to a more favored developer, stalling the original applicant long enough for the "new" invention to make its way through the system. Utopia denies these allegations and, to date, no one has ever proven them in a court of law.

Legal Issues

Technically, Project Utopia has no legal authority to regulate technology. Although it has the support of the United Nations, it's a highly questionable legal matter as to whether or not the UN has the right to grant Utopia the authority that it has. Utopia and the UN maintain that it does, of course, but not everyone agrees. The main forces that maintain Utopia's authority to police technology are the support of the United Nations and many of the world's super-powers, the power of public opinion, and the strength of Utopia's nova forces.

In the first case, the UN Security Council was persuaded to grant Utopia technological oversight by several things. One was the terrorist nuking of Sao Paulo, which made clear the potential threat posed by unrestricted technology. Novas might be capable of building suitcase nukes or even worse weapons, and there was a clear need to prevent that from happening. The other was the success of the Saisho program in Japan and other programs like it within major corporations

around the world. The technological and economic balance of power was threatened by the presence of novas, and the world's super-powers banded together to protect it. The only way they could do so was to tip the balance back in their favor by restricting nova involvement in technological innovation. Most of these nations see Utopia's regulation as a means for them to "catch up" to nations like Japan, which took advantage of nova innovations faster. The nations that got a leg-up in the technological race consider this unfair, of course, but they're in the minority.

Utopia's authority also stems from the number of novas it employs, larger than any individual nation. Although the threat has never arisen, the world super-powers are acutely aware of the fact that the novas under Project Utopia's command would be capable of reducing any of their capitol cities to rubble in a matter of hours. In many ways, Utopia is in the ideal position to act as "policeman to the world," much like the United States in the latter half of the 20th century.

Technological Boundaries

Project Utopia's mandate is the regulation of "nova-based" technologies. Originally, this meant technology invented or designed by Mega-Intelligent novas (or created using other nova abilities, like Matter Manipulation). Since the creation of the TecReg department, the definition has expanded to include technologies based on other nova discoveries, studies of nova physiology and quantum abilities, or derived from novas in almost any way.

Thus, Utopia can justify that any technology involving the hardware of the OpNet (a "nova-derived technology") falls under their jurisdiction, even if it was invented by a baseline, and it's likely only a matter of time before they conclude that OpNet software does as well. Drugs like mite and soma are derived from nova physiology, so they fall under Utopia's mandate. A nova invented the hypercombustion engine, so all of its applications are overseen by Utopia, and so forth. Opponents of tech-regulation have tried to keep Utopia's oversight restricted to its original boundaries at least, but every new innovation seems to push those boundaries back just a little further.

Non-Compliance

Naturally the UN's decision, and Utopia technological regulations, did not meet with everyone's approval. Japan, in particular, protested bitterly, and many third-world nations were divided between support for Utopia and their good works and anger at being denied the opportunities granted by nova innovations, one of their only real sources of new technology. Utopia quelled many of these objects by bringing the benefits of nova innovation to the Third World themselves, with things like the terraforming of Ethiopia. But that didn't satisfy others.

To one degree or another, all of the UN's member nations have violated Utopia technological regulations. Some of these violations are small and easily overlooked, while others represent flagrant disregard for UN and Utopia policies. Utopia knows, for example, that China regularly violates regulations on biological research related to novas, and that Japan's reported violations are only a tip of a vast technological black market. The United States government and military regularly violate restrictions on weapons, and corporations around the world ignore technological guidelines whenever it suits them. Non-compliance on one party's part virtually guarantees that others will violate regulations in order to keep up, giving the TecReg investigators plenty of things to keep busy with.

Non-Member Nations

If Utopia's regulatory authority over UN member-nations is tenuous, it's virtually non-existent when it comes to non-member nations. Some of them, like Switzerland, comply of their own free will in order to remain in Utopia's good graces. This is particularly true of nations that feel they have more to gain from cooperating with Utopia than not. But other non-member nations prefer to go it on their own, and do not acknowledge Utopia's authority over them.

Publicly, there's little Utopia can do about these "rogue nations" except work through diplomatic channels to convince them of the benefits of cooperating with Utopia's programs, usually making it clear that the price of defiance is missing out on the various benefits Utopia has to offer. Although it would go too far to say that Utopia engineered government coups - where popular uprisings threw politicians out of office and replaced them with ones more willing to negotiate with Utopia - it wouldn't be true to say that Utopia had nothing to do with them either. Utopia is always quick to point out that it doesn't directly interfere in a nation's politics, of course.

Off the record, there are things Utopia can do about "rogue" nations and parties involved in technological violations. That's a province of the intervention teams.

Unfair Competition

Finally, more than a few parties have pointed out that Project Utopia is a private organization, not a branch of the UN (despite its presence on the Security Council). Moreover, Utopia owns a number of private business interests of its own that benefit from the fruits of nova invention.

Some say this is a clear conflict of interest, and point out that Utopia's subsidiaries rarely, if ever, have any trouble with the Technological Regulation Department. There are

also accusations that Utopia takes "dangerous" technologies out of the hands of others and, with the blessing of the UN, turns them over to its own subsidiary companies to develop and market, making Utopia untold billions in profits.

Utopia counters with the fact that its subsidiary companies obey technological regulations so scrupulously that they don't need to be investigated as often. Utopia also points out that the money made from technologies developed by its companies goes to support the organization's charitable activities, and provides jobs, which the technology wouldn't have done if it were simply banned. It also maintains that a Utopia-controlled company can develop and introduce a "questionable" technology more safely than any independent company. Still, these arguments do little to satisfy critics of Utopia's policies.

What Technology Does Utopia Consider Dangerous?

Good question. The answer is, it depends. Utopia TecReg specialists carefully consider each item of technology that comes to their attention. In addition to any obviously dangerous applications the technology may have, they consider its social and economic impact. For example, while the OpNet isn't particularly "dangerous" per se, the availability of such tremendous amounts of information to the general public has had a significant impact on society. The same is true of many technologies.

Ultimately, it's up to the Storyteller whether or not Utopia decides to ban or restrict a particular technology (making TecReg a useful tool for keeping technological proliferation under control in the chronicle). Here are some examples of technology Utopia restricts:

• **Weapons:** Utopia is very leery of allowing newer and more powerful weapons to proliferate. TecReg looks with a particularly jaundiced eye on heavy-weapons and weapons of mass destruction like neutron bombs, orbital lasers, bio-weapons, and so forth. TecReg tries to encourage non-lethal weapons whenever possible and particularly looks out for "nova-killer" weapons designed to take down novas (since that weakens Utopia's nova forces and their peace-keeping power).

• **Surveillance:** Technology for covertly gathering information is usually suspect, particularly technology that may compromise the security of the OpNet (super-decryption programs, advanced scanning technology, etc.). In the cases where sensor technology has "legitimate" uses in Utopia's view (e.g., medical, scientific, or humanitarian) it tries to guide development along those lines.

• **Biotechnology:** Genetic engineering is another area Utopia is leery of, particularly human and nova genetics. Things like isolating the gene-sequences for nova latency have the potential to tremendously impact society, as does the possibility of deliberately engineering novas or "advanced" humans. Add in bio-weapons like diseases and the potential ecological consequences of genetic tampering, and Utopia keeps a close eye on advances in biotech.

• **Nanotechnology:** Even more potentially dangerous than biotech is nanotechnology, tiny machines. The proliferation of molecular-scale nanotech could totally transform human society. Although it has not yet appeared at that scale (and may never), it's something Utopia watches out for. In the meanwhile the larger (insect- and microbe-sized) nanotech poses dangers of its own, and Utopia has generally banned the development of nanotech weapons (although this hasn't kept people like Dr. Rachel Alinsky from doing so).

• **Quantum Technology:** Nearly any technology that replicates a nova's quantum abilities or involves exotic energies and quantum mechanics is of interest to Utopia, meaning that it's likely to disappear into the organization's labs for "extensive testing." Utopia is well aware that its novas are its greatest assets, so anything that is a potential threat to them is likely to end up banned or under Utopia's control. Likewise, any technology designed specifically for use by or against novas (such as eufiber, nova-specific drugs, etc.) is sure to draw Utopia's attention.

Investigation

If Utopia could depend on everyone in the world to comply with its technological regulations, things would be a great deal simpler. But Utopia isn't nearly so naïve. It knows that violations of TecReg's restrictions happen all the time. That's why it devotes the time and energy necessary to investigate potential violators and follow up on leads to new technologies that have somehow slipped through the screening process.

Unfortunately, Utopia doesn't have nearly the manpower it needs to police all of the technological developments everywhere in the world. Although TecReg routinely
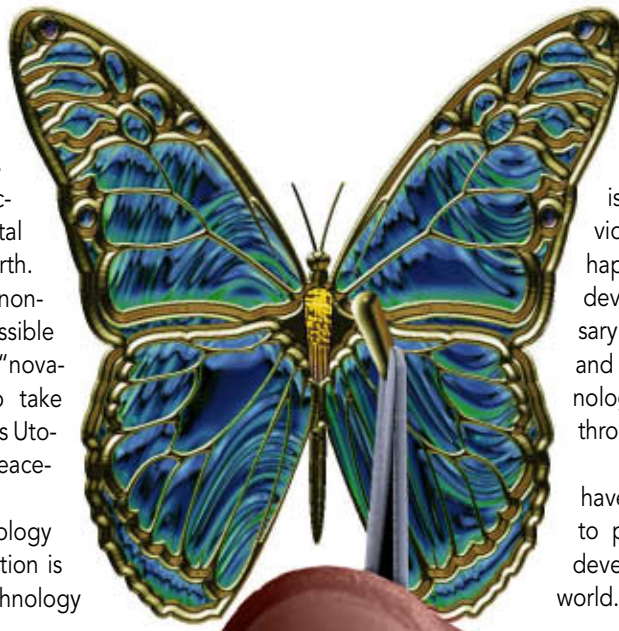
requests more personnel, it never has enough to be every-where watching everyone. What it does do is follow up on the biggest potential violations of Utopia's regulations. That generally means keeping tabs on independent novas with the requisite technical skills and abilities, corporations and governments employing novas or studying them in some capacity, and private organizations capable of developing nova-based technology.

Project Utopia and the Aeon Society keep extensive files of all known novas and their abilities, so TecRec can keep up to date on the activities of known novas, although some have managed to escape their notice. Since the Slider scandal it's been increasingly more difficult for Utopia to keep track of all novas, and some novas have been less forthcoming with information about their abilities and whereabouts (to say nothing of being less inclined to visit Rashoud facilities to register their abilities). In fact, some have become downright paranoid, and TecRec is concerned about the potential hazards of isolated and hidden novas tinkering with new technologies, completely unsupervised.

While corporations and governments are easier to keep tabs on, they guard their secrets carefully, and step one of any top-secret research project is concealing its existence from Utopia's S&T Division. Utopia investigators regularly inspect research facilities and other places where new technology is developed, but they know that the places they're allowed to visit are just elaborate shows of compliance for their benefit. The real action happens in hidden labs and testing areas where no one is allowed to go. Finding these places and formally requesting permission to inspect them is one of the first links in the data-trail when Utopia takes action against a potential violator.

Utopia has ways of ferreting out tech violators. In addition to old-fashioned detective work (following data-trails in the OpNet and conducting interviews), the insights of Utopia's own brilliant novas and the use of metasensory powers (like ESP) help to track them down. Cyberkinetic novas are particularly useful in finding hidden data-trails and incriminating information in the OpNet. There are also informants, either company personnel or rivals willing to leak information to Utopia in hopes of reward, or just to cause trouble. Finally, TecReg agents investigate unusual phenomena or patterns that Utopia uncovers that might be connected with unsupervised technology.

Utopia personnel are empowered to investigate potentially dangerous technology, and can look through company records, research documents, top-secret R&D centers, and pretty much anything else they like in search of illegal or unregistered nova-based technology. More than once, Utopia agents have used this authority as a means of getting access to places, people, and things they might not have otherwise, reporting later that they found no signs of illegal technology (but did turn up other information of interest to the Project).

Intervention

Once the TecReg department has discovered a violation of technological regulations, they are empowered to deal with it. Again, the department's personnel-power is limited, so normally TecReg relies on local law enforcement and authorities to deal with violators and any illegal technology. In practice, of course, it's not nearly so simple.

First off, some governments don't like the idea of being at Utopia's beck and call, so they respond sluggishly at best to reports of technological violations. By the time anything is actually done, the violators have caught wind of the situation and taken steps to conceal their activities. The authorities arrive to find no evidence of any violations and leave with egg on their faces or, worse yet, they seize or destroy everything in sight, opening themselves up to legal action and making them less willing to cooperate with TecReg in future matters.

In other cases, the authorities are known to overlook technological violations, even ones reported to them by Utopia. They claim not to have found anything or, in the event that Utopia personnel accompany them, the violators are mysteriously alerted to the raid and disappear, leaving nothing to be found. Authorities sometimes "confiscate" illegal technology and fail to turn it over to Utopia (or do so only after they have carefully examined, and perhaps copied, the technology in question).

In Japan, for example, many technological violations go unreported, and for every violator the Japanese authorities apprehend, five to ten others slip through the net. Those who are apprehended are often given little more than a slap on the wrist, and confiscated technology disappears into the government bureaucracy, only to have something virtually identical turn up in the R&D lab of a Saisho corporation not long thereafter. All the while the Japanese government touts its record of "compliance" with Utopia's regulations.

Clearly, Project Utopia can't rely on local authorities to do the job of enforcing their technological regulations, so they often have to do it themselves.

Direct Action

The TecReg Department enforces compliance with Utopia regulations in a number of ways: direct inspection of information, materials, and facilities, surprise inspections (or raids) looking for violations, and the confiscation of suspect materials and information that they find.

Project Utopia regularly dispatches "inspection teams" to ensure that its regulations are being followed. These "teams" range from a single inspector to small groups of specialists led by an administrator and possibly including one

or more novas. Utopia requests (read: requires) compliant companies and governments to grant their inspectors access to their facilities as needed "to ensure the safety of all personnel and to provide assistance with technological regulations as needed."

Generally, Utopia informs people in advance of an inspection team's arrival and schedules regular visits for high-profile sites. They know full well that this allows violators time to clean up and hide any evidence of their activities, but the point is to force them to do so, rather than making it easy for violators to operate in the open. Scheduled inspections are almost entirely routine and involve "marching out the flag" to remind everyone that Utopia's still watching and offer a gentle, but firm, warning to potential violators.

During inspections, TecReg can require (and expect to gain) access to any research and development materials or information. Most parties grant this access unconditionally, but some allow Utopia inspectors to see only prepared statements and reports, while a few outright refuse them access without a search warrant or the equivalent. Since this invites trouble from Utopia, those with something to hide rarely do it, they just hide what they don't want Utopia to see and given them "full access" to the "sanitized" public records. Flat refusals are usually more of a moral or ethical stand on the part of those opposed to the S&T regulation program.

Sometimes the TecReg department will perform "surprise inspections." These range from an inspection team showing up unannounced (often under the guide of the notification "getting lost") to outright raids of a facility. Surprise inspections are one of Utopia's better tools for keeping potential violators on their toes. Utopia maintains that it's technological regulation duties allow it to ignore the niceties of search and seizure when circumstances require it, although there are a number of court cases pending that argue the fact. Raids allow Utopia the opportunity to catch violators in the act and seize potentially dangerous or illegal research and materials.

Utopia often conducts raids in conjunctions with the local or national authorities of the area, although it sometimes find it more expedient to conduct the raid using its own personnel and leaving the locals out of it until the dust starts to settle. It usually depends on how helpful Utopia expects the authorities to be and how much it values good diplomatic relations with them. In nations that are either supportive of Utopia, or where Utopia wishes to remain in their good graces, the authorities tend to be involved. In nations where the authorities are less cooperative or Utopia just doesn't care about the nation's opinion, it tends to take more initiative. In "rogue" nations outright opposed to Utopia's TecReg program, of course, the local authorities are never involved and any raid is conducted as a covert or black operation.

During any inspection or raid of a facility, Project Utopia is empowered to seize any and all materials related to illegal technology and research. This includes papers, data-storage devices, prototypes, experimental materials, and so forth. Like other TecReg guidelines this one is somewhat vague and interpreted by Utopia to suit its needs. Legitimate research and materials are often scooped up in Utopia's dragnet, allowing the organization a better look at some of the subject's other activities before returning the materials with their apologies for the inconvenience.

Utopia assesses the seized materials and determines whether or not it is safe to return them. In other words, they have nearly complete discretion to decide whether or not to return something, keep it themselves, or destroy it. Although Utopia says that it destroys most banned or dangerous materials, the truth is that almost nothing gets deliberately destroyed; it all goes into Utopia's own heavily protected archives and research facilities, with the most secret and "black" technology finding its way into the hands of Project Proteus. Many parties have filed legal cases to recover their confiscated information and technology, and in some cases they have even been successful, but only at the cost of allowing Utopia to continue to inspect their facilities and ensure that the returned technology isn't being "misused."

Inspection Teams

Project Utopia maintains a number of "technological compliance inspection teams" that operate in the field and perform on-site inspections to ensure that all of the organization's technological regulations are being followed. These teams often include "stealth" novas with fairly low-level abilities, usually Mega-Attributes and metasensory abilities like Cyberkinesis, ESP, and Telepathy. Some investigation teams are made up entirely of novas, although they're fairly rare and used for the most important jobs.

Such a nova inspection team would make for an interesting group of player characters in a low-power Utopia chronicle of cloak-and-dagger investigation and espionage. The group could even mix nova and baseline characters, if the players are so-inclined. They routinely inspect sites, follow up on leads, and act as "troubleshooters" in the field. Nova teams also perform a fair amount of covert ops (below) to keep things interesting. Storytellers may want to consult the Directive sourcebook for ideas involving low-powered novas in espionage and investigative chronicles.

Covert Ops

Not all of the TecReg Department's work can be done openly. Utopia's regulation program is on shaky legal ground as it is, and there are still dozens of ways for violators to conceal their activities and their technology from Utopia's inspectors. In order to deal with these potential threats, the TecReg

Department must sometimes engage in covert operations. These operations are kept secret even within Project Utopia, requiring Alpha-level clearance (**Project Utopia**, p. 70). Only the directors and the agents involved in the mission have any knowledge of it.

Utopia often uses nova agents for covert ops missions, especially if their abilities are well suited for the work. This includes novas with Mega-Attributes and powers like Density Decrease, ESP, Invisibility, Shapeshift, and Sizemorph (Shrink).

• **Information Gathering:** The primary covert ops mission involves gathering information from reticent sources and ferreting out secret technological violations. This usually involves a combination of traditional surveillance and detective work and the judicious use of nova powers. With the assistance of Cyberkinesis, ESP, and Telepathy, there is fairly little Utopia's agents cannot learn. Some parties have taken to increasingly hiring nova security to guard their most secret projects, or investing in technology like a mental noise generator (**Directive**, p. 57) or a quantum screamer (**Underworld**, p. 61) to protect against nova spies and eavesdroppers. Covert ops teams have also been known to stumble across major threats while in the course of a routine information-gathering mission, such as a Kuro-Tek warehouse or ties between black marketers and the Teragen.

• **Industrial Espionage:** Sometimes Project Utopia finds it expedient to play technological violators against one another rather than confronting them head on. So they engage in industrial espionage, gathering information and then passing it on to a rival of that party, allowing them to do the dirty work of eliminating the technological threat. This can be delicate work, and Utopia's does do it often, simply because they can't always rely on outside parties to get the job done (and to not simply take the technology for themselves). Still, turning the worst offenders against each other works in Utopia's favor and keeps them from presenting a united front. Project Utopia would particularly like to damage Kuro-Tek's reputation on the technology black market, but thus far they haven't had much success in that area.

• **Sabotage:** Covert ops teams may be charged with outright sabotage of dangerous or illegal technology that Utopia finds too difficult to deal with openly. The sabotage that covert ops teams engage in tends to be subtle and relatively harmless (except to the technology in question). They plant viruses in computer systems and subtly alter records and data. They sabotage prototypes to ensure they'll fail, ideally in a way that will discourage any further research and development. They cripple key production facilities to make sure the technology is never manufactured, and so forth. Much of the time the target is unaware of the sabotage or at least who caused it. In cases were they are aware, they're never able to prove that Utopia had anything to do with it, although the message is still received loud and clear.

• **Midnight Raids:** Finally, covert ops teams may engage in so-called "midnight raids" on technological violators. Rather than raiding a place during business hours, Utopia personnel break in after hours and either seize illegal technology and information or sabotage the facility to ensure that such technology never sees the light of day. Black-tech has been known to simply disappear from time to time, with Utopia feigning ignorance as to what happened to it. With nova agents able to teleport, shapeshift, and transform into invisible gases, TecReg can often circumvent the most sophisticated security systems. They're also aided by the fact that most technological violators are reluctant to report any theft to the authorities; after all, how can they publicly accuse Project Utopia of stealing without exposing their own violations?

Black Ops: Project Proteus

At the extreme end of "technological regulation" comes the black operations of Project Proteus. The personnel and even the Director of the TecReg Department have no knowledge of Proteus' operations. Proteus carefully monitors the department's activities. When it sees a situation were extreme measures are necessary, it sometimes takes a direct hand in ensuring that dangerous technology doesn't get out of hand (and, often, finds its way into Proteus' arsenal).

Proteus black ops involving technology tend to fall into four main categories:

• **Extraction:** A polite term for kidnapping. From time to time, Proteus personnel will abduct someone with particularly dangerous or useful scientific knowledge. They do so both to ensure that their knowledge won't be used by anyone else and to give the abductee the opportunity to provide Proteus with the information, willingly or not. An interrogation also offers the chance to find out if the subject has shared information with anyone else. With the techniques available to them, very few can stand up to a Proteus interrogation for very long. The organization always gets what it wants from the subject, sooner or later. Subjects of extractions meet one of three fates. They are usually discretely disposed of. They disappear and are never seen again. A few are "sanitized" and released with no memory of their abduction, but this is very rare, since it represents a potential security risk. It only happens in cases where the subject's disappearance would be more problematic. Finally, a rare few may continue to work for Proteus.

• **Sabotage:** When Proteus commits sabotage they ensure that nothing remains of the dangerous technology. They're not above blowing up secret research centers, creat-

ing "industrial accidents" that destroy factories or labs, or virtually anything so long as it gets the job done. Proteus often works things to lay the blame at the feet of the technology violator or the technology itself. This only emphasizes the dangers of unrestricted technology in the minds of the public, strengthening Utopia's position as technology regulator.

Black Science

It would come as a shock to much of the world that one of the biggest violators of Utopia's technological regulations is Utopia itself. Never overtly, of course, but Utopia often gives its own scientists and subsidiaries more latitude in dealing with technologies it wouldn't let anyone else develop and does what it can to maintain its technological edge.

