METAMORPHOSIS ALPHA NOTEBOOK

by W.G. Armintrout

Five or so years ago, I read a wonderfully vague advertisement in *Analog* magazine for some new game called *Metamorphosis Alpha* It piqued my curiosity though I hadn't the foggiest idea what a "role-playing" game was - and I mailed in my five dollars. I was certainly disappointed when it arrived in the mail, a flimsy booklet with gad-awful artwork that looked scarcely worth a dollar. Where were the board and pieces? Nevertheless, determined to recoup something of my investment, I set about to play my first game.

Two years later, when I left college and closed down the campaign, I was a dedicated gamer. Those days of game mastering in an on-campus dormitory were the wildest role-playing days I've yet seen. I also saw great changes. In the beginning I was the only one I knew who had ever heard of role-playing games. I frantically studied the poorly written rulebook to find out if I was doing things correctly. (What?! Players are supposed to travel in groups???) When I left I was only one of many, with *Dungeons and Dragons* going across the hall, *Empire of the Petal Throne* running downstairs, *Boot Hill* meeting biweekly in an ice cream shop, *Monsters! Monsters!* appearing sporadically, and as I went out the door with my suitcases I saw my first copy of *Traveller*.

If someday a raiding party of wolfoids puts me on the rack and demands my game-mastering secrets, these are the nuggets I would supply them with. I wish I could claim credit for all of them, but almost al of them come from prolific cross-fertilization. Thank you, old *Metamorphosis Alpha*, and gracias to my now-distant college buddies.

The Super Campaign

So what's *Metamorphosis Alpha?*

As far as I know, it was the first of the science fiction role-playing games, a creation of TSR. The idea was that some enormous starship, so huge that entire decks have been landscaped into looking like portions of Earth, ran into a weird radiation storm and got zapped. Most things promptly died, and the majority of the rest became mutated. Life goes on in a sort of medieval style and players go adventuring to discover lost relics such as surgical kits and disrupter rifles. Zap the bearoids!

It was a nice place to start. For one thing, the game was basically a wilderness adventure so "gilded hole" mentality was avoided. But the best part of all, although rather skimpily described in the rules, was what I call the Super Campaign. Each player had three goals - (1) survive, (2) grab lots of glory, and (3) save the starship.

Too bad the rules didn't tell the game master how to save the ship. I drew up a list of twenty or so items that needed doing. The easiest were simple exploration problems (find Engineering Section). Others were more like quests (obtain the long-lost Astrogator unit, last seen in cougaroid country). I threw in a few technological tasks too (spacewalk on the hull and repair the burned-out sensor housings). Each item was difficult, worthy of an entire campaign. To accomplish all twenty was a big, long-range objective (it had to be - if the ship was saved, the game was effectively over).

I found that the long-range goal - or Super Campaign, being composed of a series of campaigns - made a difference. Players didn't wander aimlessly from place to place bashing on the animals, but instead kept alert: Could this old rusted hatchway lead to a forgotten control center? Was this dented metal box perhaps some essential part of the ship's equipment?

And when that party of adventurers finally shambled into Auxiliary Control, by virtue of their captured pass-keys, and saw on the viewscreens for the first time in their lives the stars all about them ... well, they knew that they had accomplished something.

Nugget One - Any good gamemaster will provide an opportunity for something more than everyday one-or-two-session adventures. Come up with something lofty and difficult - but not overpowering.

The Vulnerable Man

If there was one thing I liked about *Metamorphosis Alpha* - well, I liked the IDEA, but actual practice was sometimes dislikeable - It was the mutant creation rules.

Players could be humans, mutated humans, or mutated animals. The mutants rolled for their characteristics like humans. But they also rolled to see how many mutations they received. They could then pick which mutations they wanted off a large list.

But that's not the good part. Depending on how many mutations they received, each mutant had to receive one or two unfavorable mutations. These were assigned randomly, ranging from such things as epilepsy and leukaemia to uncontrollable surplus arms and a lack of resistance to infection.

Most role-playing games concentrate on racking up super talents. That's nice, but what about the other side of the coin? Faults can be overcome, or come to grips with, and that can be entertainment too. I remember a very humble mutated cougar who could fight like nobody's business. Why was he humble? He had to be - he needed friends

to look out for him when he had his epileptic fits every eighth combat or so.

However, things do need to be balanced. Lack of resistance to infection (which can come from any combat wound, save perhaps a self-cauterizing laser graze) seemed to be too big a handicap to characters that had it. They spent all their time looking up doctors and stocking up on antidotes and seldom had much fun.

Nugget Two - Don't be afraid to try out a few "loser" characteristics in a player character. Gambling, fear of heights, greed, obesity, drunkenness - for my own characters, I try to make every third one an unlikely candidate for success. Ever tried a giant thief!