Proteus is largely free of any technological restrictions, and the most top-secret research facilities follow up on technological innovations that Utopia works to keep the rest of the world from exploring. The Bahrain Rashoud facility conceals experiments on captive novas, studying their physiology, their quantum abilities, and the effects of excessive taint. Proteus performs experiments in nova cloning and genetic engineering (some with potentially disastrous results, see the **Project Utopia** sourcebook for details). If a technology is banned by Utopia, then Proteus is almost sure to follow up on it so Utopia will hold all of the cards.

• **Sanitizing:** It's been said that knowledge is like a genie that can't be put back into the bottle once it's loose, but Proteus has found a way. In some cases, they will carefully destroy all records and examples of a new innovation, then use nova telepaths to erase all knowledge of it from the people involved, while also planting subconscious blocks to keep them for pursuing that line of inquiry in the future. This sort of "sanitizing" operation is only possible when dealing with an isolated individual or very small group, where information has been kept extremely secret, otherwise it raises too much suspicion. Still, in some cases it's a better option than destroying otherwise useful resources. And Proteus keeps a copy of everything, of course

• **Liquidation:** Finally, Proteus has been known to simply assassinate people (both novas and baselines) with potentially dangerous ideas or technologies to ensure they don't get out. They usually arrange some sort of "accident" to befall the target, although they've found that can be very difficult when dealing with a mastermind nova, who can see almost any plot coming from a mile away and take steps to avoid it. One interesting game of intellectual "cat-and-mouse" can be played out between a group of nova masterminds who have all been marked for death by Proteus, fighting a war behind the scenes.

From Nova Science magazine
5/07/15

The Q Division:
An Interview with DeVries'
Dr. Rachael Alinsky

The weather is warm and clear outside of Pretoria, South Africa, at the DeVries compound, which houses some of the most powerful and combat-capable novas in the world. That's one of the things that makes it so strange to see children playing near the small lake on the property and elites renowned for their ability to overturn tanks and reinforced bunkers taking their leisure in the warm sun.

But then I'm not here to interview any of the elites, not this time, anyway. My subject is one of the people behind the success of DeVries, who makes it possible for elites like the Pursuer and even the infamous Tötentanz to complete their daring missions. A white liveried employee of the DeVries Agency drives me in a cart across the compound to the building set aside for the work of Dr. Rachel Alinsky, the technical genius of the organization, whom my guide calls "the toy lady."

It sounds like such a pleasant moniker, and I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that Dr. Alinsky makes toys for the children I saw playing. But I also can't forget that she has more weapons patented under her name than any other nova inventor on record. When it comes right down to it, the "toy lady" plays rough.

She greets me in her lab, wearing a white coat over a pair of jeans and a V-neck sweater. She's not as athletic as many novas, but she still looks like a graduate student rather than a mature woman of almost forty, and she smiles pleasantly when talking about her work. Sitting and talking to her you can sense a kind of barely restrained energy. Although she's paying complete attention to our interview, I can also tell that her mind is on a dozen other things at the same time. Even at rest, she never slows down.

Nova Science: Thank you for granting us this interview, Dr. Alinsky.

Dr. Rachael Alinsky: It's my pleasure, Raymond. I'm always happy to talk about my work.

NS: What is it that you're working on these days?

RA: Oh, all sorts of things, mostly different applications of nano [nanotechnology], that's been my primary field of study for a while, but I've always got several different projects going at once. I don't like to get bogged down in a single thing.

NS: What's the average work day like for you, then?

RA: (pauses) What day is today? (laughs) Seriously sometimes the "average work day" for me can last for three or four days, depending on how into a project I am. After all, when you can get by without sleeping for that long well, let's just say I get caught up in my work. I used to pull all-nighters back in school, so this isn't so different.

**NS:** You erupted when you were a student at MIT, correct?

RA: That's right. It was the first semester of my junior year. I was working late on a final project for my robotics class and I was just so frustrated with it. Things weren't working out like I planned and the pressure was really on. I remember being ready to take a hammer to the damn thing when it was like somebody flipped on a light switch in my head. Suddenly, it all just came together and I just knew how to make it work.

NS: Did you know then that you were a nova?

RA: Not right away, actually. At first, I just thought that all those late-nights were paying off! But the way I started devouring information, it didn't take long for me to figure out that I'd erupted.

NS: And you came to work for DeVries when?

RA: 2002, not long after I decided that I'd learned all that I could at MIT. I've been here ever since.
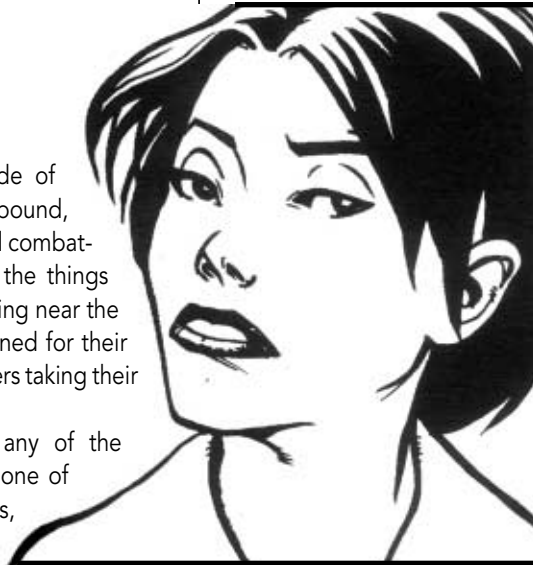
NS: Why not go to work for another corporation like ViaSoft, or for Project Utopia, for that matter?

RA: I guess Anna [DeVries, President and CEO of the DeVries Agency] made me an offer I couldn't refuse. She did give me a very generous salary, but what really made up my mind was the creative freedom she offered. I knew that I wasn't going to find that at a big company like ViaSoft and definitely not at Project Utopia.

NS: And you really seem to have taken that creative freedom and run with it. You've developed everything from stealth materials and maglev vehicles to high-powers lasers and railguns to nanotechnology and even new treatments for burns and quantum-related injuries. Do you attribute your wide range of technological endeavors to the creative latitude that DeVries allows you?

RA: Absolutely. Not only that, but the company has a way of finding new challenges for me all the time. That burn treatment, for example, came about because of some injuries some of our people sustained in Kashmir, involving temperatures that would kill a baseline, so no sort of treatment was ever developed. Other operations have posed similar challenges.

NS: Many people might question the morality of your work. After all, in addition to coming up with electrostunners and burn treatments, you've also designed any number of powerful weapons. How do you respond to charges that you're irresponsible with your abilities?

RA: I'm glad you asked that. It's some-thing that I hear a lot. The answer is a simple one. Why do police and military forces acquire better and more powerful weapons? Is it so they can wage war on their neighbors? Possibly, but more likely it's so they can defend the law and their own interests. The equipment I've developed over the years has allowed our elites to win more victories than any others, and they've helped shorten battles that could have cost many, many more lives in the long run. I find it ironic that Project Utopia denounces "warmongers" like us, while seizing and stockpiling some of the most powerful prototype weapons in existence. Offensive and defensive technologies are necessary, and I'm at least honest about creating them.

NS: Does it concern you that some of your inventions are used against your fellow novas?

RA: No, that's what I designed many of them for. The way I see it, it's their own fault. If you go up against DeVries, you pretty much deserve what's coming to you.

Alinsky's Toybox

GPS Telebeacon: The use of Teleport and Warp powers is limited by the nova's familiarity with the target point. The telebeacon expands the a teleporter's range by providing precise coordinates, distance, and bearing between any two points on the surface of the Earth using advanced Global Positioning Satellites. The system comes as either a compact set of vid-display glasses (see p. 20) or an implant that works in conjunction with a data-net implant (**Elites**, p. 72). So long as the system is functioning, the nova subtracts two from the difficulty of teleporting or warping to any location on the surface of the Earth. This is cumulative with the Safe Blind Teleport extra, although neither can reduce the difficulty to teleport to an unseen location to less than +1.

Climbing Harness: Designed to allow the wearer to climb almost any vertical surface, a climbing harness consists of a snug fitting web of belts around the hips, shoulders, and torso and a motorized grappling reel. It fires out a cord made from eufiber derived polymers that harden instantly on contact with air, producing a thin, very strong line. It can fire either a small piton capable of penetrating stone or a flat anchor with a molecular adhesive capable of holding up to ton (also the tensile strength of the line). Then the reel is clipped onto the harness and hauls the wearer up the line. The grapple can fire out to 500 meters and characters roll Firearms to aim it. The harness also comes with a chemical catalyst that can dissolve the line's adhesive instantly. If applied to the line itself, it causes it to dissolve completely within five minutes.

Hypercore Rounds: Nova abilities have led to the development of exotic materials, including hyperdense collapsed matter used to create hypercore rounds, often known simply as "hypers" or "nova-killers." These bullets have a jacket of softer material (like steel) over a very dense core shaped and designed to penetrate tough armor, like the nearly invulnerable skin of some novas. Hypercore rounds effectively give weapons the Armor Piercing enhancement (**Aberrant**, p. 231). For every success on the attack roll, the target's lethal soak is reduced by two before determining damage. However, additional successes on the attack roll do not increase the hypercore round's base damage.

Since their express purpose is injuring or killing otherwise invulnerable novas, hypercore rounds are legally regulated in most nations, and Project Utopia keeps a close eye on the production and distribution of hypercore ammunition. Hyper ammo is used by agents of the Directive when necessary, as well as by the Nakato Gumi, the C-Z Megasyndicate, and other organizations. Rumors abound that the Church of Michael Archangel is stockpiling hypercore ammo and other "nova-killer" weapons.

Shockglove: A weapon designed for non-lethal combat, a shockglove is an insulated gauntlet with an internal battery pack and electrical contacts on the fingertips and palm, making it a kind of taser that can deliver a powerful shock to anyone the wearer touches. The shock does 6d10 bashing damage in addition to any normal damage caused by the strike, and soaked separately from it. The shock also jangles the nervous system and tends to disorient; if the target takes any damage from it, he suffers a -1 penalty to all of his dice pools for the next turn. The glove is good for up to twenty shocks before its batteries run out.

Nanotech

Sensor Dust: The current leading edge in nanotechnology, sensor dust deploys a cloud of microscopic nanomachines, each equipped with a sensor package and a transmitter that beams information back to a coordinating nansect (an insect-sized robot). The nansect then sends the acquired information back through a communications relay. Everything within a hundred meters of any of the nanomachines is detected and information is send back for analysis. Scattered over a wide enough area, sensor dust is virtually invisible and capable of picking up a wide range of information. It can detect lifeforms, movement, radiation, quantum emissions, chemical contaminants in air, soil, or water, and similar information. Novas with Electromagnetic Vision may be able to see sensor dust in an area with a difficult (+3) Awareness roll, while those with Hyperenhanced Hearing may detect the dust's radio emissions with a similar roll. Otherwise, sensor dust is virtually undetectable without using sophisticated scanning equipment.

Nanokill: The deadliest chemical weapon ever devised, nanokill is a collection of microscopic nanomachines suspended in an inert gas. They are designed to break down the cellular function of any living organism they come into contact with before breaking down themselves into harmless byproducts, leaving the target area free of any trace of danger. Nanokill is deployed like nerve gas and has a similar effect, except that conventional antidotes and even the protective abilities of novas have little effect against it.

Vector: Contact.

Effect: Exposure to nanokill does one health level of damage per turn to any living creature. It also results in immediate and total paralysis in baselines. Novas have to make a Resistance roll at +4 difficulty each turn of exposure or suffer the same effects, and reduce all of their dice pool by three dice while exposed to nanokill.

Protection: Nanokill can penetrate any amount of soak unless the Storyteller rules that it is impermeable, such as a force field. It also does not affect targets that are not organic (such as novas transformed into a form other than flesh and blood). Unlike conventional poisons, the Adaptability enhancement of Mega-Stamina provides no protection from nanokill.

Antidote: The only antidote for nanokill is to administer a dose of hunter-killer nano to seek out and neutralize the invading nano-machines before irrepaiaarable damage has been done.

Hunter-Killer Nano: With the existence of weapons like nanokill, a countermeasure was needed. Hunter-killer (or HK) nano are microscopic machines designed and programmed to seek out and destroy other forms of nanomachines, including sensor dust and nanokill. An amount of HK nano wipes out an equivalent amount of other nano in an affected area, and HK nano lasts for four hours before losing its effectiveness.

Shadow Tracker RM

To: Mr. Nakamura
From: Raymond Chu, Director of Special Projects, ViaSoft
Date: 05/28/06
Re: Shadow Tracker RM

Mr. Nakamura,
    After due consideration of your offer to purchase our Shadow Tracker RM technology, we must regretfully refuse. We feel that the potential of this technology can best be developed by us here at ViaSoft. We appreciate your interest and to hope hear from you in the future.
    Sincerely,
    Raymond Chu, Director of Special Projects, ViaSoft

Shadow Tracker RM

To: Project Utopia, Science & Technology Division
From: [address suppressed]
Date: 09/14/06

    Attached please find information on Shadow Tracker RM, technology currently being developed by ViaSoft at their Cambridge, Massachusetts facility. This technology represents a potential danger to the public and I felt that you should be made aware of it, regardless of the personal risk. I've taken precautions to conceal my identity and wish to remain anonymous in this matter. Thank you for all the work you do to help keep the world a safer place.
    [FILE ATTACHED]

Shadow Tracker RM

To: Raymond Chu, Director of Special Projects
From: Peter Cavallino, CEO
Date: 09/17/06

Ray,
    How the hell did Utopia find out about Shadow Tracker? I want a complete security check and report from you about how this leaked. In the meantime, we need to dump the technology fast before Utopia makes good on their threats. The last thing we need is another black eye in the media. Contact Nakamura and agree to sell Shadow Tracker to Kuro-Tek at the price he offered back in May, provided that his people take possession immediately. Then when Utopia's dogs start barking at the door, they'll have nothing to find.

Kuro-Tek's Catalog

One of the areas where we've continued to have trouble dealing with Kuro-Tek is their distribution of information to their customers. Initially, Kuro-Tek used a secure opsite with password protection, encryption routines, and OP address identifiers, which we have usually been able to shut down within a month or so of them setting it up (forcing them to switch to a different OP address each time). We're getting faster at tracking down their online information and closing it down, with help from the cyberkinetics in the S&T department. But now it seems that Kuro-Tek has a new wrinkle on their OpNet presence. Like natural selection, their opsite has evolved the abilities to evade us, namely mobility and camouflage. How, you ask? Good question.

As near as we can tell, Kuro-Tek has developed a sophisticated, self-contained program that holds all of their catalog offerings and is regularly updated. The program is compacted into a tight, self-extracting archive and squirted out across the OpNet by automatic servers to customers who ping a particular OP address. The transfer itself probably takes no more than a few seconds at OpNet data rates.

Once it's installed on the client's computer, the program automatically unpacks itself and goes to work. It's got a sophisticated expert system and it scans the host system first thing, getting a feel for "where" it is. The first two times we managed to get hold of one of these things, they crashed and took the systems they were on with them moments after they unpacked. At first we thought some kind of passcode was needed but then we discovered that the programs "knew" they were on Utopia systems and engaged some sort of failsafe. It took putting one on a completely "virgin" system to get it to cooperate. If the system is "clean" of any other software, the program presents the user with a default selection. But if it picks up any information from the user's system, it customizes itself to the user's potential interests, hitting them right off with the prime merchandise they're likely to be interested in.

Not only that, but we've discovered that the program encodes the information scanned from the host system and includes it in the data packet that goes out with the customer's order. So every order put into Kuro-Tek tells them a little more about their customer base, what they've got, what they need, and what Kuro-Tek might be able to acquire. We may be able to use that against them, to set up some nice, tempting industrial espionage targets and see if they take the bait.

Private Communiqué

Thetis,

Kuro Tek is becoming a destabilizing influence and an outright hindrance to the efforts of Project Utopia more quickly than anticipated. While they do serve a purpose, and are partly to thank for the operational complacency of the Directive, I want to keep them on a tighter leash.

Update their dossier and compile a listing of their current projects then identify counter measures to divert them from the areas I've identified as high risk with zero blow back on our efforts as well as those of Utopia.

Ozaki

KURO TEK

Kuro-Tek: Black Science

Number one on the hit parade of Project Utopia's list of "technology violators" is Kuro-Tek, a Japanese corporation founded and run by the Nakato Gumi Yakuza. Kuro-Tek develops, build, and sells technology Utopia has declared banned or restricted, thumbing its nose at the UN's technological regulations and earning vast amounts of money in the process. In fact, in its short existence, Kuro-Tek has grown to become the most profitable enterprise the Nakato Gumi runs, making the Yakuza very protective of their new cash cow.

Corporate Structure and Organization

Kuro-Tek is a privately held corporation with Yoshiro Nakamura, the oyabun of the Nakato Gumi, as CEO and majority stockholder. It is arranged much like any other corporation, with vice-presidents and middle-managers overseeing the rest of the company's personnel. It is divided into two main sections: Operations, which handles the day-to-day business of the company, and Research & Development, which creates the technology Kuro-Tek sells.

Research & Development

Kuro-Tek's R&D department is involved in some of the most cutting-edge research in the world, developing technologies Project Utopia has banned "legitimate" companies from. Most of Kuro-Tek's development projects are top-secret, protected against industrial espionage by advanced security systems, trained security personnel and, occasionally, nova agents (supplied by elite agencies like DeVries or directly by the Nakato Gumi, see **Aberrant: Underworld** for more details).

Of course, Kuro-Tek knows all about industrial espionage. The company's so-called "Acquisitions" department focuses on two things: purchasing new technology from other companies and individuals, and stealing it where it is too expensive or too difficult to purchase. Kuro-Tek keeps a close eye out for potentially lucrative technology. When it finds some, it usually offers to buy and develop it, offering the seller a generous payment (often pointing out that Utopia might not look too kindly on their work). If they refuse, Kuro-Tek has been known to leak word of the technology's existence to Utopia's S&T division. When the investigators start knocking on the door, seller's become much more willing to unload their technology.

If those tactics fail, Kuro-Tek is willing to employ agents (both baseline and nova) to acquire the technology for it, usually eliminating any information or prototypes in other hands (and sometimes eliminating any evidence of the technology's existence along the way). Operations include physical break-

ins as well as OpNet hackers and sometimes kidnapping an inventor with vital information (although Kuro-Tek prefers to avoid kidnapping, too many complications).

Once a new technology is in its hands (either by hook or by crook), Kuro-Tek begins developing it in its own labs. Plenty of developments come out of those labs, too. Kuro-Tek has more than a few researchers, engineers, and technicians working for it. Most are baselines, but some are novas who are on the run from the law, hiding from Utopia, or simply interested in the benefits Kuro-Tek has to offer, namely lots of money, carte blanche in developing new technologies, and freedom from Utopia's stifling regulations. Some noteworthy areas of research for Kuro-Tek include:

• **Weapons:** Kuro-Tek is well known as an arms dealer, particularly high-tech, cutting-edge weapons, some of which can threaten even novas. The company's array of weapons includes advanced armor-piercing ammo, explosives, stunners, tasers, sonic beams, rail-guns, and (as the marketing department says) much, much more. Many of their weapons are based on studies of nova abilities, while others are designed to allow baselines to take on novas in combat (these are popular with customers like the Directive). Kuro-Tek weapons tend to be expensive and often experimental, so they're more suited to individuals or small units rather than equipping armies.

• **Chemistry:** Kuro-Tek experiments will all sorts of exotic chemicals, from deadly poisons and nerve gases to acids, designer drugs, and some applications of material technology (notably synthetic eufiber, which Kuro-Tek acquired the formula for from Utopia some years ago). While some of the applications are fairly harmless, most tend to be dangerous, including the manufacture of drugs specifically tailored for novas. Kuro-Tek makes soma in small quantities, along with adrenocilin, moxinoqunatimine, and eclipsidol (see **The Directive**, p. 55, for the latter).

• **Biotech:** Biotechnology is another field Utopia often finds questionable and Kuro-Tek finds profitable. They do research on human (and nova) DNA and cloning, organ replacement (often using illegally obtained transplants), biological augmentation techniques like mite, anti-aging formulas, and similar borderline medical technology. They sell black-market aphrodisiacs and potency drugs derived from nova hormones and pheromones that are very popular in Japan and abroad (many of them even work as advertised).

• **Novas:** Kuro-Tek also studies nova physiology and biochemistry looking for ways to augment and improve nova powers, inhibit or block them, and (most of all) induce eruptions in latents and perhaps even baselines. The latter often involves putting latent "volunteers" through a series of "stimuli" (read: tortures) attempting to induce eruption and direct the manifestation of it so as to select what powers the new nova will have. This has resulted in disaster on a few occasions, and earned Kuro-Tek the enmity of the Teragen (among others) but they keep trying. They also pay highly for nova cadavers to dissect and study, and to break down for "raw materials" for manufacturing nova-specific drugs like soma.

Operations

Kuro-Tek's Operations division runs the business and keeps the company in the black, and out of trouble as much as possible. Kuro-Tek maintains the façade of a law-abiding corporation in Japan, with public offices and facilities that handle legitimate products and business concerns. Some of the people employed there aren't even aware of the true scale of Kuro-Tek's operations, and those who are don't think much of Utopia's restrictions anyway. They consider Kuro-Tek heroic for defying Utopia's totalitarian attitude and supporting Japan's economy, regardless of the risk.

Under the surface is Kuro-Tek's thriving black market operation, which sells illegal technology to customers around the world. Kuro-Tek uses a variety of means to disseminate information to its customers and potential customers. Their biggest marketing tool is the OpNet. The company uses secure, encrypted opsites to sell product, as well as transmitting "autonomous" catalog programs over the 'net to customers, which automatically delete themselves and contain hidden features that gather information for the company on their customer's habits and needs. Word of mouth is also a powerful sales force, and nearly anyone connected to the black market knows that Kuro-Tek is the place to go for illegal technology. Company representatives visit potential customers to entice them with Kuro-Tek's latest offerings, politely pointing out that many of them are not "entirely approved," but most Kuro-Tek buyers don't care, so long as they get the goods.
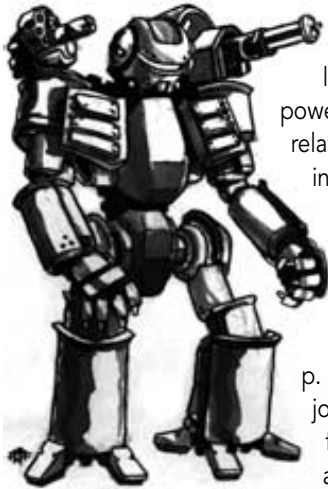
The other major duty of the Operations division (apart from administration and data-management) is security. Kuro-Tek needs protection from its rivals, from Utopia's inspection (and covert ops) teams, from "nova terrorists" (like the Teragen or the Aberrants), and from criminal organizations that move against the Nakato Gumi. The company uses highly trained

baseline security personnel, equipped with the latest hardware (and, ironically, body armor based on the velamid fibers sold by Utopia's subsidiaries).

More recently, Kuro-Tek has looked into augmenting its security forces using advanced robots, some of them operated by telepresence technology, allowing baseline security to handle more powerful threats for a position of relative safety. It's also looked into the possibility of powered-armor, but find robots more practical overall (like the Gunsen on p. 20, or the Dangard armored warrior from **Aberrant: Underworld**, p. 47 & 61. For major security jobs, Kuro-Tek hires nova elites from DeVries, Janissaries, or a Japanese agency. The company has considered starting an elite division of its own, both as a means of cutting costs and providing additional resources, but both DeVries and Utopia have subtly made it clear that Kuro-Tek elites are not something they want to happen. The company is understandably reluctant to do anything that might unite Utopia and DeVries against it.

Kuro-Tek baseline security takes lessons from the Directive (and vice versa) when it comes to dealing with nova-level threats. Storytellers might want to consult **The Directive** sourcebook for more ideas on baselines coming into conflict with nova opponents.

Delivering the Goods

One of Kuro-Tek's biggest challenges is getting illegal technology to its customers around the world. Utopia keeps a careful eye on shipments coming out of Japan (not just for Kuro-Tek but because of the vast amount of blacktech bought and sold in Japan in general). Kuro-Tek can often rely on conventional smuggling, particularly since the Japanese authorities often turn a blind eye to their activities, and tie up Utopia's surveillance efforts in red tape. The Nakato Gumi's extensive smuggling operations also serve to move Kuro-Tek goods to their destinations.

Of course, Kuro-Tek doesn't ship everything from Japan. The company has operations throughout the world, and maintains a number of "warehouses" (some are actual warehouses, others concealed storage facilities) where goods are kept until they are shipping to buyers. Utopia raids these places when it finds them, but Kuro-Tek moves its warehouses around on a fairly regular basis to keep them

from being discovered. Some warehouses are also concealed by other legitimate businesses owned by Kuro-Tek through various subsidiaries and shell companies.

When necessary, Kuro-Tek can also rely on nova "couriers" to deliver the goods to their customers. Utopia knows of at least one nova, Billy "Pipeline" McMurdow, who serves the company in that capacity. Pipeline has the unique ability to "digitize" solid objects, breaking them down into energy and transmitting them over the OpNet, reassembling them at their destination. He works as a computer consultant in Japan using his cyberkinetic abilities, but Utopia strongly suspects that the Australian expatriate uses his abilities for Kuro-Tek on the side. Kuro-Tek also employs other novas from time to time, usually elites with abilities like Hypermovement, Teleport, and Warp that allow them to slip past border patrols and arrive at their destination quickly.

The Directive Connection

One of Kuro-Tek's greatest advantages, which has helped to ensure its continued survival, is its relationship with the shadowy Directive. When the Directive first began to form, its Directors contacted Mitsu Nakamura, chairperson of the Finance Committee of the Japanese Diet and an influential woman in Japanese politics. Unknown to the Directors, Nakamura was also a cousin to Yoshira Nakamura, the oyabun of the Nakato Gumi and CEO of Kuro-Tek. The oyabun quickly saw the potential of this new alliance when Mitsu approached him for his insight and he insisted that she, and Japan, join the Directive.

With Director Nakamura's help, the Directive quickly made arrangements to buy technology from Kuro-Tek, which was riding the wave of Saisho that was beginning to sweep through Japan. Kuro-Tek's access to the cutting-edge of technology gave the Directive and its agent a leg up over the world intelligence community. It also gave Kuro-Tek a powerful hold over the new intelligence agency, and allowed it to acquire information the Directive uncovered.

The relationship between the Directive and Kuro-Tek grew and deepened as Utopia's power expanded. When Utopia was granted technological oversight authority by the United Nations, Kuro-Tek's willingness to defy Utopia's regulations allowed the Directive to continue buying the best equipment available. They couldn't allow Utopia to choke off the technology that gave them a much-needed edge against nova opponents, so the Directive supported Kuro-Tek's activities behind the scenes.

Of course, it also wasn't long before the other Directors learned that Kuro-Tek was a Yakuza front, and that they'd made a deal with the devil. But as it turned out, many of the Directors didn't care. The intelligence community had worked hand-in-hand with organized crime before, and politics made for stranger bedfellows. Kuro-Tek served a purpose, and served it well. Although Director Ilyanovich has suggested the idea of "weaning" the Directive from its dependence on Kuro-Tek for its equipment, the idea hasn't met with much success. The Directive simply has more important things to worry about than fixing something that isn't broken from their point of view. Plus Directive Nakamura shoots down any attempt to separate the Directive from her cousin's company.

The relationship does benefit both sides. The Directive doesn't have to invest money in research and manufacturing facilities (or argue over which nation will own and control them), it gets access to the best technology available, and Kuro-Tek enjoys the Directive's assistance and protection from its enemies (including Project Utopia).

The only real flaw in the arrangement (apart from the Directive owing much of its existence to a criminal syndicate) is that the relationship could prove a public relations nightmare for the Directive if the truth came out. Certainly Utopia could use knowledge of the Directive/Kuro-Tek alliance to put pressure on the Directive and force them to back off in certain areas. In fact, Utopia suspects the possibility of a relationship. After all, they know the Directive is getting blacktech from somewhere. But they don't have any hard evidence, so they're not quite ready to openly confront the Directive in the public arena.

The Kuro-Tek Catalog

The following is a sample of the sort of goods Kuro-Tek has available. Some are fairly innocuous, while others are more dangerous and banned by Utopia. Additional Kuro-Tek products can be found in **The Directive** sourcebook and **Aberrant: Underworld**.

Tekcloth

Developments in eufiber technology allow for computers and display systems made from a light fabric than can be folded, crumpled, and generally treated like ordinary cloth while still retaining the ability to function. A tekcloth is a small computer system "woven" into eufiber cloth, usually about half a meter square when spread out on the flat surface. When activated, the surface of the cloth shows a display area and a flat, touch-sensitive "keyboard" for typing. Objects in the display area can also be moved around by touch. A small, lightweight battery pack is attached to one corner of the cloth, and it also has a plug for AC power.

Larger tekcloths are available, including flat-screen displays two meters or more across and "e-paper" capable of displaying any text or image downloaded to it, then being erased and used for different text or images. Eufiber is also laminated to rigid backings to create desktop displays, portable "data-slates" and even wall art that can be changed at the touch of a button, uploading new images (even moving images) to electronic "windows". Eufiber is also making

appearances in the fashion industry as a fabric for clothing capable of not only changing color or shape when certain electrical charges are passed through it, but also capable of displaying graphics and moving images. Video clips are becoming popular displays in the T-shirts and backs of jackets in many parts of the world.

Nootropic Drugs

Nootropic or "smart" drugs stimulate brain activity and promote the development of neural connections in the brain. Modern-day nootropics are based partially on the study of neurotransmitters and other activity in the brains of novas with mental enhancements. They help treat a wide variety of mental conditions, including absent-mindedness, senility, attention deficit disorder, memory loss, and similar dysfunctions. Nootropics are also believed to "build brain-power" in healthy people, allowing them to improve their intelligence and other mental abilities, although critics say that there is no definite proof of this, and there are concerns about long-term side-effects. Still, this hasn't stopped "smart drinks" from showing up in trendy cafes and places like Star Lord's.

In game terms a dose of nootropic drugs grants a +1 die bonus on any Mental Attribute or Ability roll for about an hour afterward, may allow a Willpower roll to overcome some mental Flaws or even Aberrations (rather than having to spend a point of Willpower). A regime of nootropics over the course of weeks or months can justify spending experience toward increasing any of the Mental Attributes.

Sensor Cloth

Another development of eufiber, sensor cloth is a fabric sensitive to light and other electromagnetic energies used to create sensor devices. Sensor cloth equipped with tiny radio transmitters or thread-like eufiber connectors can be deployed almost anywhere, creating sensitive, full-spectrum cameras ranging in size from a postage stamp to a large painting (the fabric surface of the sensor can be printed on or colored without any effect on its use).

Sensor cloth can also be made into suit of clothing, feeding data to a set of display glasses or even an implanted data connection (see **Elites**, p. 72). A sensor cloth suit grants its wearer +3 dice to all Perception-based rolls along with the effects of the Mega-Perception enhancements Electromagnetic Vision, High-End Electromagnetic Scan, and Ulter-peripheral Perception. It operates for up to eight hours continuously using a compact battery pack (usually located at the small of the back).

Vid-Display Glasses

A pair of lightweight glasses virtually indistinguishable from ordinary eyeglasses, these spectacles contain microcircuitry in the frames and eufiber derived coatings on the lenses, allowing them to display visual information directly in the wearer's field of vision from any standard input device via infrared transmission. The glasses can display pretty much any information that can appear on a computer monitor, ranging from text to tactical information. Vid-Display glasses are often linked with a palmtop computer or cell-phone (usually the same thing in 2015), and may also have tiny speakers in the earpieces to provide sound along with visual information. In addition to their many other functions, the glasses can change from transparent lenses to sunglasses on command (either from an input device or with a pre-programmed tap against the frames).

Energy-Opaque Vitrium

Vitrium or "super-glass" is a glass-like material with tensile strength equal to that of steel (see **Aberrant: Year One**, p. 98). It is used for a variety of construction work; including the creation of "bulletproof" windows in high-security buildings. The use of vitrium has been further refined by the creation of a type of the super-glass that is sensitive to EM frequencies of a particular intensity. When the glass is exposed to a powerful energy source like a laser, it becomes opaque and its outer surface takes on a silvery, reflective sheen. It takes the vitrium one turn to turn opaque, so it won't protect against a sudden sneak attack, but once it changes, the glass provides complete cover, imposing a +3 difficulty modifier, and it also provides an additional five points of soak against physical and energy attacks.

Energy-opaque vitrium is also sensitive to things like laser sights and laser microphones, and blocks them when it becomes opaque, providing additional protection. Optional electrical leads allow the opacity of the glass to be controlled remotely as well. Otherwise the vitrium changes in response to energy it comes in contact with, returning to normal transparency over the course of about half an hour. The only sort of attack vitrium is vulnerable to is a specific frequency of intense sound (which differs for each batch of super-glass). Vitrium cannot soak sonic attacks on that frequency.

Gunsen "War Fan" Security Robot

The gunsen or "war fan" security robot is produced by Kuro-Tek (along with other mecha like the Dangard, see p. 47 & 61 of **Aberrant: Underworld**). The gunsen has a relatively small torso topped with a triangular head on a flexible neck-stalk. It's limbs are long and spindly, allowing it to fold itself up into a compact shape less than a meter in diameter for concealment and storage. It can unfold instantly into an active configuration when needed. It is operated by telepresence or pre-programmed instructions. The gunsen has the equivalent of Mega-Strength 1 and Mega-Dexterity 1 and it's armed with a large SMG (7d10L damage, RoF 45, Ammo 200), a shock pad (see the shockglove, p. 13), and a rotary saw blade that does [5]+10d10L damage. It has Armor 3 [4].

Sonic Pacifier

Studies in acoustics have discovered specific frequencies that produce different states in the human (and nova) brain. Terr'r music uses these subsonic frequencies to create unreasoning fear, but it is possible to create other effects as well. The sonic pacifier uses low-frequency sound waves to produce a soothing effect that calms people and can even put them into a deep sleep. It has begun to enter use as a therapeutic tool in the medical field, but other people have quickly latched on to its use as a security device.

The pacifier can be designed as a single generator able to affect a small room or a collar or headband worn by a subject (and affecting only him). While the pacifier is activated, the subjects are affected like the Soothe enhancement of Mega-Charisma (**Aberrant**, p. 176); they immediately become happier and calmer, and cannot take aggressive or hostile action without making a Willpower roll at +2 difficulty to overcome the effects of the pacifier. At its highest level, a sonic pacifier forces subjects to make a Willpower roll at +1 difficulty each turn to avoid falling into a deep sleep. Such pacifiers are sometimes used as a non-pharmaceutical treatment for insomnia. Pacifiers are also entering use in prisons to help control outbreaks of violence.

Explosive Collar (Bracelet)

Nova prisoners are particularly difficult to control, leading to the creation of the explosive collar: a slim metallic collar filled with high explosives that fits closely around the wearer's neck. The collar is equipped with a remote control (usually radio or IR base, sometimes both) that allows the operator to detonate the explosives in the collar at any time. This does an automatic ten health levels of lethal damage to the wearer, plus another ten dice of damage. The placement of the collar and the design of the explosives also halves the wearer's lethal soak against the explosion (round down), so even very tough novas are likely to be hurt or killed. The collar also comes in the form of a bracelet, which will "only" blow off the wearer's hand (and may allow him to survive if he gets immediate medical attention).

In addition to the remote control, explosive collars can be activated in other ways. They are commonly set to go off if they are tampered with in any way, and may be tuned to a central transmitter. If the wearer moves outside of the transmitter's range, the collar explodes, encouraging wearers not to wander off. Collars can also be equipped with quantum scanners (see **Aberrant: Underworld** for details), allowing them to go off when the wearer spends quantum or uses quantum powers, for example.

Since blowing someone's head off is something of a final measure, many explosive collars and bracelets are also equipped with built-in tasers and high-density batteries. This allows them to deliver a powerful shock to the wearer that does 8d10 bashing damage, enough to addle many novas, or at least sting them enough to remind them who's in charge.

Lethe

A memory erasing drug, lethe breaks down the chemical links in the brain relating to recently formed memories, causing short-term permanent memory loss.

Vector: Injected

Effect: A minute after entering the subject's system, lethe begins erasing memories beginning from the present moment and working backward, targeting the most recently formed memories first. The subject becomes disoriented (-3 dice to all pools) and must make a Willpower roll each turn to remain conscious. The subject's memory of the previous 1d10 days is erased, at the rate of about one day's worth of memory per minute, after which the drug has run its course.

Protection: Lethe must be injected directly into the bloodstream to have any effect, so novas with three or more levels of lethal soak are likely immune to being injected (except with a very heavy-duty needle or some other method). Novas with Mega-Stamina can roll Resistance against the drug's effects, each success protects one day's worth of memories and successes equal to or greater than the drug's effect mean it has no effect on the character.

Antidote: There is no known antidote for lethe and its effects are permanent. Even the use of nova powers like Telepathy can't restore the lost memories.

Quik-clot

Intended for medical use, quik-clot causes rapid blood clotting, preventing patients from bleeding excessively, but it has also been co-opted for use as a tool of assassination.

Vector: Injected.

Effect: Quik-clot causes rapid blood clotting, preventing the patient from losing any more blood due to injuries. It can help prevent an Incapacitated character from dying, if applied quickly enough. An overdose of the drug is a deadly poison, causing blood clots to form inside the bloodstream and leading to a fatal heart attack or stroke. The subject of an overdose must roll Stamina each minute, failure results in a level of lethal damage, a botch results in immediate death.

Protection: Quik-clot must be injected or applied to an open wound to be effective, so novas with three or more levels of lethal soak are generally immune unless they are already wounded. A nova who scores six or more successes on a Stamina roll to resist the drug manages to purge the effects of it from her system.

Antidote: There is no antidote for quik-clot, although fast medical treatment, blood thinners, and a complete blood transfusion can eliminate its effects (although most patients die before any treatment can be completed).

Kiroshi Virus

The Kiroshi virus is a biological weapon, an engineered disease that causes the body's own immune system to run amok, so that the victim is attacked and killed by his own immunity ("Kiroshi" is a Japanese expression meaning roughly "death from overwork"). Even novas are not necessarily immune to the effects of the disease.

Vector: Airborne. The virus cannot survive long outside of a living host, however, dying rapidly on contact with air, and is not contagious once it inhabits a living host, so it does not spread. It is sprayed in aerosol form on its intended targets to infect them.

Effect: An hour after infection, the victim of the virus begins running a very high fever, accompanied by chills and weakness, often vomiting. The immune system runs rampant, attacking the patient's own systems. Delirium often accompanies the fever as it intensifies. The victim suffers a health level of bashing damage each hour thereafter. Once he reaches Incapacitated, the damage becomes lethal damage; victims usually die within 12-16 hours of infection.

Protection: Potential victims must avoid breathing in the virus. Conventional gas masks are ineffective, but full hazmat suits or seal oxygen supplies work. Novas with the Adaptability enhancement are immune to the virus, but other novas, even those with Mega-Stamina, are susceptible to it, since the disease turns the body's own immune system against it.

Antidote: There is currently no medical treatment for the Kiroshi virus, although a nova with at least Healing •••• can cure it.

Chapter Two: Inventing Fun

One of the opportunities presented by playing a Mega-Intelligent nova is advancing the frontiers of science and coming up will all sorts of fun and interesting new technology. Unfortunately, this can be an area that creates headaches for Storytellers and leads to players becoming frustrated with the limitations of the setting and the story. Gadgets and cool technology have their place in **Aberrant**, but there are a number of things to take into consideration before letting your imagination run wild.

Why You Can't Be Iron Man

Or Reed Richards, or Doctor Doom, Lex Luthor, or any of the many other comic book scientific geniuses. The simple answer to the question is that most comic books assume that the remarkable scientific inventions of heroes and villains aren't used for much other than trying to commit crimes or saving the world from evil. The best gadgets are locked up in their headquarters and secret lairs, away from the public eye and, for one reason or another, Tony Stark doesn't license his power-armor designs to the military or corporate sector. Notice how corporations invent amazing technology, only to have it stolen from them and used to commit crimes. Also notice that when heroes recover the stolen technology, it's inevitably lost, damaged, labeled too dangerous, or simply ignored in future stories.

In **Aberrant,** novas can do whatever they want with their technology and inventions, meaning they have the ability to radically affect the world with them. Therefore, novas tend to have more realistic limitations on the sort of things they can invent or discover; no whipping up time machines or portals into other dimensions as a routine part of their day. For inventions more closely resembling comic book technology there are gadgets, but they have limitations of their own (see **Two Flavors of Technology**).

On the other hand, if you're not using the **Aberrant** setting, you're running a more four-color game, or you don't really care how nova technology affects the world, you can feel free to loosen or ignore any and all of the restrictions discussed here and in other **Aberrant** books. But plan on seeing some major changes in the setting once nova inventors hit their stride. It's your game, so do what you want with it.

Two Flavors of Technology

In **Aberrant** novas have basically two means of creating new technology: traditional scientific research and development and gadgets. The former is similar to how it works for baselines in the real world, except novas often have intellectual and physical capabilities far beyond those of baseline scientists and researchers, allowing them to push the envelope in many fields of science faster than baselines. Gadgets are essentially nova powers cloaked in technological trappings. They're "cheats" in that the nova's ability to affect quantum reality is what allows them to work, not tried and true scientific principles. Gadgets are more akin to traditional comic book super-science and tend to have less impact on the world as a whole.

Scientific Research & Development

Many novas (Mega-Intelligent and otherwise) engage in scientific research to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. Ultimately, it's up to the Storyteller what these nova researchers discover, and what they can prove. The guidelines in this section focus more on applied research, the development of new technology and new applications of existing scientific knowledge, rather than pure research.

Pure research makes a good background element for an **Aberrant** campaign, with some of the implications of that research as story or adventure hooks. For example, a nova scientist might be studying the origins of the universe and develop a theory that suggests it might be possible to trigger a collapse of the space-time continuum, if the conditions were right. But something like that is highly unlikely to happen, right?

General Guidelines and Requirements

In order to research a particular technology, the researcher(s) must have the appropriate Ability. That's generally Computers for new sorts of programs and software, Engineering for most forms of hardware, and Science for things like biotechnology. The Storyteller may require certain ability ratings and/or complimentary skills in order to even begin

researching a new technology. For example, developing a computer-based artificial intelligence may require a minimum of five dots in Computers, four dots in Engineering, and even a few dots in Medicine (Psychology) to even get started. Unless the characters involved have the appropriate Abilities, they don't even know where to begin, no matter how much raw Mega-Intelligence they may have.

Technological research takes time, often a lot of time. Novas are capable of speeding up the process somewhat, but even they can't make scientific breakthroughs in a matter of days or even weeks. And while they're working on their latest toys, there are other things that novas can be doing (see **Laboratory Life**, below, for details).

Technological and scientific research also takes money and resources, usually a lot of both, particularly when dealing with cutting-edge innovations. While it might be possible for a nova with Resources 5 to front a research operation, it would be a drain on nearly any one individual's Resources. Fortunately there are all sorts of organizations willing to front money for nova research, but those resources usually come with some strings attached to them. Project Utopia expects technological innovations useful in advancing its goal of improving the world, while organizations like Kuro-Tek want technology that's valuable on the black market. Governments and corporations have their own agendas, and middle-managers and other VIPs get their say in how a research project proceeds. Acquiring the necessary resources and dealing with the red tape that often comes with them can be one of the greatest hurdles for a would-be inventor to overcome.

Inventing and Resources

It's tempting for a player to say "I don't need to give my character dots in Resources, I'll just get Mega-Intelligence, invent some stuff and get rich (or take the Financial Prodigy enhancement, for that matter, and make a killing in the stock market). Storytellers should take care in dealing with this sort of "loophole lawyering" in the game. There's nothing inherently wrong with the character concept described above (poor nova makes it rich), in fact, it's a pretty common on in the world of **Aberrant**.

But Storytellers should encourage players to take the appropriate Background to suit their character concept, unless the player wants to play out the nova's rise to fame and fortune. In that case, the Storyteller should feel free to place whatever obstacles he likes in the character's path. The Storyteller isn't out to make it impossible for the nova to earn a fortune, but it shouldn't be easy, either. There are all sorts of complications that can entangle a nova trying to use Mega-Intelligence (and related abilities) for personal gain, some described here under **Invention is the Mother of Necessity** and others elsewhere in this book.

The Design & Development Process

Once the conditions described above are satisfied, the real work can begin. The project is broken down into two main stages: design and development.

The design stage involves coming up with the idea for the project and a design that can be built and tested in a lab. The player describes the desired invention to the Storyteller in reasonable detail, including what it is intended to do. You can get as technical and specific as you and your players want at this stage, so long as it doesn't hamper everyone's enjoyment of the game. The Storyteller should decide if the invention is plausible and set the difficulty for designing and building it.

Both the design and the development phase are extended actions (**Aberrant**, p. 109). Additionally, because of the often-frustrating nature of research, the second chances rule (**Aberrant**, p. 111) applies to design and development rolls. After each roll, the total number of successes required is increased by one. The Storyteller determines the difficulty of the action based on the complexity of the invention. In general, designing an invention is at least Challenging (+2) while developing a working prototype is at least Difficult (+3). Novas with Mega-Intelligence can apply their dots to reduce these difficulties normally. The Storyteller also determines the total number of successes required. Generally, a new design requires at least five successes, and can require as many as 10 or more for especially complicated technology.