The Omnipotent Brain

When I started out with *Metamorphosis Alpha*, I went strictly by the book. The book said that the Main Computer of the starship was still alive, hated mutants, was in full control of a fleet of security robots, and would help any humans that requested it.

Initially, adventures tended to go something like this: party of humans find a computer terminal, request an escort of security robots and directions to the nearest cafeteria, and live happily ever after. Alternatively: mutants find a computer terminal, are spotted by the computer, and get ambushed by a posse of security robots (usually fatal - ever taken on a party of robots when all you have is a primitive crossbow?).

Something had to be done.

Of course, you could hide a laser rifle under every bush and a grenade in every ruined hut and maybe the mutants could survive . . . but I never cared for super charging a campaign.

My solution was to simply decree that the computer had lost its Locational Matrix, the part that told it where things were and how to get from hither to yon: (The Matrix was conveniently in the hands of ferocious mutated whales on the arctic deck). Security robots could not be told to ambush anyone they couldn't find. Computer terminals could not give coherent directions. However, the computer was still available as a game-mastering device: for instance, to ask humans to accomplish some of the tasks required by the Super Campaign.

Nugget Three - If anything is omnipotent - be it Grok, God of the Lizards to Giant Tonioli, Mafiosa kingpin - give it an Achilles heel. Maybe that evil King has a pretty daughter you can marry against his will?

Ups and Downs

"Damn the elevators!" I cried one day.

Another party of adventurers had just reached the elevators and were demanding to see every deck on the starship. And I hadn't gotten around to mapping all eighteen of them quite yet ...

In any science fiction adventure, elevators or things like elevators can give too much mobility to a party of adventurers. Magic portals can have the same effect in a fantasy game. The game master sighs in total exasperation: "I haven't got that mapped yet." Whereupon the players beat him with their rifle butts.

Here are three fairly decent "fixes" for this problem:

Ambushes. Being logical, you can make the assumption that any major means of transportation is going to attract powerful attentions the way a water hole attracts lions. Say, by Main Computer (a bevy of roaming security robots?) or maybe black market merchants and pirates. On the other hand, opening a door that opens on the Unknown can initiate something else. Door opens, and water gushes in from that flooded deck, or that long lingering radiation gives you a dandy dose, or bloodvines come snaking into the tiny room and the elevator doors won't close ...

Weird Controls. An elevator is a box with controls marked "1st floor," "2nd floor," etc., right? Not in my universe! Perhaps this one has a robot attendant waiting to take your requests, only he is sadly injured and not too reliable. Maybe this machine reads thought waves, or coded responses from the right kind of pass key. My favorite is simply to redefine the controls so that buttons do not indicate specific floors, but rather whether you want to go up two floors (+2) or down seven floors (-7). Push the same button, and you'll go somewhere else all day long. Now add a few more buttons for confusion - say, for movement from station to station within a floor, a la *Star Trek's* elevator-and the players will stay a bit confused for some time.

Disguise. The rulebook said something about the elevators being towering cylinders in the center of each deck. Unfortunately, that stands out a little bit in the medieval wilderness and makes too handy of a reference feature. One gamemaster I knew camouflaged everything with holographic plates - you couldn't find an elevator unless you stumbled into it. I just decreed that the elevator was housed in a one-story building. How did it go from deck to deck? Blame it on super science - maybe it runs beneath the deck to the wall and then goes up or down. Maybe it materializes. A game master can't know everything.

Nugget Four - Always add something a little unusual to what would otherwise be usual. Elevators have weird controls. Maybe automobiles have tillers

instead of steering wheels. What if guns have their grips at the firing end of the barrel?

Bye, Bye, Birdie!

When I was gamemastering, the most popular single class of characters was the mutated eagle - eagloid. Not that that means anything. I once ran a fantasy campaign by mail where the most popular character was a female goblin! But it is significant.

For the game master, flying characters can be a pain unless you are able to deal with it. After all, an eagle can map out an entire deck in no time at all. He can also fly away from danger rather often.

When looking for a solution, try to think logically: if this were a real world, what would place natural limitations on this too-powerful character?

First, a flying character cannot transport all that much loot. A few rings, a bag of gold coins, that antique chainsaw, - but not that great hunk of machinery, not your wounded friends, and maybe not even yourself if you are seriously wounded. Fliers need to team with ground-based characters. (And, if the gamemaster is lucky, maybe some of the other players will not take too kindly to a flier that takes off whenever the rest of them have to fight!)

Second, fliers have their own special dangers. Sure, they avoid a lot of ground encounters - so make up a table of aerial encounters! Fliers are always run into a pack of mating hawkoids, or unsuspectingly land in a tree armed with poison spikes, or draw the attention of evil lookouts at the hideout the adventurers are supposed to be sneaking up on. (Remember, if something is in the air it can not only see farther - IT CAN BE SEEN FARTHER ALSO.)

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Nugget Five - Most everything has its natural limitations. Sure, let magic carpets and flying rings into your campaign - just as soon as you can put together that new Air Encounter Table!

Looking for a Few Good Zulus . . .

I was reading the other day about a rash of new wargames by several companies about a battle called Rorke's Drift. The battle took place when a few

thousand enraged Zulus armed with spears took on a few dozen British armed with firearms. It was a close fight, I'm told.

Shoot, that's nothing! Science fiction has got that all beat! If I recall my *Star Trek* facts correctly, a Captain Tracy once held off a large army of the Yangs with phaser fire.

So what happens when that party of adventurers in a basically medieval world stumbles on a disrupter rifle? Do they rule the world? Maybe not.

First of all, any game master worth his salt will limit the available ammo. Yes, you've got a bazooka, Ongka the Barbarian - now try to find shells for the darned thing! In *Metamorphosis Alpha,* most weapons ran off power packs. The best solution was to hide power packs well, or put them in the hands of people who knew how to use them (non-player characters).

Next, don't be afraid to raise the stakes. Any character that saunters into town openly carrying a disrupter rifle is going to have more than pickpockets and tax collectors to worry about - he is going to attract some high-powered attention. And when that character uses his laser pistol to kill a lionoid in the wilderness ... well, perhaps a mountain tribe will be enraged by the sound of high-energy weapons in their turf.

Just a personal note here. A few years back, I had the opportunity to playtest Metagaming's experimental science fiction role-playing game. I didn't have too much fun. Repeater lasers, collapsium armor, atomic grenades - well, things can get a little TOO powerful. The fastest draw fires his Incredible Weapon at the enemies, and they sizzle into nothingness . . . For my tastes, one or two powerful weapons tucked into a more low-key background is just right.

Nugget Six - Big weapons, incredible artifacts, wish rings - they can all attract greedy and bothersome attention.
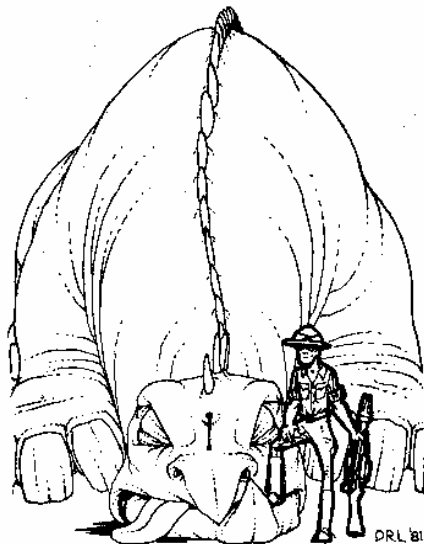
Ah, Dulcinea!

So on our characters go - defending orphans, protecting maidens and widows, befriending the helpless, serving the causes of truth and beauty, and reestabhshing justice. Long live knight-errantry!

Just one problem.

You see, I had a roommate who had the soundtrack from *Man of La Mancha* so I have been exposed to the legend of Don Quixote. I have heard all about the adventuring and the questing. But where are the Dulcineas - "half a prayer, half a song, thou hast always been with me though we have been oceans apart" -where are the romanticized women of chivalry?

I know that the thirteen-year-olds with acne will be snickering at me for the idea of adding "girls" to the campaign, but I assure you that I do not promote the profligate spreading of unadulterated mush on to the fantasy role-playing scene. If you want that, go play Dallas. But I do have a small point to make.

Actually, I have a brief story to tell. Once upon a time, when I was stocking up a mined city for the campaign, I added one enchained princess. My notes had one simple line: "Adventurers will fall in love with her; no saving roll." (That may not be the best game-mastering technique, but at the moment that is non sequitur). It so happened that a lone adventurer found her, rescued her, and they soon were married.

But they did not five happily ever after. He and she went adventuring, ran into some nasty rogues, and she got her poor head sliced off by a rapier.

That incident launched one of the most incredible - and spontaneous - quests that I have ever seen. He determined that he could not live without her, and set out to find a way to restore her to life. He plunged into the depths of the wilderness, he sought out every wise wizard and hirsute but mysterious hag, he tried everything.

Eventually he succeeded. (Who was I, a mere game master, to stand in the way of True Love?)