Each design roll takes one day (eight hours) of work with relatively few distractions or interruptions. The Storyteller makes the roll secretly and records the character's successes for that day. A failure means no successes are gained (and, in fact, some ground is lost due to the increase in difficulty). A botch sends the designer down the wrong path. After her next roll, she believes the design is complete, but in fact it is flawed and will never work.

Design Example

Dr. Edward Olanos starts working on the design for a new device for detecting quantum emissions from a nova's M-R node. He is a baseline with Intelligence 5, Engineering 5 and Science 4, meeting the Storyteller's requirements for doing the research. The Storyteller decides that the device is plausible and sets the difficulty for the design at Challenging (+2), with a total of seven successes required. On the first day, Dr. Olanos rolls and gets three successes over the difficulty. That leaves four successes needed on the task, but the Storyteller adds one more for the first roll, increasing it to five. The next day, Dr. Olanos rolls again, getting only one success above the difficulty. That is canceled out by the increase for that day, so he still needs five more successes. After 12 days of work, Dr. Olanos has accumulated enough

successes to give him a complete design.

Elsewhere, another scientist is working on a similar idea. But this is Dr. Rachael Alinsky, DeVries' nova tech-wizard. She has Intelligence 5, Mega-Intelligence 5, Engineering 5 and Mental Prodigy: Engineering. She subtracts two from the difficulty of the design with two dots of her Mega-Intelligence. Before making the first design roll she rolls Intelligence, getting four successes, allowing her to add four dice to her pool. She rolls a total of 17 dice on the design roll (Intelligence + Mega-Intelligence 3 + Engineering 5 + 4 dice from Mental Prodigy) and gets seven successes, allowing her to complete the design for the quantum scanner in a day.

Once the design work is complete, the inventor can head into the laboratory to build a working model of the design for testing. The inventor needs the appropriate facilities and equipment for the development work. If these are lacking, work cannot proceed (or proceeds at a much slower pace, possibly with some dice pool penalties at the Storyteller's discretion).

As with the design phase, the Storyteller sets the difficulty and the total successes required to create a working model from the design. Each development roll requires a week's work, and the total number of successes required increases by one after each roll. The inventor receives +1 die to his pool for each qualified assistant helping him (the Storyteller decides on the qualifications, but Abilities within a dot of those of the inventor are a good guidelines). An inventor can have a number of assistants equal to his Bureaucracy rating helping him at once. (At the Storyteller's discretion, assistants over this rating may actually impose a penalty, getting in the way, messing up instructions, and so forth.)

Achieving the needed total of successes proves the design and creates a working prototype of it (although not necessarily a full-scale production model in the case of larger inventions like generators or heavy-weapons). A botch destroys the prototype and wipes out all accumulated successes, forcing the inventor to start over again at the beginning of the development phase. A botch may also have other dangerous side-affects, ranging from explosions to rifts in the space-time continuum, as the Storyteller sees fit. Working from a flawed design (above) will never produce a working model. The inventor just wastes time (and resources) until he decides to give up.

Development Example

Dr. Olanos takes his complete quantum detector design into the lab and begins working on a prototype. The Storyteller sets the difficulty at Challenging (+2) and requires a total of eight successes to complete the work. Dr. Olanos has a pool of 10 dice for his design roll, plus the assistance of two qualified baselines, giving him two more dice. He completes the work in three weeks and has a working model of the device.

Dr. Alinsky also takes her design into the lab. She again applies two dots of her Mega-Intelligence to reduce the difficulty, using the same difficulty and number of successes as Dr. Olanos. She rolls a pool of 17 dice, and scores the needed successes in the first roll, finishing her prototype in a week (well before Dr. Olanos has even completed his design work, in fact).

Complex Devices

The rules and guidelines presented here assume relatively simple devices with a single purpose, e.g., a weapon, a scanner, a new type of material, etc. For more complex or multi-purpose devices, the Storyteller has two options. The first is to simply increase the total number of successes requires (and perhaps the difficulty) to reflect the additional complexity of the invention. This works for devices that are slightly more complex or involved.

For very complex inventions - prototype vehicles, powered armor, computer systems, and so forth - the Storyteller may want to break the invention down into its major component systems, having the designer work on each on in turn. Thus for a suit of power-armor, the designer has to come up with the compact myomer motors, then the new armor composites, the control systems, the advanced weapons, etc. Design and construction of complex devices and take a very long time, although Mega-Intelligence novas can still speed the process up considerably.

Storytelling the Process

Throughout the design and development process of inventing, the Storyteller makes all rolls secretly, and informs the player of the results (e.g. "You've made a little more progress this week.") Not only does this keep players from knowing exactly how close they are to a successful design, it also allows the Storyteller considerable latitude is stretching out, compressing, or otherwise messing with the design process to suit the demands of the story. See **Invention is the Mother of Necessity** for more ideas on how to complicate the design and development process.

Gadgeteering

Gadgeteering (described in detail in the **Aberrant Players Guide**), allows novas to create devices ("gadgets") based on their own quantum-manipulating abilities. Gadgets are empowered by quantum energy, so they aren't restricted like ordinary technology, but they're also limited in their use, since they require either a storehouse of quantum energy or a nova to operate them, and they're not always usable by all novas (much less baselines). Gadgets can't be mass-produced; they're unique products of nova genius. This allows Storytellers to give players more leeway with gadgets, since they don't affect the setting as much as true advances in technology.

Other "Nova Tech"

Nova gadgets are one example of novas exercising their quantum abilities through the medium of technology. Some other nova abilities might appear to be "technological" even when they're not. For example, some novas develop a psychological dependence on a particular object in order to use their powers (the "Dumbo Syndrome," see p. 95, **Aberrant Players Guide**). This object may be a device like a computer, gun, "power armor suit," or even a vehicle. The nova (and others) may be convinced that his powers stem from the object, even when that is not really the case.

Laboratory Life

Whether they are expanding the boundaries of existing technology or whipping up amazing gadgets, nova inventors have to spend a lot of time in a laboratory or workshop, which isn't necessarily the best environment for exciting stories, especially when all the other characters can do is stand around, occasionally passing the inventor test tubes and remarking on how brilliant he is. If characters spend a lot of time doing research and development, the Storyteller has to take it into account when planning the chronicle. There are several strategies for handling this in the game:

Downtime: Things like scientific research can take place in "downtime" between stories or even between scenes or episodes or an extended story. This allows the Storyteller and the inventor's player to consult with each other outside of the game and handle the inventing process "off stage"

without involving the other players. It also keeps the character's research from bogging down the events of the story. By controlling the amount of "downtime" a character has, the Storyteller can influence how much research gets done (par-

ticularly since only the Storyteller knows exactly how long a given project is going to take).

Duty Calls: Few nova gadgeteers can spend all of their time in the lab. There are other things they need to do from time to time. It might be attend staff meetings, give interviews, report to superiors, make personal appearances, attend to duties as a member of T2M, and so forth. Some inventors do their very best to limit these sorts of "extraneous" activities, but such anti-social sorts are probably not the ideal characters for a group-oriented chronicle, and Storytellers should feel free to point this out to players.

Also, many Mega-Intelligent novas have abilities other than their intellect. Antaeus, for example, would be a formidable nova even without his Mega-Intelligence. Novas are still rare and nova scientists may be called upon to use their other powers from time to time. For example, Antaeus (when he worked with Project Utopia) helped to clean up environmental disasters, rescue earthquake victims, and even find people lost in the wilderness in addition to spending time in his lab. The same is often true of other Mega-Intelligent novas.

Field Work: Even the most dedicated scientists sometimes need to leave the lab to test their theories out in the real world. Storytellers can use the need for "field research and testing" as a way of luring inventors outside where interesting things can happen. Testing a particular invention, or doing field research can be a story hook that may lead to other things as well (like when the test goes awry or someone tries to steal the prototype).

There are also plenty of uses for Mega-Intelligence out in the field, away from the lab. When a situation requiring a nova scientist's expertise crops up (from a new disease to a difficult engineering problem), odds are good that the character will be called to the scene to help out.

Get a Life: Characters only demonstrate their personality through their actions, particularly when interacting with other characters. A nova character that stays in the lab and never gets out doesn't offer too many roleplaying opportunities. Storytellers should encourage these (and other characters) to have a life outside of their work. Does the character have friends or family? Hobbies? A significant other? All of these things can help keep a character from spending 24 hours a day in the lab and, if they do, can give the character some realistic consequences to deal with (from a neglected spouse, children, or friends).

Laboratory Accidents: The lab can also be a setting for stories, just not all the time. Still laboratories offer opportu-

nities for various kinds of stories using the nova's work as a hook. A laboratory accident might pose a challenge for the inventor and fellow novas (especially if there are clues that the "accident" was deliberate sabotage). Utopia or government inspectors might visit the lab suddenly, or nova elites might "visit" in order to steal a new invention (or kidnap the inventor!). On a more mundane level, the character might develop a conflict or a relationship with a co-worker or assistant, or technical problems might force a temporary halt in the inventor's work, forcing him to find something else to do.

Invention is the Mother of Necessity

Mega-Intelligent novas have the potential, perhaps more than any others, to revolutionize and transform the world. Fortunately for Storytellers everywhere there are some limitations and restrictions on the creativity of the Mega-Intelligent. Some are limitations novas have yet to overcome while others are imposed by outside forces looking to put the brakes on nova invention.

Storytellers can use these factors to help control the proliferation of nova technology in the chronicle. But a word of warning: don't go overboard trying to restrict nova inventors or the players are sure to become frustrated. After all, if they created inventor characters, you should let them invent things from time to time. But you don't necessarily have to make it easy, or let players walk all over you when it comes to their brilliant ideas.

Time and Resources

One of the biggest limitations faced by inventors is the availability of time and resources (money, lab space, and materials). The issue of time-management in an **Aberrant** chronicle is covered under **Laboratory Life**, above. In short, characters who spend all their time in the lab don't have much of an opportunity to interact with the events of the chronicle. Storytellers should encourage inventors to get outside from time to time, and even arrange circumstances to get them to do so.

It's not difficult for a Mega-Intelligent nova to get someone to give him laboratory space and enough resources for research, but those things rarely come without strings attached. Whoever is providing for the inventor's needs is going to want a say in the kind of research that gets done and how the nova's inventions are developed, patented, and marketed. Sure, novas working for a major corporation like ViaSoft get a piece of the pie (maybe even a big piece), but they also have to deal with corporate management and sign contracts that give ViaSoft certain rights over the nova's work. The same is true of pretty much any other organization, from Project Utopia to the underground labs of Kuro-Tek. Sure, Kuro-Tek doesn't have any problem with you development deadly new weapons (in fact, they prefer it to research

into humanitarianism, which just isn't as profitable). But Kuro-Tek has to deal with the demands of the market, not to mention raids by the authorities and things like that.

Moreover, some resources may be more difficult to come by than others. If a nova's idea involves micro-gravity manufacturing, well, there's aren't a lot of off-planet research facilities for the nova to use. Likewise, labs on the ocean floor, or equipped with truly advanced equipment (like particle accelerators) are rare, and always controlled by someone, who may or may not want anyone else using them.

Finally, resources or components of the new technology may be difficult to mass produce, or difficult to produce at all without the use of nova abilities. A nova may be able to use Molecular Manipulation or Matter Creation to come up with exotic new substances and materials, making all sorts of technology viable. But the only source of the material is the nova, who probably doesn't want to spend all day whipping up batches of raw material to make new gizmos when he could be moving on to the next research project.

The Ladder of Progress

Sometimes a nova inventor is just a little too far ahead of his time. Technology is only capable of advancing so fast, even with the help of novas. This is especially true when it comes to mass-production technology. Sure, a nova may be able to invent an amazing new technology, but what will it take to retool factories and manufacturing plants to produce this new technology? And are the owners of said facilities willing to pay out the costs of the changeover? The market likes steady and gradual change rather than technological revolutions. Just because the nova's new gizmo does things a hundred times better doesn't mean that everyone in the world will throw out the old way of doing things immediately.

It may also be that real-world technology needs to catch up to the nova's ideas. A nova inventor may have a design for a theoretical technology that could revolutionize the world, provided someone develops cold-fusion first, or room-temperature superconductors, or molecular-scale nanotechnology, or computers about a million times faster, or well, you get the idea. Mega-Intelligent novas have a lot of ideas that are simply impractical for anyone to develop because the technology to create and support them doesn't exist yet. That often leads novas to start at the bottom of the tech-ladder and work to improve things so that their wilder concepts can be realized eventually.

Project Utopia's Science & Technology Department

One thing nova inventors can count on is that Big Brother Is Watching. Utopia's S&T Department has the job of keep-

ing the proliferation of nova technology under control. If they choose, they can require inventors to submit their designs for approval, suspend experimentation, seize research and information (and prototypes), and place bans on particular areas of research and development. About the only thing the inventor can do about it (apart from engage in a lengthy and drawn out legal battle) is go underground, ending up on Utopia's "most wanted" list and working for whatever organization is willing to help sponsor research that defies Utopia's regulations.

The S&T Department is one of the Storyteller's ultimate tools for controlling the proliferation of nova-tech. Odds are if you think a particular innovation is going to cause problems in the world, Utopia probably does, too, and will take steps to minimize those problems. Utopia doesn't have to ban technology outright. They may instead insist on an extended period of testing and research, along with a carefully constructed program to introduce the new technology with as little social and economic upheaval as possible.

Government Regulation

Utopia's not the only party interesting in controlling nova technology. Governments often get in on the act, too. This is particularly true when dealing with technology that may become a threat to public safety (like weapons or biohazards), or simply things the government feels threatened by (like spy-tech or ultimate data-encryption technology). This includes everyone from the United Nations to national governments to local and regional governments. They perform the same sort of spot inspections (and possibly seizures) as Project Utopia, and things can get interesting if a government happens to disagree with Utopia's decision regarding the inventor's latest project. Utopia may permit it while the government shows up to confiscate it, or vice versa.

If nothing else, nova inventors have to register their inventions at a government patent office, if they want to ensure their technology remains theirs. If they do, they alert the government and Utopia to whatever it is they're working on (allowing them to take action, if they feel it's necessary). If they don't register, then someone else can steal their technology and claim to have invented it themselves and legally prevent the nova from marketing it!

Corporate Intervention

Nova innovations make or break corporations in the 21st century, and savvy companies keep an eye on the latest developments coming from Mega-Intelligent inventors. Plenty of companies try to hire these geniuses to work for them, and a number of novas do. A corporation may offer to buy a nova's technology, not to sell it, but to bury it so it can't damage the company's own position in the marketplace! For example, the hypercombustion engine caused oil prices to drop with its huge increase in fuel efficiency.

Car manufacturers were pleased, but oil companies certainly weren't!

A corporation may also buy a new technology, but take some time to bring it out on the market. The company might run afoul of manufacturing problems, or Utopia's technological regulations, or simple bureaucratic incompetence that causes all sorts of delays.

Finally, there's industrial espionage. Many companies have no qualms about stealing new technology from nova inventors any way they can, including hiring elites to "acquire" it for them. Corporations spy on each other and sabotage rival research projects to ensure that theirs is the only one that's successful. Dirty tricks help to reduce the value of another company's stock in preparation for a hostile takeover. The waters of the corporate world are full of sharks, waiting to smell blood.

Public Prejudice

Public opinion sometimes limits the development or at least the sale and use of certain technologies. Already, the culture of the world in 2015 is in a state of profound "future shock" with the development of things like the OpNet, hypercombustion, eufiber, and dozens of other technologies. On the one hand, many baselines have come to expect technological miracles from novas that make the world a better place.

On the other, there is a profound nervousness in baselines about novas and anything related to them. Certain "watchdog" groups can be counted on to oppose almost any advance in technology, and some may trigger opposition from a large segment of society. Storytellers can use the whims of public opinion to direct the development of technology. Certainly if a majority of people are opposed to a particular innovation, no corporation or government is likely to move ahead with it, for fear of the negative press it would generate.

No, Really, You *Can't* Be Iron Man

Well, okay, you can, sort of. A nova with a substantial amount of Mega-Intelligence, the right enhancements (particularly Mental Prodigy and Inventive Genius), and enough Resources can built a lot of gadgets following the guidelines from the **Aberrant Player's Guide**. The nova gets access to a variety of quantum powers and abilities without having to acquire those powers directly using experience. The trade-off is that gadgeteers spends a lot of time in the lab building or maintaining their various gadgets and they have to devote quantum points to powering them. Gadgets, while more reliable than quantum powers, also don't have nearly the flexibility or the potential for being maxed out in a time of need.

Chapter Three: Storytelling

Chapter Three: Storytelling

So, think you're smart enough to handle some of the smartest people the world has ever seen? No matter how smart you are, there are some challenges to incorporating the full potential of Mega-Mental Attributes into your **Aberrant** chronicle. This chapter looks at them and ways you can handle them without making your players regret those nova points they spent on giving their characters Mega-Intelligence or Mega-Perception. We'll also consider the possibility of chronicles based on novas with primarily Mega-Mental Attributes rather than the traditional kick-ass quantum powers.

Any More Bright Ideas?

Odds are, after reading this book, you'll have your own ideas on how to handle Mega-Mental Attributes in your game and some twists on the game rules and source material. By all means, use them! Maybe you want to make Kuro-Tek and the Directive into puppets of a world-spanning conspiracy, with a Mega-Intelligent nova pulling the strings. Or you want to have the most Mega-Perceptive novas start going mad because they keep sensing something, something too horrible for their minds to cope with, that other people can't see, hiding in the shadow of what we call reality. Whatever you want to do with your **Aberrant** chronicle, take it and run with it.

One particular area where you might want to mess around is in the places White Wolf can't. Two major things limit official **Aberrant** products. First, the need to maintain a certain "baseline" world (no pun intended) that cleaves to the history of the future in **Trinity** and of the past in **Adventure!** Just because White Wolf isn't going to have China go to war with the rest of the world or have Earth invaded by a parallel timeline in **Aberrant** doesn't mean that you can't. Second, White Wolf is limited by copyright in terms of what it can add to the **Aberrant** mix. Do you want to have a nova who thinks he's a certain Man of Steel (and has the powers to match)? Time-Warner probably wouldn't like it if White Wolf did it, but you can. Want some of H.P. Lovecraft's creations to drop in? Dig out your other books and introduce your novas to what's beyond the quantum level of reality. In short, this game is a tool for your imagination, not the other way around.

Theme

Theme is what the overall story is "about," the meaning it imparts. The major theme **Aberrant** explores is one of power and what people do with it, summed up in the tagline "What would you do with the power of a god?" Mega-Mental characters offer the opportunity to explore this and many other themes.

Responsibility

It's an old line but "with great power comes great responsibility." Perhaps more than any other novas, those with Mega-Mental abilities have the potential to transform the world, because they can conceive of things that no one before them ever has and, more importantly, they can make those things a reality. That's a tremendous power, and an awesome responsibility. How do novas handle it? With so many problems in the world, where do they choose to apply their abilities first? What do they identify as problems and how do they propose to solve them? What if some people don't agree with the solution they come up with?

The key element of this theme is your actions have consequences. When you're tremendously powerful, your actions often have tremendous consequences. We've pointed out that, in the comic books, the world never really changes all that much. In your chronicle, things can change as much as you let them, so it becomes a matter of what the characters choose to do and what happens after that. Some novas may try to escape the terrible burden of responsibility, by denying or running away from it. Others may ignore the consequences of their actions, until they catch up with them. Some are paralyzed by all the possibilities, unable to act. Then there are those that accept their responsibility and forge ahead as best they can.

Normality

A lot of people want to feel accepted and normal. But what is "normal" exactly, and what if you can't achieve it? The life of a Mega-Mental nova can be an isolated one, even from fellow novas. What's it like to live in a world where

everyone seems blind, deaf, stupid, or impossibly slow? How do you relate to people like that and what do you feel toward them: pity, sympathy, frustration, anger, envy, or a little of each? Moreover, how do those people see you and what do they feel: awe, jealousy, respect, fear? The struggle between the need to "fit in" and the need to "be yourself" is one that most people understand that also relates strongly to Mega-Mental novas.

Awareness

If "ignorance is bliss," then Mega-Mental novas must be very unhappy people. They're capable of perceiving, understanding, and coping with information baselines aren't, but even novas must have their limits. They're more likely than anyone to be aware of some of the dangers threatening the world in the Nova Age, up to and including the existence of Project Proteus and the creeping threat of Taint that leads to the Aberrant War. How do they deal with this knowledge? Do they ignore it and tell themselves that they don't really care what happens or do they take some sort of action? Can they convince others that what they know is true or do they have to act on their own? Doomsayers throughout history have often been ignored or derided for their warnings, with others realizing the truth when it's too late.

On a more personal level, how does increased awareness affect the nova's life? How difficult is it to live in human society when you can tell exactly how everyone feels about you, no matter what they actually say? How many conversations can you have with people who clearly have no idea what's going on around them? What is it like being constantly surrounded by people who are your mental inferiors? (Yeah, I'm sure many of you think you already know what that feels like but, remember, to a Mega-Intelligent nova, even Einstein was a mental midget.)

Conflict

Conflict is what drives a story, putting the characters into action. Mega-Mental Attributes offer plenty of opportunities for conflicts.

Nova vs. Baseline

This conflict is built right into the game, but Mega-Mental characters help to bring it out. Many people can more easily accept that fact that novas are physically more powerful than baselines, even accept that novas are better looking, richer, and more famous than baselines. But many baselines have a very difficult time with the fact that some novas are also smarter, cleverer, and more perceptive than they are. Many believe that intelligence and self-awareness are the qualities that set us apart from all other creatures. It's a sobering thought to realize that you're no longer at the top of the "intellectual food chain," especially for baselines who consider themselves smart, witty, or perceptive, or did before novas came along.

Now the smartest baselines in the world are outstripped by novas and rather than performing the research, making the discoveries, or coming up with the plans, they're often managing the novas who are doing those things. Take note of the fact that organizations like Project Utopia, the Directive, and ViaSoft are run by baselines who tell novas what to do. How is a Mega-Intelligent nova going to feel when he's asked to carry out the (clearly flawed) plans of his intellectual inferiors all the time? Let's ask Antaeus... oops, that's right, he left Project Utopia, didn't he? Is it any wonder why?

Sooner or later, Mega-Mental novas wonder why they're taking orders from their mental inferiors and, unlike many frustrated baselines, they often have the means of doing something about it. A lot of nova vs. baseline conflicts feed into the idea that Mega-Mental novas will inevitably take over, simply because of their nature (see **The Riddles of the Sphinxes** for more on this).

Brains vs. Brawn: Mega-Bright vs. Mega-Kick Ass

Who's more powerful: Caestus Pax or Rachel Alinsky? Well, Pax can pulverize mountains and he's pretty much invulnerable, but if anyone can come up with a weapon that can hurt him, Alinsky is the one. Moreover, she can probably arrange a trap so cunning and complex that Pax won't see it coming until it's too late. Sure, if Pax gets his hands on Alinsky, she's probably dead meat. That's assuming that he can find her, that when he does it's really her (and not another trick or trap), and that he can figure out she's the one responsible for all those traps in the first place.

As you can see, brains and brawn both have their strong points, and you can get some interesting stories by pitting novas with flashy physical powers against opponents with Mega-Mental abilities. In the short-term, physical power wins out. But give the Mega-Mental novas the opportunity to plan and implement their ideas and the other guys haven't got much of a chance. Playing from this perspective requires some adjustments from the brilliant strategy of "I fly in and kick his ass!" See R**unning Mega-Mental Antagonists** for some ideas and ways to handle it in a chronicle.

The Scientific Race

In the scientific world of 2015 "publish or perish" is more true than ever. It's not so much a matter of publishing one's scientific theories or discoveries, but getting new inventions patented and being the first to get new technologies to market. Vast fortunes are made on nova-created and -inspired technology, and the scientific race can be a brutally competitive one. Corporations and government don't mess around when billions of dollars and the fate of entire industries are at stake.

Novas involved in any sort of research and development are

likely to get drawn into the struggles of the scientific race, whether they want to or not. They have to deal with rival scientists (both nova and baseline), industrial espionage, saboteurs, and special interest groups (possibly including some of the factions from the **Aberrant Players Guid**e, like the Daedelus League, Greenwar or the Gestalt). Nova researchers also have to deal with Project Utopia's Science & Technology division sooner or later (see **Chapter On**e for details).

Progress vs. Tradition

Where Mega-Mental novas are concerned there is no lack of new ideas. But just because you can do something doesn't always mean that you should, and novas often encounter resistance to their brilliant schemes in the form of simple conservatism and unwillingness to change. Consider all of the many brilliant and alternative ideas that have come up in the past twenty or thirty years and how some of them have fared. For example, it's scientifically provable that a carefully managed vegetarian diet is healthier for both human beings and the planet, but huge numbers of people still eat meat. We know that fossil fuel emissions damage the environment, but giving up our cars (much less our power plants) just isn't an option.

The innovations of Mega-Intelligent novas have to take the needs and wants of society into account if they are to be successful. For example, novas came up with ways of scrubbing the pollutants out of the environment and invented cleaner, more fuel-efficient, engines, neither of which required baselines to change their lifestyles. The more a technology changes the way people live, the more resistance there tends to be to it, unless the change is clearly for the better (that is to say, makes life easier or more fun). Some ideas are just too radical for society to accept without taking some time. This is one of the reasons Utopia's S&T division exists, to help minimize "future shock" and ensure that new technologies and ideas are introduced gradually. This often proves frustrating to innovators who can't wait for the rest of the world to catch up to their visions.

Mastermind Shadow-Wars

Mega-Intelligent characters often have goals and plans so complex and sweeping that only another Mega-Intelligent nova is capable of understanding them, or stopping them, for that matter. Some Mega-Intelligent novas, like Antaeus, devote themselves to fairly solitary goals (in his case, protecting and cleaning up the environment). Other novas, however, have conflicting goals, or come into conflict for other reasons. Novas (even the Mega-Intelligent) are not necessarily gifted with greater maturity or emotional stability, and may suffer from petty rivalries, jealousy, anger, and the like the same as baselines. Some novas may even conflict with their peers simply because they enjoy the challenge, treated the whole struggle like a complex game to keep their vast intellect occupied.

Whatever the reason, Mega-Intelligent novas can and do come into conflict. When they do, it's usually in the form of a complex game of cat-and-mouse, move and counter-move, with the whole of the world as their game board, and the rest of the people and institutions in it as the playing pieces. Most people (baseline and nova alike) are completely unaware that these novas are fighting their own "shadow wars" behind the scenes, often for very high stakes indeed.

Storytellers can use the shadow wars of the Mega-Intelligent as hooks to draw the characters into the conflict, either as unwitting pawns of either side, or as outsiders who stumble onto something bigger than they imagined. Conspiracy minded groups can go wild with multiple masterminds and their various interlinked plots and schemes, mixed with the existing conspiracies of the **Aberrant** world to create a cloak-and-dagger chronicle well suited for characters affiliated with the Aberrants or the Directive, or loners out on their own.

This sort of conflict is also a great basis for a chronicle with only one or two players, creating an entirely different sort of **Aberrant** game (see **Solo and Duo Games**).

The Riddle of the Sphinxes

Shadow wars already exist between Mega-Intelligent novas, but some think they are inevitable. There's a theory that says not only do Mega-Intelligent novas tend to hatch schemes and plots, they have to as part of their nature. Part of intelligence is the ability to influence and control your surroundings. We humans as a species do so in numerous ways we're scarcely even aware of. Our society and technology have undeniably transformed the world around us to suit our needs.

The theory says that

novas can't help but do the same, and their ability to control the world around them is greater than ours by several orders of magnitude. Mega-Intelligent novas can (and do) treat the world like a giant chessboard, with them manipulating pieces that represent entire organizations, nations, and cultures, and they do so without regard for the individual people those "chess pieces" represent. Just like human cultures throughout history have given no thought to enslaving or wiping out less-developed societies, so will these "sphinxes" transform the world to suit their needs without any concern for the human lives they alter in the doing. Storytellers interested in more details on the sphinx theory should consult "Strange Bedfellows" in **Aberrant Worldwide - Phase I**.

Certainly there's some truth to the sphinx theory. Mega-Intelligent novas can manipulate people and events to a great degree. The question is whether or not such manipulation and behind-the-scenes scheming is an inevitable part of being Mega-Intelligent. This is left for the Storyteller to decide. Adding the sphinxes to an **Aberrant** chronicle adds a darker element of conspiracy and a certain inevitable nova/baseline conflict. It also brings the role of Mega-Intelligent player characters into question. Which side (if any) will they ally with, and will they become "players" in this worldwide game of strategy and manipulation?

Factions

The various factions of the **Aberrant** world each have an interest in the abilities and activities of masterminds, both as resources and as potential threats. Mega-Mental characters fit into each in their own way.

Utopia

Project Utopia's relationship with Mega-Mental novas (like its relationship with all novas, to a degree) is both optimistic and cautious. On the one hand, most of Utopia's greatest achievements can be directly traced back to the work of Mega-Intelligent novas: the cleanup of the environment, new technologies, new ways of doing things, and so forth. Although the more flashy powers of novas like Team Tomorrow are what show up on the OpNet broadcasts, the work of brilliant nova scientists created the foundation Utopia is built upon.

On the other hand, Project Utopia is still primarily an organization run by baselines, and aimed at improving the world for everyone, baseline and nova alike. That means that not only is Utopia limited to moving at a speed baselines can tolerate, but its agenda and its goals are set by baseline managers and directors. The number of novas in the upper echelons of Utopia's management has increased very slowly over the years.

This has led to frustration on the part of some novas working for Utopia. When their less-intelligent superiors have asked them to carry out plans they clearly think are faulty, or that are dictated by things like public relations, politics, or anything other than logic or common sense (as defined by the nova), they feel slighted. Some (like Antaeus) choose to deal with it by leaving Utopia, although they never leave the scrutiny of the organization or its S&T department behind. Others try to work for change from within, or swallow their objections and allow them to fester (possibly leading to stress and the risk of accumulating Taint).

Project Proteus

The other risk Mega-Mental novas working for Utopia encounter is the fact that they're the most likely to discover the existence of Project Proteus and take note of some of the unusual things Utopia is doing. Mega-Perceptive novas pick up on small clues others might miss. Mega-Intelligent novas figure out the logical reasons for things like the "mystery" of nova sterility or the sudden deaths of certain novas, while those with Mega-Wits tend to put together rumors and things they've discovered and notice patterns that others don't. Plus they're very difficult to lie to or deceive in the first place.

All of these things put Proteus in something of a bind. Mega-Mental novas are essential to Project Utopia's success but they're also the greatest threat to its existence. That means Proteus must tread very carefully in dealing with them. The Project does its very best to keep masterminds (both inside and outside Utopia) ignorant of its existence and its operations as much as possible. It actually encourages competition and conflict among masterminds as a means of creating a "smokescreen" for its own activities. If nova mega-brains are busy playing their own power-struggles, they're not as likely to notice Proteus slipping between the cracks.

In the event that a nova does learn of Proteus' existence, the Project has several ways of dealing with them. The first is to simply lie low and see what the nova does. There are certainly some Mega-Intelligent novas who know Proteus exists, but have chosen to do nothing for reasons of their own. In some cases because they feel the truth would damage Utopia, and they don't want that, in others because they have their own plans for dealing with Proteus, but require time to put them into motion (giving Proteus the opportunity for counter-espionage, and another shadow-war begins).

Some novas actually agree with Proteus' goals, or at least see the need to act ruthlessly in order to further Utopia's agenda. They have no problem with treating the rest of the world like game pieces because they do so already. They may choose to leave Proteus alone, keeping an eye out for trouble and preparing some contingency plans should Pro-

teus prove a threat to them. Others actually join Proteus, and the Project tries to recruit these novas, since their abilities are a great asset.

Those few remaining masterminds that are an immediate threat to Proteus and its goals are usually targeted for assassination, although that doesn't always prove easy, and sometimes creates an new enemy for Proteus to deal with.

Aberrants

Some of those novas turn to the Aberrants. The ranks of the Aberrants include a number of Mega-Mental novas who figured out there something not quite kosher going on inside Project Utopia. Some chose to disappear after Slider's death, figuring they might be next, while others wanted the opportunity to do something about the corruption within Utopia outside the system. A number of the so-called "hidden" Aberrants still working for Utopia also have Mega-Mental Attributes, allowing them to take note of unusual happenings inside the Project and to pass that information on to their colleagues without getting caught.

Unfortunately for the Aberrants, most of their mastermind members tend to be those who chaffed under Utopia's regulations to begin with, and have various radical ideas of their own. The infamous Dr. Worm (**Exposé: Aberrants**, p. 19) is one example. Although undeniably brilliant, his philosophy and personality tend to put people off, and certainly don't engender sympathy for the Aberrants or their cause. The masterminds of the Aberrants often lack to social skills to get their message across (which is why leadership of the group tends to fall to more social and dynamic novas). Of course, a nova character who combined brains and charisma might be able to change that.

The Directive

The Directive mistrusts novas, masterminds most of all. The organization exists to check the power of novas that can seriously alter the status quo, so the Directive would be perfectly happy if the activities of Mega-Mental novas were strictly regulated, happier still if they didn't exist at all. But the organization is somewhat split on how to deal with the dangerous potential of nova brainpower.

In general, the United States and England want to see masterminds carefully controlled (although the Directive is unaware the British nova Arthur Anningsley is actually doing some of the controlling. See **Aberrant Worldwide - Phase II**). Russian Director Illyanovich strongly distrusts masterminds based on his experiences with Russian Minister Vladimir Sierka. Illyanovich (and the rest of the Directive) knows that Sierka practically runs the Russian Confederation, but hasn't yet found a way of limiting his power without harming Russia

in the process. The Japanese are all for harnessing the brainpower of novas for the common good, as shown by the success of their Saisho program, but even the Japanese are threatened by the specter of novas operating on their own, outside of government supervision and control.

A Directive chronicle offers the opportunity to baseline characters (and "stealth" novas) to pit themselves against the schemes of various nova masterminds. See the **Directive** sourcebook for details.

Teragen

It is among the Teragen where Mega-Mental novas can find the most freedom to explore their abilities and their ideas, but they may find themselves surrounded by peers who don't necessarily agree with them, and may even find their ideas and abilities threatening.

Although the Teragen is ideally a gathering of equals to explore their potential as novas, it's often more like a dysfunctional family unit, or a pantheon of squabbling gods. Each member of the Teragen (particularly the aptly named Pantheon) has his or her own agenda, and a nova mastermind is just one more among many. A Teragen chronicle offers excellent opportunities for scheming and inter-group conflict for Mega-Mental characters. See the **Teragen** sourcebook for more details and ideas.

Elites

Brainiacs among the biggest ass-kickers in the world, why not? Most people tend to think of elites as combat specialists, and that is often the case, but the mercenary attitude can apply just as easily to intellectual pursuits, as companies like Amanda Wu's Novelty Consulting prove (see p. XX). Mega-Mental novas have no lack of potential clients willing to pay huge fees for their abilities, especially if they're willing to overlook some of Utopia's rules and regulations. Even combat oriented elites are grateful for the work of eggheads like Dr. Alinsky (p. 11), who come up with the fancy tech they use in the field to get the job done.

Running Mega-Mental Games

Unless you happen to be a Mega-Intelligent nova yourself (and trust us, you aren't) some of the characters in your campaign are considerably smarter than you are. Yet as the Storyteller, you are expected to accurately portray these masterminds, particularly adversaries. How do you do that? Simple, you cheat.

Storytellers by definition have a limited degree of omniscience where their chronicles are concerned. They know the motivations and actions of all of the characters other than the players' in advance, and they know all of the exact abilities

of the players' characters (and probably have a good idea of the abilities and proclivities of the players as well). They also know, to a limited degree, what their players will do in a given situation. Here are some tricks for making Mega-Mental characters in your game as capable as they should be:

"Oh, I knew that."

Storytellers are usually encouraged to separate what they know from what the characters they portray know. In the case of Mega-Mental novas, the line is a little more blurred, simply because they know a lot. So you're entitled to give those characters a little "privileged information" and, more importantly, allow them to act upon it.

A good chronicle should always have secrets, things that the players (and their characters) don't know. Mega-Mental characters may know some of these secrets, and use them to their advantage. For example, they make know about Project Proteus or some parts of its agenda, information Utopia has classified, scientific discoveries most people aren't aware of (and wouldn't understand anyway), and so forth.

"I have planned for *every* contingency!"

Just because an action a player comes up with takes you buy surprise, that doesn't mean that a Mega-Mental character didn't see it coming from a mile away. Secretly adjust things behind the scenes so it seems as if the mastermind expected the characters to do exactly what they did. Roll some dice, shake your head sadly, and keep the Mega-Mental character one step ahead of the players' characters the whole way.

For example, the novas run into trouble and decide to seek out a friend to ask for help. Have the friend already replaced by a shapeshifting ally of the mastermind, ready to lead the novas into a trap or feed them misinformation. Have the safe haven they go to already compromised, with a strike team lying in wait for them. Give the antagonist defenses prepared against all of the characters' powers, even the ones most people don't know about, and always give the mastermind an escape route when he needs one.

"This is what I had planned all along."

No matter what happens, find some way that it fits into the Mega-Mental antagonist's plans and make it so that's what he planned to happen all along. So the characters have smashed his plot to manipulate the stock market? Have it turn out that their intervention was just what he expected. The subtle shift in the market when it's revealed feeds into another plot that you can detail in a later story.

Listen to the players. Odds are good they'll speculate on what they think the mastermind is up to. They may give you ideas for even better plans than the one you had in mind, and may point out possible holes in your current plan. Plus, if someone guesses right, you can always change things on the fly and give the antagonist a different plan altogether.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find out?"

Masterminds can take advantage of information other characters just wouldn't have. They can deduce a nova's secret phobia just by observing her behavior and learning a little about her history. They can find out the deepest, darkest secrets and turn them to their advantage. They know things the players don't expect them to know, as if they can read minds or see the future (and some masterminds can do that, too).

Hey, Don't Get Smart With Me!

Of course, there are times when you shouldn't give Mega-Mental characters too much of an advantage over the players. You're "cheating" to make the masterminds a challenge, not to ensure the players lose and rub their faces in it. This is especially true when some of the players are running Mega-Mental characters as well. In that case, you should tone down the advantages of their mastermind adversaries accordingly.

Even when none of the player characters are mega-brains, you shouldn't go overboard making the players feel stupid. The goal is to make the players think in order to overcome their adversary, and make it difficult for them to deal with masterminds using nothing but brute force. If you can do that, then the game should be both challenging and fun.

Storytelling Techniques

Some particular types of games and storytelling techniques are well suited to Mega-Mental chronicles and stories.

Bluebooking

"Bluebooking" is a term coined by author Aaron Allston (in his **Champions** book **Strike Force**) to refer to roleplaying conducted by writing, either in person (using a notebook) or, more commonly, by e-mail. Bluebooking offers a number of advantages that can improve a chronicle:

• **Creative Freedom:** Many players feel less constrained in their roleplaying when they're putting it down in words rather than acting it out at the gaming table. Bluebooks allow for more creative freedom, staging scenes that might be uncomfortable or awkward to play out in person (particularly romantic or highly emotional scenes). Bluebooks also allow for more detailed descriptions and carefully chosen prose than a spur-of-the-moment idea rattled off at the table.

• **Character Knowledge:** Using bluebooks (or passing notes during a game) can cut down on the "parrot

syndrome," where the Storyteller explains what a character knows and the player parrots it back to the rest of the group in-character. Information in a character's bluebook can be shared (or not) with the other characters as the player desires. This particularly helps enhance the mood of conspiracy oriented chronicles.

• **Subplots:** Bluebooks allow players to explore subplots for their characters that might otherwise detract from the main plot during a game. They also allow players to explore their characters' personal lives "off-stage," sharing what they want with the other players. So when someone from one of their sub-plots pops up in the regular game, the player knows who it is, but the rest of the group may not.

• **Permanency:** Bluebooks provide a permanent record of character interaction and plotlines that the Storyteller and players can refer to later, when they need to know exactly who said what to whom. They're also fun to read when you're in the mood to reminisce about a particular game.

Online Games

Related to the idea of bluebooking is online chat or play-by-email (PBEM) games, which are well-suited to the more cerebral style of Mega-Mental nova characters. These games are played much like face-to-face (FTF or "live") games, except all of the participants communicate in an online chat-room or via e-mail. Online games tend to be slower-paced in live games (PBEM games can take a week or more to handle a scene, a month or more for a single story, depending on the frequency of the turns). Online games offer the same advantages as bluebooking, but tend to be less action- and more story- and description-oriented (simply because complex action like combat tends to slow the game down).

They're also an option for players having trouble finding an **Aberrant** group to play with, or **Aberrant** Storytellers having trouble finding players.

E-mail and online play can also supplement a regular FTF game, running subplots and various scenes in between live games, particularly if the group can only get together to play every so often and wants to keep the game going in the between times.

Solo and Duo Games

Masterminds are often loners, and well suited for a game where the Storyteller has only one or two players. A solo game can obviously focus entirely on one main character, much like many novels and other stories do. As a general rule, solo characters need to be very competent on their own, since they can't rely on others to help them out. This is rarely a problem in **Aberrant**, which characters have tremendous abilities, but the Storyteller may want to give a solo character more nova points, depending on the desired power level of the game (see the **Aberrant Players Guide** for guidelines on high- and low-powered chronicles).

A game with two players can either make their characters partners or can make them rivals (possibly both, depending on the circumstances). This is an excellent opportunity to play out a shadow-war between two nova masterminds, with the Storyteller as "referee" and go-between. This sort of game works particularly well over e-mail, since the two players don't even come into contact with each other. The trick is to make sure the game is handled fairly and the competition doesn't get out of hand outside the game (inside the game is fine, and is likely to result in some interesting situations). Storytellers can use the absentee rivalry between Amanda Wu and Johnny Rose from this book (and the **Aberrant Storyteller's Screen**) as an example of this sort of chronicle.

Chapter Four: Knowledge is Power

Mega-Mental Attributes

Most people in the world of 2015 associate novas with their amazing physical abilities: lifting tanks, flying through the air, firing bolts of energy from their hands, and so forth. It's a bit more difficult to define the enhanced mental abilities of novas. But those mental abilities have transformed the world more than any other single power of novas. Quantum-enhanced intellects have advanced science and technology farther than many people would have imagined and, harnessed by Project Utopia's programs, those scientific advancements have made the world cleaner, healthier, and richer. If you want to see the power of Mega-Mental Attributes, you don't have to look any farther than the rolling green fields of Ethiopia or the flying cars zipping overhead in downtown New York City. While Mega-Mental Attributes are subtler than most nova abilities, they have the potential for the most lasting impact, and some of the greatest danger.

Mental Muscle

It's often difficult to imagine exactly how much smarter, more clever, more perceptive, etc. a nova with a Mega-Attribute is compared to a baseline with a similar base Attribute score. A helpful way of looking at this is by using Mega-Strength (perhaps the most easily quantifiable Attribute) as a basis for comparison. For example, a nova with three dots of Mega-Strength can lift 25 tons compared to a baseline with Strength 3, who can lift around 100 kilograms. Figure that a nova with three dots in a Mega-Mental Attribute has roughly the equivalent "mental muscle" as the nova with Mega-Strength does in physical power and you can see just how much more capable Mega-Mental novas are compared to baselines.

Prejudice and Mega-Mental Attributes

More than any other set of Mega-Attributes, the Mega-Mental Attributes - particularly Mega-Intelligence - provoke feelings of mistrust and jealousy in baselines, and even other novas. While most people admire the amazing physical abilities of novas and everyone loves novas with Mega-Social Attributes, Mega-Mentals are different in ways that isolate them from the rest of the world.

First, Mega-Mental characters see the world differently. They might do so literally, as in the case of those with Mega-Perception, or they might simply understand and react to things differently. The world seem oblivious to things that appear glaringly obvious to them. They can try and explain what they perceive to others as best they can, but they can really only share it with another Mega-Mental nova or "mastermind" as they are sometimes known.

Masterminds find themselves surrounded by people who seem dull and slow. This leads to frustration and impatience on the part of many novas when dealing with others. Imagine having to deal with morons all day long. Odds are good you didn't have to imagine real hard, but now multiply that by many times to get a sense of the frustration a mastermind feels. Little wonder they often seem cold, bitter, and sarcastic to others.

Then there's the fact that novas really are more capable than baselines, leading to a certain amount of arrogance on the part of novas. While an inflated ego is a common problem among novas, masterminds are even more prone to it - partly to shore up their own sense of self-worth in the face of social disdain. If they can't feel successful in the social arena, many Mega-Mentals decide they'll at least feel successful in their own field of endeavor.

Of course, prejudice is not entirely caused by novas. There's more than a small amount of mistrust and jealousy on the part of baselines, and even from novas without Mega-Mental Abilities, toward those who have them. On the one hand, people admire masterminds - like all novas - for their achievements. The discoveries of the mega-perceptive, the inventions of the mega-intelligent, and the creations of the mega-witty, are all lauded by society, so long as they're not too different or threatening. Corporations, governments, and private organizations like Project Utopia eagerly seek out masterminds for their special abilities. They can write their own tickets, if they want.

But admiration leads to certain expectations of Mega-Mental novas. The more wonders they achieve, the higher

the expectations on them become. Some wonder why, with all their brainpower, masterminds haven't done even more for the world. Why can't they solve the problem of cold fusion, or unravel all the secrets of DNA, or discover exactly how their own quantum powers work?

Then there are those who fear that masterminds can do all of those things and much more. Mega-Mental Attributes can be quite imposing, even intimidating, and no one likes to be made to feel stupid, dim, or clumsy, especially people who normally consider themselves smart, clever, and witty. That is until they meet up with a nova who blows them out of the water, even unintentionally (and more than a few novas enjoy deflating baseline egos on purpose).

Mega-Mental Attributes inspire jealousy and breed dislike and mistrust of novas among baselines. Who knows what novas are really capable of? When all of the leading scientific researchers are novas, how can any baseline authority understand, much less regulate, their activities? If novas are really so clever, what do they need baseline humanity for, except perhaps as unskilled labor, and may not even that, once they invented some robots or genetically engineered some chimps. Deep down, there's a feeling in every baseline confronted by the innate genius of novas. It's like being a Neanderthal, or maybe even an ape, confronted by a modern man, a sense that they're no longer at the top of the evolutionary ladder, and that their time as the dominant species on Earth may be over.

Mega-Mentals and Other Mega-Attributes

Of course, Mega-Mental Attributes don't exist in a vacuum. If they were the only abilities that novas had, they would still be impressive, but novas also have an array of other Mega-Attributes as well as their quantum powers, and mastermind novas often have other abilities at their command.

Mega-Mental Attributes often appear together in a nova, just like the Mega-Physical and Mega-Social Attributes do. They compliment each other well, as we shall see later on, but dots in multiple Mega-Mental Attributes also tend to reinforce their problematic aspects as the nova becomes more and more removed from the baseline point of view and baseline limitations.

Stereotypes to the contrary, Mega-Physical and Mega-Mental Attributes do appear together in novas. This is particularly true in "stealth" novas who have a small measure of all of the Mega-Attributes. Novas like Antaeus prove that brains and brawn are not incompatible. Mega-Dexterity and Mega-Wits are an especially common combination, often among novas with heightened speed who need the increased reaction time. Mega-Stamina allows masterminds to research, study, and work for days on end without needing rest.

Heads I Win, Tails You Lose

One of the important things to keep in mind about Mega-Attributes is their scale, in relation to each other and in relation to baseline Attributes. Note that in any contest, the character with the higher Mega-Attribute always wins. The only exception is when a character with a lower Mega-Attribute competes with another with a higher Mega-Attribute, in which case there's a small chance of victory, but even then, it's slim (see **Aberrant**, p. 155 for details).

This means when it comes to baselines competing with novas there's simply no chance for a baseline to win. A nova with Mega-Perception is more observant than any human being ever. A Mega-Intelligent nova is smarter than every human being who ever lived, including paragons like Einstein. A nova with Mega-Wits is never caught off guard by baselines, and always has a snappy comeback (or counter-attack, as the case may be) where they are concerned. In every respect, the nova is superior, and overwhelmingly so. This is also generally true of novas with higher Mega-Attribute ratings; the lower-rated novas barely have a chance.

Note, however, that this rule of thumb applies only in matters of direct competition between characters, not necessarily achievement. It's possible for baselines to develop new technologies and ideas, discover new things, and create new expressions of those ideas, in some cases just as well as novas do. The difference is in the amount of time it takes. It's entirely likely that baselines would have invented the hyper-combustion engine, eventually. Their abilities just allowed novas to do it sooner and faster. That's true of most achievements of Mega-Mental Attributes, they're things that baselines might achieve, given enough time and effort.

Of course, now baseline society will never know if they might have invented hyper-combustion or terraformed Ethiopia, because novas have already done it. And the pace of nova achievement shows no signs of slowing. The concern is that novas will leave baselines eating their intellectual dust for the foreseeable future, possibly forever. Baseline jealousy over nova intellectual achievements is one of the many factors that leads to the Aberrant War and one of the prime reasons that all of the positive achievements of novas are systematically wiped out following the war.

Mega-Mental and Mega-Social Attributes can be an even more devastating combination than brains and brawn. Popular stereotypes have Mega-Mental novas as socially inept "brains" and Mega-Social novas as beautiful airheads (sometimes devious, but not usually very smart). Tremendous social influence and the ability to apply it to the greatest possible effect are a powerful combination that can make a nova a force to be reckoned with on the world-stage. Many governments and baseline authorities fear the implications

of a nova with a combination of Mega-Mental and Social Attributes. To some degree, their fears are justified (see **The Riddle of the Sphinxes**).

Mega-Mentals and Quantum Powers

Mega-Mental Attributes also improve a nova's aptitude for certain quantum powers, particularly those involving the sensing and shaping of matter and energy. Novas with Mental Mega-Attributes can get more out of powers based on those attributes, adding their Mega-Attribute dice to their dice pools.

- **Perception Powers:** Animal/Plant Mastery, ESP, Intuition, Magnetic Mastery (Magnetize), Premonition, Pretercognition, Telepathy, Teleport, Warp.
- **Intelligence Powers:** Cyberkinesis (Alter Data, Reprogram), Disrupt, Elemental Animal (Enhance/Diminish), Entropy Control (Breakdown), Hypnosis, Mental Blast, Molecular Manipulation (Molecular Alteration), Quantum Leech, Weather Manipulation (Fog, Weather Alteration).
- **Wits Powers:** Cyberkinesis (Overload), Elemental Anima (Elemental Shield, Shaping), Elemental Mastery (Imprison, Storm), Gravity Control (Gravitational Field), Invisibility, Magnetic Mastery (Magnetic Field), Matter Creation, Molecular Manipulation (Shape Alteration), Strobe, Temporal Manipulation (Accelerate Time).

Some quantum powers enhance the perceptions of novas even further, and the ability to directly control matter and energy allows nova scientists to test theories and designs that baselines cannot (or, at least, not easily).

Creating Mega-Mental Characters

So, you want to be the smartest kid on the block? There are some things to take into consideration when creating (and playing) a Mega-Mental character.

The first thing to consider is your character concept. What Mental Mega-Attributes does your character have, and in what amounts? If you're creating a character with the default 30 nova points, then your nova isn't going to have five dots in every Mental Mega-Attribute. But you can buy as many as five dots in one of them (for 15 NPs), if you're willing to buy your Quantum up to four and your base Attribute up to five. This creates a very focused character who's extremely good in a particular area, but may leave gaps in your character's abilities. You should consult with your Storyteller in advance to find out what sort of chronicle the character will be involved with, so you can tailor the abilities to match. A mastermind character can fit into an elites game just fine, for example (see Dr. Rachel Alinksy in **Elites**), but you have to consider her role in the chronicle.

Then consider what your nova does with her Mental Mega-Attributes. Does she use Mega-Perception as an investigator, a researcher, an observer, a spy, or something else? Does your nova use Mega-Intelligence to excel in a scientific field, as an administrator, an inventor, a doctor, a thief (or a "freelance security specialist"), or something else? Do you want Mega-Wits so your nova can be a brilliant artist, clever stand-up comic, businessman, or kick-ass fighter (or some combination of all of the above)? Something to consider if Mega-Mental Attributes are part of your character concept is that many of their applications are indirect; there's a temptation for Mega-Mental characters to sit around and think all day instead of getting out and doing anything (see the **Storytelling** section for more on this problem).

How have the character's Mega-Attributes affected his life as a nova? Have they done so already or are they only beginning to cause changes in his life? As the material in this chapter shows, Mega-Mental Attributes can significantly affect the way a nova looks at the world and how the world looks at him, consider these effects on the character and his choices. Maybe he decided to sign on with Utopia because they offered the opportunity to apply his Mega-Intelligence in the least-restrictive environment. Perhaps he joined the Teragen in order to be in the company of fellow novas rather than surrounded by gibbering monkeys all the time.

Playing Mega-Mental Characters

Mastermind characters offer some particular opportunities and challenges in play. The Mega-Mental Attributes often require a certain amount of forethought, planning, and inventiveness to use well. Their applications are less direct than the other Mega-Attributes, and they also require more input and assistance from the Storyteller.

Advantages

The advantages in playing a mastermind character come mainly from having greater insight into the world around you, and what you can do with those insights.

More Information: Masterminds have the potential to know more than any other characters. Not just the Mega-Intelligent ones, either. Mega-Perceptive novas are more likely to notice things that others miss, while Mega-Wits provide you with the ability to pick up on details and small things while everyone else is paying attention to the big picture (or vice versa). In any given situation, a nova mastermind is more likely to know what's going on, understand things, and be able to put that information to use.

There are two ways the Storyteller can implement your nova's greater knowledge: allowing you to make Ability rolls (improved by your Mega-Attributes and enhancements), to find out certain things, and just telling you things that other

characters wouldn't necessarily know or pick up on. Keep in mind that just because you don't know or understand something doesn't mean that your character doesn't! Feel free to ask the Storyteller if you can make an Ability roll to get more information whenever you feel that you need it.

Battles of Wits: If you like intellectual puzzles, piecing together clues, and figuring things out in the game, then a mastermind character will suit you well, since those are the sort of challenges the Storyteller should be throwing your way. With Mega-Mental Attributes on your side, you should be very good at it, too! Masterminds have the advantage of being able to out-think and out-maneuver most other people, given the opportunity. If you feel that your mastermind character is getting short shrift in this area, take a look at **My Character is Smarter than Me!** on p. 48 and speak with your Storyteller about it.

Careful Planning: Putting Mega-Mental Attributes to the best use calls for careful planning and forethought. If you like that sort of thing, then a mastermind character is a good one for you. On the other hand, if you're not a fan of advance planning, a mastermind is still a good choice, provided you can get your Storyteller to agree to some ground rules. From time to time you should be able to turn to the Storyteller and say, "Would I know that?" or "Would I have thought of that beforehand? I am Mega-Intelligent (Perceptive, Witty, etc.) after all." This shouldn't be a "get out of trouble free" card, nor should you be able to play it all the time, but it is a fair way of simulating a mastermind character without requiring you to do all the "homework" for it. Talk with your Storyteller about how you're going to handle such uses of Mega-Mental Attributes in your game.

Acting First: One of the advantages of having all the facts is that you often get to be the first to act upon them. Whether its knowing there's a danger none of the other characters can sense, piecing together a puzzle no one else can figure out, or just having greater reaction time than anyone else, mastermind characters often get to take the initiative and be at the forefront of things. If you like having the chance to be the first to take action, then a mastermind character is a good choice. Of course, it may be a bad idea to hog all of the action, so you'll probably want to clue the slower characters in once in a while (see **Private Agendas**, below).

Disadvantages

While there are plenty of advantages to Mental Mega-Attributes, there are some drawbacks as well, notably the fact that masterminds may be among the most difficult characters to portray, because of their unique abilities. Fortunately, there are ways of dealing with most of the challenges of playing a Mega-Mental nova.

The Parrot Syndrome: One of the things you're likely to find most annoying playing a mastermind is "the Parrot

Syndrome." This is when you ask the Storyteller a question or make a roll to find out if your character knows something. The Storyteller tells you what your character knows or finds out, then you turn to the rest of the players and "parrot back" what the Storyteller told you in character, perhaps with a few slight modifications. This has a couple of drawbacks to it. First, it doesn't make your character sound all that smart or insightful, since you're only repeating back what the Storyteller said. Second, it makes it more difficult for you to add your own spin or interpretation to the information, or even to withhold some information, since the other players already heard the Storyteller tell you what your character knew. Dealing with both problems is a matter of cooperating with the Storyteller.

The Storyteller may come up with ways to communicate information to you without having to tell you out loud. Passing notes or using "bluebooks" (p. 34) is one way of doing this. Storytellers may want to create some "clue cards" in advance of the game, with things characters can find out through investigation or the use of their other abilities written on them. When characters find out things, cards get passed to the players to read, allowing the information to come from them directly, and allowing the players to put their own spin on the information, or even withhold some of it.

Some information can be given to players of mastermind characters in advance of the game, in person, with a prepared handout, or via e-mail. For example, the Storyteller can say "when you investigate the body and I nod to you, point out how it's clear to you that the murderer must have used an exotic tree-frog venom native to South America, the details are all on this card." Storytellers naturally have to be careful not to give too much away in advance, but allowing mastermind characters a "peak behind the curtain" is a nice perk and makes them easier to play.

Finally, gaming groups with a particularly good rapport and play-style may allow mastermind characters to occasionally "ad lib" information. In essence, the player simply makes up what his character knows and the Storyteller tries to work it into the overall plot of the game. So, in the previous example, the Storyteller would just describe the murder scene to the players. Then the player of the mastermind character says, "hmmm, look at this discoloration of the lips and the skin around the eyes, clearly the work of the venom of the rare Brazilian spotted tree frog."

The player has no way of knowing what the Storyteller has planned, so this works best when used sparingly, and only when the Storyteller is comfortable improvising things to make them fit the story. As a general rule of thumb, limit characters to doing this sort of thing no more than once per game per dot of Mega-Attribute. Don't allow them to change any existing facts (although they can rationalize things to make the facts fit their new theory), and give the Storyteller

the right to veto any idea that will completely derail the story. In the previous case, the Storyteller might have said "Taking a second look, you notice that the symptoms are very similar to tree frog poisoning, but there's also evidence of some sort of pathogen."

Fragile Eggheads: There's a tendency for mastermind characters to not be very tough, or not to have much in the way of combat abilities. This can not only make the player feel left out when there's a fight; in the dangerous world of **Aberrant** it can also result in the rather messy death of a mastermind character when a nova capable of picking up buildings punches him in the brain.

Unless the Storyteller is running a strictly intellectual and combat-light game, you should give some thought to your character's offensive and defensive abilities. There's absolutely nothing wrong with the character's offensive ability being "a biting comment" and his defensive ability being "knowing when to run and hide," so long as you and the Storyteller are comfortable with that. Otherwise, you should look into something a bit more substantial.

Defensive ability is most important, since it protects the character's life. This doesn't have to be sheer Soak value. It could be tremendous dodging ability (particularly appropriate for masterminds able to see attacks coming from a mile away). Density decrease is a great defensive ability, particularly if you're not concerned about being able to attack or you have mental powers of some kind. Teleportation and Hypermovement are also very useful abilities for getting out of harm's way.

For offensive abilities, you have a wide choice available, and there's nothing that says a mastermind can't pack a powerful Quantum Bolt or some Mega-Strength. Less offensive powers can be very useful in combat when backed by a little cleverness as well, particularly the ability to manipulate matter and energy that often shows up among masterminds. Give some thought to clever ways your character can use her other powers in combat situations.

Finally, masterminds lacking in offensive or defensive capabilities can always invent some. Take a look at the gadgeteering and inventing rules in this book and have your character whip up some armor, a force field harness, or a mega-blaster cannon to help deal with those tricky situations.

Private Agendas: When you've got some inside information, there's often a temptation to play your cards close to your chest, waiting for the ideal moment to use that information to your advantage. There's even a temptation to lord it over the other players, with an "I know something you don't know" attitude. Sometimes mystery and personal agendas can spice up a chronicle and keep everyone interested, but other times it can bring things to a grinding halt and create feelings of ill will among the players. When using the vari-

ous methods of avoiding the Parrot Syndrome (above), don't forget to clue in the other players about what your character knows rather than keeping it all to yourself. **Aberrant** is generally a team-oriented game, so try and make your character a team player.

There's also a tendency for mastermind characters to get caught up in their own struggles and shadow-games with NPCs or even with other player characters. Unless this is the sort of chronicle the Storyteller is running and all of the players are agreed upon it, it's best to keep the shadow-war stuff "off screen" and handle it via blue-booking or e-mail (see the **Storytelling** chapter for details). Don't get caught up in your character's private agenda at the expense of everyone else's enjoyment.

Information Overload: There is such a thing as too much information. Some players find that having more information doesn't help them but hinders them, making them indecisive and hesitant. There's also a temptation for investigations to go on forever, or for mastermind players to spend all their time in private blue-book session with the Storyteller, exchanging notes and secretly uncovering things. Again, it's best to keep that sort of stuff "off screen" and handle it outside the game, keeping game-time for action, and encouraging the players to do things. Take a look at the **Storytelling** chapter for ways to encourage mastermind characters to get into the thick of things when they start to become too isolated or hesitant.

Taint and Mental Mega-Attributes

All novas face the hazards of gradually accumulating Taint and suffering the effects of excess quantum energies on body and mind. Novas with Mega-Intelligence and the

Taint Resistance enhancement are actually more resistant to Taint than most. The modifications that Mega-Intelligence cause in the brain can allow it to adapt to the growth of the M-R node, preventing changes in behavior due to pressure of the brain's forward lobes. The Taint Resistance enhancement also allows Mega-Intelligent novas to more easily overcome the effects of mental aberrations.

That's a good thing, too, because mental aberrations are just the sort that novas with Mental Mega-Attributes are prone to developing. Such aberrations are subtle and difficult to detect at first. Most people undergo some change in their personality when they become novas; it's difficult to acquire that kind of power and go completely unchanged. So additional changes in personality often go unnoticed, at least at first, and baseline society tends to give novas a wide degree of latitude when it comes to their personal quirks. As the aberrations increase they become more and more obvious, but novas sometimes rationalize them or find reasons to hide them from others; even the most Mega-Intelligent aren't immune to self-deception.

Mega-Mental novas can develop physical aberrations, too, usually ones related to their enhanced mental faculties or the importance of their mind in their self-image. Physical aberrations involving the sensory organs are the most common with Mega-Perception, while Mega-Intelligent novas tend to develop physical aberrations involving the head, particularly the cranium and brain. Aberrations of the nervous system are the most common for Mega-Wits novas, with changes in their neurochemistry and nerve structure.

It's also worth noting that many "mental" aberrations have physical root causes. One significant cause of mental aberrations is the growth of the M-R node, putting pressure on the frontal lobes of the nova's brain, and even reshaping the gray matter to some degree. The node's quantum emissions can also have a direct effect on neural tissue, creating mutations and reshaping it to reflect the nova's abilities and subconscious impulses. Such changes in brain structure can result in very different outlooks and perceptions for novas.

Mega-Perception: Watchers

The world is full of sensations, and the watchers, novas with Mega-Perception, are aware of them all. Mega-Perception opens up the mind to the full range of sensory impressions out there, opens up the nova to a whole new world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and more. To those with Mega-Perception the world seems at once larger and smaller, filled with an array of sensations, but ultimately quite simple, once you learn to look at it the right way.

Keen Observations

At its most basic level, Mega-Perception enhances both the sensory organs and, particularly, the parts of the brain concerned with sensory input and processing. Most people can train to improve their senses and their awareness of what they sense, novas with Mega-Perception gain that ability without any need to practice and study. The range of a watcher's senses isn't necessarily greater than that of a baseline, but they are better able to notice fine details and gradations. Mega-Perceptive novas can tell very similar shades of color apart and distinguish different tones. The sense of sight and hearing remain the strongest, just as they are for baselines, but the nova's overall sensory abilities are improved.

Some novas have modifications of their sensory organs, making them particularly acute, even able to detect stimuli beyond the normal human range. This is most common with the weakest human senses, particularly smell and taste (which are closely related). Novas can develop a sense of smell as keen or better than a bloodhound, allowing them to distinguish individual people by their scent alone, and determine the ingredients in food simply by tasting it. Backed up by a human (or greater) intellect, these sharpened senses can pick out chemicals, poisons, drugs, and similar things. One nova helped apprehend a drug dealer at an airport simply because he scented spike on the man as he was passing by (the police didn't bother asking the nova how he knew what spike smelled like). Similar modifications to the skin and nerve endings there can give a nova extraordinarily sensitive touch which can, among other things, read type by feeling the impressions of ink on a printed page.

At the uppermost level, some novas develop the ability to perceive things beyond the ability of any human sense. Scientists have various theories about how this is accomplished, but haven't definitely discovered how novas are able to sense things in defiance of many of the laws of physics. For example, some novas are able to "see" wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum that are simply far too long for human eyes to perceive. The nova's eyes would have to be the size of satellite dishes (or, in some cases, radio telescopes) in order to perceive such wavelengths, but novas can and do perceive them. Likewise, some novas can directly perceive "quantum" phenomena, seeing things on

the microscopic (or even smaller) scale.

The so-called "metasensory" powers (like ESP and Telepathy) are closely related to Mega-Perception, and seem to partake of the same mechanism as other nova senses that don't obey ordinary physical laws. It's a mystery how novas can perceive events happening great distances away in defiance of the speed of light, much less how they can read (and even influence) the thoughts of others.

The insights provided by Mega-Perception have made novas trailblazers in scientific research of all kinds, since they are capable of more precise and accurate observations than even the most sensitive scientific instruments. Watchers find work in scientific fields from chemistry and biology to astronomy and physics.

Mega-Perception also has applications in the world of art, with nova artists capable of recognizing fine gradations of hues, tones, and other sensory input beyond human ability. There are nova painters able to precisely match colors and brushstrokes by sight alone and nova musicians able to write down an entire musical score after hearing it only once. Some nova artists have even begun to experiment with mediums and works of interest solely to novas. The "ultra-soprano" work of Alejandra is one example, involving some notes in the ultra-sonic range, only audible to listeners with enhanced hearing, as is artwork designed for viewers able to perceive both infrared and ultraviolet light.

Naturally Mega-Perception is of use in any field involving observation and gathering information, which includes surveillance and espionage. Watchers are in demand for things like detective work, covert surveillance, and the like.

Mega-Perception and the Universal Hologram

One commonly accepted explanation for the sensory abilities of novas (and, to a degree, their other powers) is the "holographic" theory of reality. It states that the physical universe is much like a hologram, a three-dimensional image of light, except far more complex. This hologram arises out of the interaction of quantum forces and, like a regular hologram, is holistic in that each part of it is intimately connected with (and contains) ever other part.

In essence, the universe is a much simpler, interconnected structure than it appears, and consciousness is very much a part of this structure. It may be that consciousness (intelligence, awareness, call it what you will) has the ability to perceive "beneath" the surface of reality as we understand it, recognizing things like distance and time as illusions and able to sense beyond them.

Thus novas can sense distant events and the information received and transmitted by their quantum powers seems to defy limitations like the speed of light. If the quantum hologram of the universe is influenced by consciousness, then nova powers may simply be a matter of sending information in the same way they receive it, changing the nature of the universe like re-arranging pixels on a display screen. Theoretically, this means that there is nothing a nova can't accomplish, given enough time, energy, and insight into the structure of reality, an idea that keeps many physicists and parabiologists up quite late in the Nova Age.

Roleplaying Mega-Perception

Imagine being able to notice things other people couldn't. You could be like Sherlock Holmes (or Batman, or any other great detective), able to dazzle everyone with your displays of insight into things that seem so obvious to you. Now imagine having to explain things like Holmes all the time to people who just seem oblivious to what's going on around them. Now you have a pretty good idea of the upside and the downside of Mega-Perception.

Mega-Perceptive novas often point out what they can sense to less perceptive people (see the **Drawbacks** section above for some ideas on how to do this in-game). They tend toward offering their opinion on just about everything, because things seem so clear to them. They're also prone to mentioning things other people can't detect quite casually. ("How did I know that he played guitar? The calluses on his fingers were quite distinctive, of course.") This particular habit can get as annoying as you let it.

Watchers tend to either revel in the world of sensation or seek refuge from it (sometimes going from on to the other, depending on their mood). The world can be overwhelming sometimes for novas with Mega-Perception, causing them to seek out peace, quiet, and isolation so they can enjoy simple and subtle sensations rather than the cacophony that bombards them all the time.

There is also a tendency among the Mega-Perceptive to spend all of their time observing things and very little actually doing anything. They become too caught up in the sensations around them, giving them a distracted look. Some watchers become voyeurs, caught up in the ability to spy and eavesdrop on others without their knowledge; the fact that Smart Alex from Teen Tomorrow has x-ray vision isn't widely known to the public, but every woman working for Project Utopia finds out about it sooner or later.

Mega-Perception and the Law

Mega-Perception raises some significant issues of privacy or personal responsibility in the Nova Age. Some novas are capable of spying on virtually anyone they want, and the fact that they notice things other people can't may make novas more responsible (at least legally speaking) than baselines.

In general, it's extremely hard to prove charges of voyeurism or stalking against a watcher. Indeed, a baseline could be watched by a nova and never even know it, and it's that

idea, more than anything else, that disturbs them. The truth of the matter is most novas have better things to do than eavesdrop on the people around them, but some novas do from time to time, and for a few it becomes a hobby, then an obsession. Various crackpot schemes offer ways of blocking "nova peepers" using everything from lead foil to complex electromagnets, but most of them are just ways of bilking people out of their money.

It's fairly solid precedent in 2015 that evidence obtained by novas using their unique perceptions is admissible in court, so long as it was not obtained illegally. However, convictions are rare based solely on nova "eyewitness" testimony, particularly when it involves metasensory abilities. A nova may have seen someone commit a crime through a solid wall, but if there are no other witnesses or corroborating evidence, it's a matter of the nova's word versus the defendant's. The same is true when a nova reads someone's mind to find out if they are guilty or not.

This leads to legal issues of how responsible a nova is to act when he or she senses a danger or a crime in progress. If a nova happens to read the mind of someone on the street and discovers he's planning on shooting up his workplace, or scents homemade explosives from the back of a truck parked on the street, what should he do? Ideally, the matter should be reported to police, but there is a debate about applying "Good Samaritan" laws to novas, requiring them to take action in these cases, if it is within their abilities, and possibly leaving them open to criminal and civil prosecution if they fail to do so.

New Mega-Perception Enhancements

Body Awareness

Everyone is aware of their body to some degree, but novas can be aware of their own physical condition with a precision greater than a battery of sophisticated medical tests. A character with this enhancement is aware of any changes in his physical condition, regardless of the source.

System: A nova with Body Awareness instinctively knows everything about his body's physical condition: heart rate, respiration, blood-sugar level, and so forth. He also immediately knows when any foreign substance (from drugs and alcohol to viruses and bacteria) enters his body and how his system is reacting to it. He can sense the development of any illness or physical imbalance even before symptoms manifest themselves, down to alterations in his genetics due to radiation, nova powers, or some other source (such as Project Proteus' sterilization treatment). With a successful Medicine roll, the nova can identify the exact condition or foreign substance (if he's already familiar with it). The character always knows his exact Health Level (and how much more damage

he can suffer) and his exact level of Temporary and Permanent Taint.

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Holographic Awareness

Scientists speculate that the structure of space-time is like a hologram, a three-dimensional image created by the quantum interference patterns of the implicate order. Novas with this enhancement sense the universe around them in this manner, aware of all of the dimensions of space-time, with an intuitive sense of direction, distance, dimension, and time.

System: The nova can determine an object's exact spatial dimensions with an Awareness roll, as well as knowing the exact distance between any two points she can see, and the exact speed at which any object is moving, relative to her position. The nova always knows were magnetic north is and is capable of moving through any place that is familiar to her without relying on her senses, including the ability to retrace her steps through any place she's been. The nova also knows exactly how much time has passed between events she has experienced (even if she was unconscious or sleeping during part of that time) and can time things as if she possessed an accurate stopwatch (similar to the Temporal Manipulation technique Internal Clock, **Aberrant**, p. 226).

Note that this enhancement only affects things the nova can sense or once sensed (assuming conditions haven't changed). While she could make her way through a familiar place blindfolded, she doesn't get the benefit of the Blind-fighting enhancement, since by definition she can't see her opponent and the conditions change too rapidly.

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Psychic Awareness

The so-called "psychic" or "metasensory" abilities of novas still remain a mystery to modern science in terms of exactly how they operate. Scientists speculate about quantum interaction with the brain's neural electricity or even neural chemistry on the quantum level, while some believe psychic powers point to ties between consciousness and quantum reality. Whatever the case, some novas are gifted with the ability to sense psychic abilities used on them or in their immediate area.

System: The nova automatically senses any psychic power used against him or in his presence (that is, any quantum power affected by Psychic Shield, **Aberrant**, p. 215). The nova can "see" the waves of quantum energy flowing between the nova and the subject. If the nova with Psychic Awareness is the target of a psychic power, he can make an Awareness roll to sense the identity of the attacker, opposed by the attackers Wits + Power Rating.

If the attacker is using Telepathy with the Surreptitious extra, the nova gets a chance to sense the mental intrusion: roll Awareness vs. the telepath's Wits + Telepathy. If the nova wins, he senses the attempt, whether it is successful or not. The nova can only detect Surreptitious Telepathy when he is the subject. If he detects it, he can make another roll to try and determine the identity of the telepath, as above.

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Note that this enhancement does not allow a nova to detect the use of psionic powers or psiads, only "psychic" quantum powers (see the **Aberrant Players Guide**, p. 58, for further information on psiads and their abilities).

Sensory Editing

We've all sometimes wished for the ability to block out the world, or just some particularly unpleasant or annoying sight, sound, or sensation. Sometimes we manage to only see or hear what we want to, but not to the level that novas are capable of. A nova with this enhancement can literally "edit out" sensory input she doesn't want to perceive, for as long as she wants.

System: The nova has the ability to selectively "filter out" any sensory input she wants. The nova selects the input and poof! She's no longer aware of it. This allows the nova to do things like adjust to bright light without sunglasses, eliminate background noise to focus on a particular sound, ignore a nauseating odor or flavor, and become completely immune to being tickled.

The nova can also ignore sensations of pain, overcoming any dice pool modifiers due to injuries and gaining tremendous resistance to physical torture (consider the nova to have automatic successes equal to her Mega-Perception for Resistance rolls). If she chooses, the nova can "dampen down" a sensation to a lower level rather than eliminating it altogether: dropping background noise to a dull whisper or blinding light to a faint glow.

Note this ability only affects sensations that the nova is aware of, it takes a moment for the nova to consciously edit out the sensory input. So this enhancement is useless against sudden or unexpected sensory input. For that ability, see the Sensory Shield power (**Aberrant**, p. 220).

Sensory Editing requires no roll and costs a quantum point to activate for an entire scene (with as many edits as the nova desires). The nova can restore any and all of her normal sensory input at will.

Synesthesia

Have you ever heard colors or seen tastes? Some novas can, and without the use of recreational drugs. Synesthesia is the ability to "reroute" sensory input the nova feels, swapping his senses in any way that he desires. In addition to the aesthetics of being able to know what the color blue tastes like or see the shape and hues of a Brahms symphony, it also allows the nova to better understand what he senses by filtering it through different perceptions. The nova can also use one sense to make up for a lack in another, when necessary.

System: The nova can re-allocate his sensory input at will. This has two primary game effects. First, the nova can compare and contrast sensory impressions about a particular subject. This allows the nova to make an Awareness roll and apply the successes as bonus dice for an Investigation roll involving the subject or another ability roll where detailed information about the subject is useful (in the Storyteller's judgment).

Second, the nova can use one sense to make up for the loss or deficiency of another. For example, he can "feel" colors, allowing him to read printed material by touch, or "see" sounds, allowing him to differentiate between a jumble of different noises. The Storyteller is the final judge of any particular use of the enhancement, but it should allow the nova to overcome many sensory limitations.

Synesthesia requires no roll and costs a quantum point to activate for an entire scene (with as many sensory shifts as the nova desires). The nova can restore any and all of his normal sensory input at will.

New Mega-Perception Aberrations

Aberrations involving Mega-Perception usually result from the effects of the nova's extremely heightened senses: either an inability to control sensory input, resulting in overload, or physical mutations linked to the nova's enhanced abilities. Generally speaking, the aberrations listed here are limited to novas with at least one dot in Mega-Perception.

Common aberrations from **Aberrant** and the **Aberrant Players Guide** for Mega-Perceptive novas include Aberrant Eyes (see below), Delusions, Disturbing Voice, Flashbacks, Masochism, Second Self, Sensitive, Sensory Dysfunction, Uncontrollable Power, and Vulnerability (Strobe attacks).

Low-Level Aberrations (Taint 4-5)

• **Aberrant Eyes (Ears/Nose/Skin/Tongue):** Novas with Mega-Perception often develop physical mutation of one or more of their sensory organs. Their eyes may glow softly, reflect light, acquire vertical pupils like a cat's, and so forth. Their ears may become pointed, stunted, or acquire an odd shape. Their nose may become enlarged, flattened, ridged, or acquire additional nostrils. Their skin may change color (equivalent to the Colored Skin aberration), texture, become covered in fine hairs (for improved sense of touch), or become almost translucent. The tongue may elongate, become forked like a snake's (common with improved smell

or taste), acquire an unusual texture or color, and so forth. Each significant alteration in a sensory organ is considered a separate aberration.

• **Eye of the Beholder:** Mega-Perception changes the way you look at the world around you. Most novas manage to hold on to at least an understanding of the way baselines perceive things, but some don't. Open to a new world of sensations and perceptions, the nova sees beauty in ugliness, and often dismisses what baselines consider beautiful. A sunset looks quite different to someone able to see the entire electromagnetic spectrum, and gold can be admired for the simplicity and symmetry of its molecular structure as well as it's color and luster. Novas with this aberration have difficulty relating their perceptions to those who don't share them, and typically feel isolated because of it. This should be roleplaying, and the Storyteller may wish to impose an additional penalty on Social rolls (on top of the character's Taint modifier) when perceptions and share experiences are a factor.

• **Voyeurism:** The nova becomes so fascinated with observing other people that it becomes a compulsion. The nova spends an inordinate amount of time observing others, preferably without their knowledge. In order to pass up an opportunity to spy or eavesdrop, the nova must make a Willpower roll (modified by permanent Taint). The Storyteller may increase the difficulty of the roll in particularly tempting circumstances.

Medium-Level Aberrations (Taint 6-7)

• **Antennae:** The nova acquires a graceful set of antennae sprouting from her forehead. They may be long and thin, short and stubby, or feathered like a moth's. They typically twitch slightly when the character uses her Mega-Perception, particularly enhancements like Hyperenhanced Hearing.

• **Bug Eyes:** The character's eyes become multifaceted, like those of an insect. Baselines, with their instinctual dislike of insects, find this aberration particularly repulsive and disturbing, reducing the character's Appearance by one dot. Combined with the Enlarged Eyes aberration (below), the character may have giant, bulging insect-like eyes.

• **Distractible:** Novas with Mega-Perception live awash in a sea of sensations. Sometimes it is difficult for them to sort out the sensory input that bombards them almost constantly and they find themselves drawn into and fascinated with certain sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and so forth. When a nova with this aberration encounters a particularly interesting sensation (in the Storyteller's judgment), the player must make a Willpower roll to avoid having the character become lost in the experience, unable to act or react to anything else. Spending a point of temporary Willpower automatically allows the character to ignore the stimulus.

• **Enlarged Eyes/Ears:** The aberrant's eyes or ears (or both) are abnormally, even freakishly, large (at least five times their normal size). The character's Appearance is permanently reduced by one dot, and his face becomes quite distinctive.

High-Level Aberrations (Taint 8+)

• **Extra Sensory Organs:** The aberrant develops a profusion of additional sensory organs. This may include an array of eyes (similar to a spider), extra ears, noses, or tongues, or entirely new sensory organs that humans don't even have, attuned to different radiation wavelengths, high- or low-frequency sound, quantum emissions, and so forth. These extra organs may be on the nova's head, or elsewhere on the body, like the torso or limbs, perhaps mounted on flexible stalks sprouting from part of the body.

• **Rampant Synesthesia:** This works like the Synesthesia enhancement (above), except the nova can't choose how the sensory impressions manifest themselves and can't turn off the effect. So the nova might be seeing sounds one moment and hearing smells the next, creating a confused mass of sensory impressions. In addition to feeling like the nova is on a permanent hallucinogenic trip, the nova suffers an increase in the difficulty of Perception-based Abilities equal to the social modifier for his permanent Taint (e.g., +1 at Taint 4 and +1 more per two points of Taint thereafter).

• **Supersensitive:** The nova's tremendously enhanced senses become as much a curse as they are a blessing. A nova with this aberration is so extremely sensitive to stimuli that her senses can be overloaded by what baselines consider a normal and comfortable environment. Ordinary daylight is blindingly bright, sounds above a whisper are almost painfully loud, anything but the most mild, bland tastes and odors are overpowering, and anything more than the softest touch or the smoothest fabric is rough and unpleasant. Sensory input above these levels is treated like a Strobe attack (**Aberrant**, p. 223) against the character, with the dice pool determined by the intensity of the stimulus (and the Storyteller's judgment). Ordinary Strobe attacks on the character have their effect doubled after the successes are rolled. Additionally, the nova finds it almost impossible to rest or concentrate in any environment other than a quite, dimly-lit place that's free of distractions. If the nova sleeps, he may only be able to do so in a sensory deprivation chamber or the equivalent.

Mega-Intelligence: Brainiacs

Brains, geeks, nerds, brainiacs - they're not the most popular of people in high school, but many of them go on to change the world. The limits of the human mind are challenged with every new idea and invention someone comes up with, but novas shattered previous ideas about the limits

of intelligence when they came along. The most intelligent novas make the most intelligent baselines look like idiots by comparison, and the ability of intellect to change the world is manifested in novas like never before. In less than twenty years, nova scientists and inventors have created things it might have taken baselines decades more to perfect, and their inventions have made these nova brainiacs some of the wealthiest people in the world.

But in addition to their ability to develop new ideas and technologies, Mega-Intelligent novas have the ability to understand and influence complex systems in ways baselines can barely comprehend. People are just beginning to understand the potential brainiacs have to manipulate world events like chess masters sitting at a board, using people and even nations as their pawns.

Brainiacs, Wealth, and Power

Mega-Intelligence often goes hand in hand with wealth and influence in the world. Although any nova can write their own ticket in 2015, making ungodly amounts of money from commercial endorsements, if nothing else, brainiacs are especially in demand and a brilliant nova can earn huge sums as a consultant, researcher, or inventor. Companies like Novelty Consulting regularly employ Mega-Intelligent novas, along with major corporations, governments, and organizations like Project Utopia. Or a brainiac can go it alone, setting up a new company or consulting business, or creating a new invention. A brainiac who's a financial prodigy may simply earn a fortune playing the stock market. Players of Mega-Intelligent characters are certainly justified in taking any level of Resources, and may also have a degree of Contacts or Influence because of their abilities. Brainiacs often use their resources and influence as part of their overall plans for the future (see **Mastermind Shadow-Wars** and **Riddle of the Sphinxes**, in the **Storytelling** chapter for more information).

Bright Ideas

What is it like to be smarter than almost everyone else in the world? Consider, in 2015 novas are only a little more than a millionth of the world's population. Only a fraction of novas have Mega-Intelligence, and every one of them is smarter than any human being who has ever lived, smarter than billions of other people. Novas with higher levels of Mega-Intelligence are smarter by an order of magnitude than the brainiacs below them. At the pinnacle of the scale are beings so intelligent, capable of such ideas, they can scarcely be called human any more.

Of course, the question comes to mind: "what is intelligence?" In **Aberrant** terms, Intelligence is "raw mental processes - memory, retention, judgment, reasoning, and imagination." It involved "the ability to find connections between seemingly unrelated pieces of information or ana-

lyze complex ideas." It is a measure of how clearly and well a character thinks, although not necessarily how quickly (that's covered by Wits).

Mega-Intelligence enhances all of these qualities: memory, reasoning, and imagination. A Mega-Intelligent nova is able to learn and retain things more quickly and easily, can reason out complex problems faster than others, and can come up with ideas at the drop of a hat (not necessarily always good ideas, although they come more easily, too). Mega-Intelligence is an excellent justification for spending nova points on dots in Abilities, since a brainiac can soak up new skills (especially Abilities based on Mental Attributes) quickly. Storytellers may want to reduce or waive training times when it comes to Mega-Intelligent characters learning new Abilities; they just spend the experience and they know how to do it after doing some reading or seeing it done once. Even if they lack the Eidetic Memory enhancement, Storytellers should consider allowing Mega-Intelligent novas to make an Intelligence or appropriate Ability roll to recall some useful piece of information they have seen or heard, representing their excellent memories.

The enhanced reasoning and imagination of Mega-Intelligent novas makes them the movers and shakers in nearly all fields of intellectual endeavor, particularly science and engineering, but also finance, business, philosophy, strategy, and related fields. Although the world benefits from the fruits of nova inventiveness, there is also considerable concern over the potential of novas to dominate intellectual life on Earth, particularly in the area of economics.

Baseline businesses and businesspeople are aware that there is simply no way they can compete with the abilities of novas. Mega-Intelligent novas are also well aware of the potential of their abilities and what they can do with them. This leads to efforts to curb the impact of nova intellect on science, technology, and the economy. Project Utopia's Science & Technology Division (p. 3) exists for this very reason. If novas were allowed unregulated use of their intellectual abilities, they might be capable of coming up with things that could radically change society and the world, and not necessarily for the better. An out of control super-weapon could easily destroy an entire city, if not more, and Utopia has seen designs for experiments that could theoretically draw the Earth into an artificial black hole, reduce the planet to atomic rubble, or even unravel the fabric of reality. These are extreme and only theoretical possibilities, but they're enough to make people in the know very wary of the Mega-Intelligent.

Roleplaying Mega-Intelligence

When taking the role of a Mega-Intelligent character, consider the effects of his or her vast intellect of different areas of life, such as the character's philosophy, goals, interactions with the world at large, and personal relationships.

Brainiacs can be quite philosophical, after all they have plenty of opportunity to consider and carefully dissect their personal beliefs. If you like to play characters with very detailed personalities and belief systems, then a Mega-Intelligent nova gives you the opportunity to plumb the depths of that character's persona.

There's a tendency to portray the Mega-Intelligent as somewhat amoral, or at least beyond ordinary ideas of morality. They may have strange or novel thoughts regarding proper behavior, or get caught up in a particular philosophy. Antaeus (detailed in **Project Utopia** and **Aberrant Worldwide - Phase I**) is one example, with his fascination with the environment and natural eco-systems. Things outside his area of expertise aren't of much interest to Antaeus. It's almost certain he knew of some of Project Utopia's "black" operations, but he chose to overlook them until Utopia's policy affected him directly, then he struck out on his own. Another example of the amoral genius is Dr. Worm from **Exposé: Aberrants**, whose philosophy of personal freedom is at the core of his personality, or even Divis Mal, who advocates a different sort of morality for novas than for baselines. Consider how Mega-Intelligence influences a character's moral outlook and philosophy of life. Some might become cold, amoral, and impersonal while others may build a strong moral foundation for themselves.

This ties into the goals of the Mega-Intelligent. What does a nova genius do with all of that brainpower? Like any intelligent person, the goals of a nova may vary. Some novas may genuinely want to help make the world a better place (either out of selflessness or because they want the fame and fortune that goes with it). Some brainiacs want recognition of their brilliance, from the public, from their peers, or from someone in particular. Nova researchers might be looking for greater truths in the universe or simply playing with fun new toys and ideas to see what will happen. A few brainiacs may even want to hide their intelligence, in order to fit in and be considered "normal."

Then there's how the Mega-Intelligent go about achieving their goals, which ties back into the character's personality and outlook. One brainiac may be an amoral

ANTAEUS

DOCTOR WORM

DIVIS MAL

manipulator who will do anything to get what he wants without any concern for other people, while another may be devoted to disrupting society as little as possible and ensuring that other novas don't disrupt it either. Brainiacs may be well served by joining up with an organization like Utopia or ViaSoft that can provide the resources necessary to achieve certain goals, or they may prefer to go it on their own, taking the time to build up their own resources in exchange for greater personal freedom. Some Mega-Intelligent novas step "outside" conventional means to achieve their goals. They see the world as part of some master plan (see **Riddle of the Sphinxes**, p. 31, for more).

How does the nova interact with the rest of the world? It's easy for brainiacs to consider themselves "above" or "outside" baseline and even nova society. Teragen sympathies are common among the Mega-Intelligent, which of them hasn't felt at least a little frustration dealing with baseline limitations? Plus brainiacs are less likely to dismiss the Teragen based solely on emotionally biased public views of them.

Mega-Intelligent novas tend to be more popular in theory than in fact. For example, everyone thinks Antaeus' ecological achievements are amazing boons to all humanity, but plenty of other novas are more popular then him, and even if he granted interviews, most people would find Antaeus strange and difficult to understand. The same goes for many Mega-Intelligent novas. People appreciate the things they've done for the world, but nobody's really interesting in listening to some egghead babble on about quarks or quantum theory or social dynamics or whatever other big snooze of a topic is on their gigantic minds at the moment. In the public eye, brainiacs are still just geeks. Powerful, influential, and brilliant, but geeks nonetheless.

On the flip side, the Mega-Intelligent have a tendency to treat everyone else like idiots (since, from their perspective, they are). They either react with sarcasm and clever put-downs or else they condescend and patronize, even when they're not intending to. Many Mega-Intelligent novas give off the feeling that they're talking down to you, like you would to a small child or even a friendly pet. Of course, when they

don't do this, we're right back to brainiacs talking right over people's heads and putting them to sleep.

It's little wonder that the Mega-Intelligent often seek out each others' company, but there are troubles there, too. Brainiacs are often competitive and territorial when dealing with their peers, which can lead to disagreements, cattiness, and even outright hostilities.

My Character is Smarter than Me!

The major challenge in playing a Mega-Intelligent nova is that the character is (by definition) smarter than the player could ever be. This is fairly easily to imagine when you're talking about physical or even social attributes, but how do you play someone who's smarter (possibly a lot smarter) than you are?

In part, you have to rely on your character's Traits and the Storyteller's cooperation to help you. Don't hesitate to ask the Storyteller if you can make an Intelligence or Ability roll in a situation where you think your character might have a better idea than you do. Talk with your Storyteller about ways you can play up your character's Mega-Intelligence in the game (a number of ways are discussed in this chapter and the **Storytelling** chapter). But also keep in mind that even the most intelligent people still make mistakes and Mega-Intelligence doesn't mean that a character knows everything.

New Mega-Intelligence Enhancements
Discerning Mind

While a sharp mind is no guarantee of being able to resist the a pretty face or a charming personality, some novas with Mega-Intelligence are able to see through attempts to influence them, and their quick, analytical minds allow them to escape from such traps where others might not.

System: In any situation where someone tries to exert influence over the nova, either through Social Abilities or powers like Dominate or Empathic Manipulation, the nova may roll Intelligence. Successes are applied as additional dice on rolls to resist the outside influence, as the nova's insight warns him of the potential danger and allows him opportunities to slip the net. In situations where a resistance roll isn't allowed, Discerning Mind doesn't help.

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Fast Learner

The nova's prodigious intelligence allows her to grasp new ideas and information very quickly. The nova can pick up new skills and improve them faster than normal.

System: The nova learns new Intelligence Abilities for one experience point, and improving Intelligence Abilities costs only (current rating) rather than (current rating x 2), so

long as the current rating of the Ability is less than the nova's Mega-Intelligence rating. Additionally, the nova requires only about half the usual amount of training time. This enhancement has no effect on Abilities bought during character creation; it simulates the nova's facility with learning new Abilities and improving them during play.

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Inventive Genius

Some people are just full of ideas. Novas with this enhancement are brimming over with them. They have a gift for seeing things in new ways and finding new applications of existing technology and techniques. Their inventions change the world, provided they're not confiscated by Project Utopia's Science & Technology division, that is (see p. 3).

System: When the nova is working to come up with a new application or invention related to any of the Intelligence Abilities, the player may make an Intelligence roll. For each success, she may roll an additional die on any Ability roll related to developing the new idea. This includes creating gadgets (see the **Aberrant Players Guide**, p. 143, for details). Inventive Genius may substitute for any type of Mental Prodigy required for the creation of a gadget or new invention, and its effects are cumulative with Mental Prodigy when coming up with new inventions.

At the Storyteller's discretion, the player of an Inventive Genius may spend a Willpower point to come up with a particularly brilliant idea or inspiration in play (with input from the Storyteller).

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Mental Prodigy

Computers: While Engineering prodigies (**Aberrant**, p. 167) are good at designing, building, and repairing hardware, Computer prodigies are masters of writing and modifying software and getting computers to do what they want. They put some of the best baseline hackers to shame, and they can design programs of amazing complexity and utility (not to mention some killer vid-games). With some actual training (i.e., dots in the Computer Ability), they've amazing.

System: Whenever the character is engaged in activity involving operating or programming computers (including hacking them, **Aberrant**, p. 236), the player may make an Intelligence roll. For each success, he may roll an additional die when making Computer rolls or any other Ability related to those tasks (including the uses of Cyberkinesis, **Aberrant**, p. 187).

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

Total Concentration

It's easy to get distracted, especially in the modern world of media saturation, with a hundred different things vying for attention all at once. Novas with this enhancement don't get distracted. Their minds are focused like lasers, allowing them to block out anything other than what they're dealing with.

System: When performing any action based on the Mental Attributes, the nova can ignore die pool or difficulty penalties for distractions, including injury modifiers and environmental conditions, equal to her dots in Mega-Intelligence. So a nova with Mega-Intelligence 3 can ignore up to 3 points of penalty (to dice pools or difficulty). When an Endurance or Resistance roll is required to maintain concentration, the nova's player can roll Intelligence. Successes on the roll apply as extra dice on the Endurance or Resistance roll.

This enhancement is always on and costs no quantum points to use.

New Mega-Intelligence Aberrations

Aberrations linked to Mega-Intelligence usually involve a change in the functioning of the brain, leading to a variety of mental disorders ranging from the innocuous (quirky behavior) to outright insanity. Physical mutations of the brain itself sometimes also result in an unusual appearance. The following aberrations tend to be found only in novas with at least one dot of Mega-Intelligence.

Common aberrations from Aberrant and the Aberrant Players Guide for Mega-Intelligent novas include Bipolar Disorder, Hormonal Imbalance (Lust or Rage), Megalomania, Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder, Paranoia, and Schizophrenia.

Low-Level Aberrations

• **Bald:** Some Mega-Intelligent novas (both men and women) quickly go completely bald, and this baldness resists all known medical and cosmetic treatments (although the nova can still wear a hairpiece or wig). This is the equivalent of the Hairless aberration (**Aberrant Players Guide**, p. 92).

• **No Sense of Humor:** A nova with this aberration loses the ability to comprehend humor of any kind. He's simply too analytical and literal minded, and even the most highbrow humor seems crude and artless. The nova doesn't appreciate the humor of others, taking most statements at their face value. Likewise he doesn't crack jokes himself or see the humor in any situation. The nova isn't emotionless (see the Cold aberration, below), but he tends to have little patience with what he sees as the failings of others and is prone to make sarcastic or inappropriate remarks.

Medium-Level Aberrations

• **Analytical:** The nova's intellect overrides even his basic and instinctual responses. She prefers to think a situation over - thoroughly - before she takes action. Because of the nova's reluctance to act in haste, her permanent Initiative score is reduced by 3. Furthermore, on an Initiative roll of 1, the nova will hold her action to go last in the turn, regardless of Initiative score, in order to get a better feel for the events happening around her. Analytical characters refuse to take action unless they feel they have a firm grasp of the situation, otherwise they prefer to gather information and develop plans, and they encourage others to do the same. The player can spend a Willpower point to allow the nova to act on impulse or without a proper plan of action for one scene, although the nova will likely analyze the results of her actions afterward for some time.

• **Big Head:** The nova's mega-powerful brain literally grows larger than a normal human brain, sometimes twice as large or more. The nova's cranium increases in size to give the brain enough room, resulting in the nova having a literal "swelled head". This aberration reduces the nova's Appearance by one dot, and tends to clearly mark him as a Mega-Intelligent "big brain".

• **Cold:** Some novas are so intellectual that they develop "past" so-called "primitive" human emotions. Novas with this aberration have no emotions; they're incapable of love, joy, fear, hate, jealousy, or any other significant human emotion. They can still "feel" intellectual states of being like satisfaction, like or dislike, and so forth, and they still know the difference between right and wrong, but they don't feel passionately about anything, positively or negatively. On the upside, the nova is immune to abilities like Natural Empath and powers like Empathic Manipulation; there are simply no emotions to detect or manipulate. The nova is also immune to any sort of social appeal to her emotions. On the other hand, the nova is not capable of relating to other people on an emotional level. The nova cannot have the Natural Empath enhancement of Mega-Wits.

High-Level Aberrations

• **Sociopathic:** The nova's intellect and emotions are completely detached from any moral sense of right and wrong, or any empathy for other beings. The nova only knows that what pleases him or makes him happy is "right" and what he find unpleasant is "wrong". So a sociopath thinks nothing of violating or even killing others for his own pleasure, or of conducting research or experiments others would consider unethical or immoral. So long as the sociopath is getting his kicks, the rest of the world doesn't matter. Of course, sociopaths aren't necessarily foolish. They can completely understand the consequences of their acts, and so take steps to ensure they're not caught committing crimes,

for example. They just don't care about the harm (physical, mental, or emotional) that their actions may inflict on others. Sociopaths aren't always deliberately cruel, but their inability to empathize with anyone usually causes them to be sooner or later. A sociopath can have the ability to pick up on others' feelings through Rapport or enhancements like Natural Empath, they just don't take others' feelings or welfare into account when choosing a course of action.

• **Transparent Skull:** In addition to losing all head hair (this aberration is always associated with the Bald aberration above), the flesh and bone of the nova's skull above the eyebrows becomes almost completely transparent, leaving the nova's brain visible. It is often accompanied by the Big Head aberration as well. The nova can conceal his transparent skull using conventional wigs or makeup. Otherwise it's likely to have a negative impact on his social life, except among those who really are attracted to him for his brain.

• **Vestigial Body:** With the nova's emphasis on the mental, the physical body begins to deteriorate. The nova's body becomes shrunken and gaunt, although retaining the nova's normal Physical Attributes. This aberration and Big Head (above) are a particularly common combination, leading to a mockery of the human form similar in many ways to images of "Grey" aliens: small, thin body with an enlarged head.

Mega-Wits: Quick-Thinkers

Think fast! That's what the quick-thinkers, the novas with Mega-Wits, do. They have a combination of fast thinking and rock-solid concentration that lets them handle the most difficult situations with ease and grace. They don't notice things as much as the watchers and they're not as smart as the brainiacs, but the novas with Mega-Wits are quicker on the uptake than anyone else, and they have more of an opportunity to act while their fellow masterminds are just thinking.

Rapier Wit

How many times have you thought of the perfect comeback or thing to say ten minutes (or more) after the moment has passed? It happens to the best of us, except for novas with Mega-Wits, of course. These quick-thinkers always seem to have the perfect comeback or response in every situation. In areas where most people get rattled or lose their nerve, the Mega-Witty are as cool as ice, and handle things with poise and confidence. Nothing seems to faze them and engaging one of them in a debate or argument is almost sure to earn you a few cutting remarks that may leave some serious scars.

Mega-Wits breaks down into two major abilities: thinking and reacting quickly and being able to remain calm and composed under pressure. Together they allow quick-thinkers to be the calm in a storm of activity until they suddenly leap into action, reacting at the speed of thought.

Novas with Mega-Wits think and react faster than other people. Those with the Enhanced Initiative enhancement react much faster. So long as it doesn't bog the game down and spoil everyone's fun, the player of a quick-thinker is perfectly justified in asking for a moment to consider his actions before he takes them, since doing so takes his character no time at all. In non-combat situations where it's a matter of who goes first, the Storyteller may want to ignore Initiative rolls and simply say the character with the highest Mega-Wits (followed by the highest Wits) acts first.

Amazing as their reaction time is, it's their preternatural calm and control that makes the Mega-Witty so impressive. Most people have their minds going in all sorts of directions at once. In any given situation they're thinking about what they'll do next, what's going to happen next, how things will come out, and all sorts of other minutia like their social lives and what they're going to have for lunch. The Mega-Witty are remarkably clear-minded, able to focus completely on whatever it is they are doing without being distracted. They have greater control over their emotions and their involuntary reactions. Things like shock and surprise are virtually non-existent for them or at the very last don't hamper them significantly.

This allows quick-thinkers to do things like pick up the subtle signs of other people's body language and inflections that show their emotions and whether or not they're telling the truth. They can then quickly synthesize all of that input and come up with someone's emotional state. Conversely, they can keep their own feelings from showing and they know when someone is trying to "read" them. Their tremendous calm and poise, combined with quick thinking, also gives the Mega-Witty the edge in any social encounter. They're rarely shaken by what anyone else has to say and can respond in kind quickly, making them masters of conversational thrust and parry.

Mega-Wits, Willpower, and Mega-Social Attributes

Mega-Wits have a particular impact on the use of Mega-Social Abilities (see the **Aberrant** rulebook and **Cult of Personality** for more on the Mega-Socials). As a general rule of thumb, characters roll Rapport (a Wits Ability) when they are attempting to pick up on the fact that they are being socially manipulated, or to discern someone's intent, such as when they are being "worked" with Subterfuge. Willpower is used to actually resist the effects of social manipulation. So it is possible that a weak-willed but Mega-Witty nova knows when other people are trying to manipulate her, but goes along with them anyway, while a strong-willed quick-thinker is better equipped to both notice and resist such efforts.

In cases where a Mega-Wit picks up on an attempt to influence him, the Storyteller may want to make the Will-

power roll to resist the attempt easier, since it's more transparent to the nova. Add the successes from the nova's Rapport roll to the Willpower roll, with a maximum bonus equal to the nova's Mega-Wits.

Roleplaying Mega-Wits

If you're playing a character with Mega-Wits it helps if you can think on your feet, but it's not essential. Events in play often happen faster or slower than they do in "game" time: an attack it takes the player a minute to describe and roll for happens in just a second, while a long trip or other scene may be glossed over with a brief description. You can take advantage of the elasticity of game-time to help portray your character's quick thinking.

Take the opportunity to consider your character's actions, without slowing down the game too much. Ideally, the Storyteller shouldn't pressure you or ask you to make too many snap decisions, since your character usually has time to weight the options before acting. You may want to talk things over with your Storyteller to set some ground rules for this, but realize that it's part of the Storyteller's job to keep the game moving.

Mega-Witty novas are at ease in almost any situation, and they have keen insight into the motivations and feelings of others. If you're playing a Mega-Social character, consider picking up a dot or two or Mega-Wits to compliment those abilities. If you're expecting to deal with Mega-Social characters, Mega-Wits can help there, too.

Unlike other masterminds, quick-thinkers tend to handle social situations well. They're not as likely to be overwhelmed as those with Mega-Perception or as socially awkward as those with Mega-Intelligence. The primarily limitation the Mega-Witty face in social situations is impatience. Sometimes the rest of the world seems so slow by their standards that it's difficult to wait for everyone else to catch up while they are racing along. It may be too tempting to resist making a clever remark here, a clever jibe there, thereby hurting someone's feelings. While Mega-Wits can allow novas to hold their own in any conversation, it can also earn them some enemies, if they're not careful what they say.

If you're playing a quick-thinker and you're at a loss for a response, you may want to ask your Storyteller or even your fellow players for something appropriate. This is a case when outside input should be encouraged. The Storyteller should be accommodating, particularly if you're dealing with baselines or novas with a lower Mega-Wits score than yours. If you're really concerned about having your character look witty, pick up the Razor Wit enhancement and start putting some of those "straight lines" to work for you. Of course, when dealing with characters with a higher Mega-Wits rating than your character's, you're on your own. Even the Mega-Witty get shown up once in a great while.

New Mega-Wits Enhancements
Foresight

Some novas with Mega-Wits are so fast in apprehending a situation that they seem almost precognitive, able to know what's going to happen before it happens. Such novas always seem prepared for every eventuality.

System: By spending a quantum point, the nova enhances her reactions for the turn, becoming hyper-aware of the actions of everyone and everything around her. The character's player then declares her actions after everyone else involved in the scene has declared their actions. In effect, the character knows what everyone else is going to do and may react accordingly. In the case of multiple characters with Foresight, they declare actions in reverse order of Initiative, with the lowest Initiative declaring first and the highest Initiative declaring last. Note that Foresight does not modify the character's Initiative, so it's possible for characters with higher Initiative scores to act before she has the opportunity to do so. Sometimes it's not a good thing to know what's coming next.

This enhancement costs a quantum point to activate it for a single turn.

Hypercognition

Novas with Mega-Wits are always thinking several steps ahead of everyone else. Those with Hypercognition are several steps ahead of them. They have the ability to make tremendous deductive leaps, synthesizing all of the information at their disposal and coming to conclusions more rapidly than any process of simple logic.

System: By spending a quantum point, the player can turn any extended action for the character into a simple action (**Aberrant**, p. 109), provided that the action primarily involves thought and information that is potentially available to the character (even if he is not consciously aware of it). For example, a nova with Hypercognition can solve a difficult puzzle of mystery simply by looking at the clues, navigate quickly through a maze, immediately overcome a trap, and so forth. The effects of Hypercognition are cumulative with other enhancements that speed up the nova's thought processes. For example, a nova with both Hypercognition and Mathematical Savant can perform calculations at truly blinding speed, coming up with answers to even complex problems instantly.

This enhancement costs a quantum point to activate it for a single task.

Mind Over Matter

Some novas prove that it's the mind that matters more than the flesh. Some of them have the ability to exert mental control over every aspect of their physiology, from heart rate and breathing to healing and immune response.

System: The nova has the ability to control normally involuntary bodily functions. Among other things, this allows the nova to slip into a trance state virtually indistinguishable from death without a comprehensive medical examination (roll Medicine at +2 difficulty to determine that the nova's not really dead). While in this trance state, the nova's biological functions are extremely slow: she requires only a tenth as much food, water, and air and poisons and diseases affect her at a tenth their normal speed. The nova can roll Wits + Subterfuge to resist the effects of the Lie Detector and Natural Empath enhancements, as well as polygraph machines and similar devices. The nova can ignore dice pool penalties for injury up to her Mega-Wits rating. Finally, the nova adds +1 multiple to her healing rates so long as she's conscious (cumulative with the multiple for Mega-Stamina).

This enhancement costs no quantum points to use.

Razor Wit

You're never at a loss for a quick comeback or clever comment. Your cutting remarks have a razor edge to them that can slash someone's confidence to the bone. Your Wits are an effective weapon, whether in battle or in the social arena.

System: When the player gets in a cutting remark and clever jab (in character), he may roll Wits. Successes increase the difficulty of the target's actions with relation to the subject of the remark for the rest of the scene or until the target succeeds in an action related to the remark, restoring his confidence. For example, if the nova derides a subject's combat skills, they suffer the difficulty increase until the subject successfully hits something. Likewise, a jibe directed at a subject's intellect affects Intelligence abilities. The Storyteller is the final arbitrator on what rolls are affected by a use of Razor Wit.

Additionally, you can give the Storyteller up to up to one "straight line" per dot you character has in Mega-Wits. These are things you want Storyteller characters to say or do that help set you up for a brilliant comeback (which you've had the opportunity to prepare in advance, of course). The Storyteller should make every effort to work these straight lines into the story, although he has the right to ask you to come up with others if they prove unsuitable. Straight lines also don't work on characters with Mega-Wits scores equal to or higher than your own, they're a little harder to set up than that.

The enhancement costs one quantum point to active per use.

Unfazeable

The Nova Age has produced some spectacular (and disturbing) sights, and new things seems to crop up every day. Even the most jaded people are continually surprised by something that new novas are capable of, but not you. A nova with this enhancement isn't fazed by anything and manages to keep his wits about him in any situation.

System: Whenever the player is called upon to make a Willpower roll for the nova to resist fear, intimidation, surprise, or similar effects, she may roll Wits and add her successes to her Willpower dice pool for the roll. When the nova needs to conceal surprise, fear, or another socially inappropriate emotion, roll Wits and add the successes to the nova's Wits + Subterfuge dice pool. When dealing socially with characters with fewer dots in Mega-Wits than her, the character's poise is unshakable, no matter what happens.

New Mega-Wits Aberrations

Novas with Mega-Wits live at a different pace from the rest of the world. Sometimes this causes them to go "out of synch" with people living at a normal mental speed. Mega-Wits aberrations tend to be associated with the speed of the nova's thought-processes or disruptions of the same. Physical mutations tend to be the rarest with Mega-Wits among all of the Mental Mega-Attributes, although some disorders do affects the nova's brain or nervous system. The following aberrations are most common for novas with at least one dot in Mega-Wits, but not exclusively limited to them.

Common aberrations from **Aberrant** and the **Aberrant Players Guide** for novas with Mega-Wits include Absent-Minded, Anima Banner, Bad Temper, Bipolar Disorder, Flashbacks, Fragile, Multiple Personality Disorder, Paranoia, and Seizures.

Low-Level Aberrations

• **Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):** Things happen fast when you have Mega-Wits, and you're often itching to be moving on to the next thing. Novas with this aberration have trouble focusing on a single task or subject for long periods of time. Their attention tends to drift and they latch on to other things that interest them, before losing interest and moving on to the next thing, and so forth. The player must make a Willpower roll (modified by the character's permanent Taint) in order to perform an extended action or otherwise focus on a task that takes longer than a minute or so. A point of temporary Willpower can grant an automatic success on the Willpower roll.

• **Impulsive:** Novas with this aberration prefer to act while others wait. They never delay their actions in combat (**Aberrant**, p. 239) or at any other time, for that matter. They have no patience for planning, waiting, or pondering when there are things they could be doing, and they tend to act on the first idea that comes to them. If that doesn't work, they

can always try something else. An impulsive character is not necessarily foolhardy, but does have to make a Willpower roll (difficulty modified by the character's permanent Taint) in order to exercise restraint or to wait patiently for something.

Medium-Level Aberrations

• **Mega-Bitch:** Sometimes people just make it so easy to take them down a few pegs, and it feels so good doing it. A nova with this aberration feels satisfaction and a sense of validation from embarrassing, humiliating, or otherwise humbling others. It usually takes the form of exceptionally cutting personal remarks and games of oneupsmanship and dominance, although in some cases it may escalate to physical contests or threats of violence. The player must make a Willpower roll (modified by the nova's permanent Taint) to avoid indulging in this behavior in inappropriate circumstances. Such individuals may gain a few sycophants or like-minded allies, but won't prove too popular with most people.

• **Mood Swings:** The moods of a nova with this aberration can vary wildly from one moment to the next and the nova's reaction to any given situation is somewhat unpredictable. The player is encouraged to roleplay that character's mood swings. As a general rule of thumb the Storyteller can call for a Willpower roll for the character when something new happens, on a failure, the character's mood shifts in the opposite direction (happy to sad or angry, for example). A point of temporary Willpower buys an automatic success on the Willpower roll, allowing the character to keep control of his mood swings for a time.

• **Nervous Tic:** The nova's nervous energy is built up so much that she twitches, fidgets, or otherwise moves about almost constantly. In addition to be inappropriate in many social settings, a nova's nervous tic may draw attention to her in situations where she is trying to avoid it, such as attempts at stealth or disguise. A distinctive nervous tic may also be a dead giveaway for a disguised nova.

High-Level Aberrations

• **On Edge:** Some novas don't adapt to having superhuman reflexes and reaction times as well as others. Their reflexes are so high that they jump at shadows and start at every unexpected sound. On Edge novas have to make a Willpower roll (modified by their permanent Taint) to avoid overreacting to surprises or sudden changes in their situation. On a failed roll, the nova adopts a "fight or flight" reaction, either lashing out or taking off as fast as possible, depending on the nature of the threat and the Storyteller's judgment. So if a nova arrives home and a bunch of friends leap out and yell "surprise!" she may teleport across the country before realizing there was no threat. Likewise a nova who sees a child jump out at him with a toy gun may not realize there's no threat before he's hit the kid with a fist capable of punching through steel plate. Storytellers should also exaggerate descriptions given to On Edge characters, telling them: "You arrive home and people suddenly leap out from behind the furniture!" or "A figure leaps from the alley and points a gun at you!" in the above two examples.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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