The point is that romance can add that Certain Touch to an adventure. The only problem is that, to my knowledge, there is no role-playing game that provides any sort of a system for this sort of thing. Roll 3 dice against IQ, Steve Jackson? (Perhaps I expose my ignorance. If anyone has heard of such a system for romance, please write an article about it so we can all benefit from this knowledge!) [SPI's John Carter of Mars. - SJ]

Nugget Seven - Lay a little loving on 'em! You may find that romance will help flesh out your two-dimensional characters and deepen your link to your
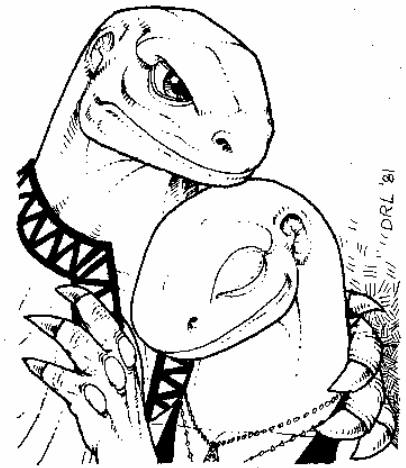
alter ego. "I have sought thee, sung thee, dreamed thee, Dulcinea!"

The Monster-of-the-Month Club

Last week a game master I know dropped by my place to borrow *Arduin Grimoire* and *Monsters! Monsters!.* Why? Well, he doesn't think *The Fantasy Trip* has a good enough selection of monsters.

In fact, monster cataloguing is becoming quite an industry.

One of the finer points of *Metamorphosis Alpha* was that it contained rules for generating your own monsters - say, if you want to scrounge up a Desert Deck or an Arctic Deck. When I was game-mastering we made this a community project - all of the players who wanted to got together and used the tables to generate the mutant lifeforms. The rules were not always realistic - how about giant teleporting penguins? - but the players would live with them and stomach the implausibility when they had had a hand in creating them.

There is no real reason why every roleplaying game shouldn't dedicate at least a paragraph or two to creating special monsters. It would come in handy.

One of the handicaps a lot of game masters have is a mistaken belief that new monsters must be built about some gimmick -acid breath, polymorph, or a tendency to melt when splashed by enchanted water. The result is often some silly, "cutes-cutesy" aberration.

A new monster needs no gimmick. It does need to have a basic personality type, and it should look like something. You can steal ideas freely from half a hundred books - I picked up useful concepts on gnomes, banshees, brownies, Harriers, ghosts, demons, religious hermits, witches, and griffons from *The Fellowship of the Talisman* by Clifford D. Simak. Not that the book is one that I would urge you all to rush out and read - it was all right, but not spectacular- but it makes good source material.

My favorite resource is a local hobby shop in my nearest city. Any shop

with a decent assortment of metal figures will send your imagination soaring! (On the other hand, it can be a horrible pain to try to find a figure for a monster you designed without seeing what figures were available - I have found nothing that approximates my favorite fantasy race, the Thellonicans, who look like giant erect otters).

Monsters have always been, at heart, a collection of appearance and personality. Twenty monsters can all have the exact same characteristics as an ogre, as long as the players believe in the differences in looks and mannerisms. Rather than coming up with a hundred-and-one monsters-with-a-gimmick, just flesh out a few regular monsters with real backgrounds. What do they want? What do they eat? Do they growl, snarl, mumble, snort?

Nugget Eight - When creating a monster, the object is to make the players believe in him. Letting them help out, using a painted metal figure, painting a capable word-picture as you game master - all of these are techniques that help.

A Help-Meet

I have heard some discussion on multiple game-mastering - that is, games that are run by two or more game masters. In some cases, one game master might run the monsters while the other game master moderates. Or perhaps each game master runs a different hunk of a world - say, one runs the land of the Saracens, another the Roman Empire, another the land of the Egyptians.

Well, it so happened that one semester when I was game-mastering *Metamorphosis Alpha* I was rooming with
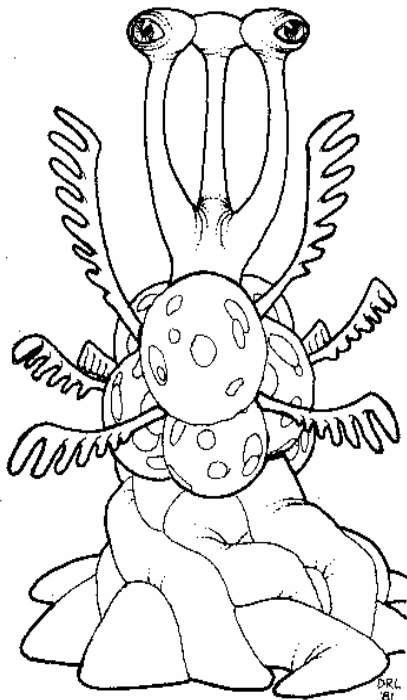
my best friend. He was into role-playing from being in my campaign the year before, but for this semester he was loaded down with heavy courses and couldn't afford to run a character on a weekly basis.

So he became my assistant game master - which gave him a lot of satisfaction, being promoted from serf to lord, so to speak, while it provided me with someone to try out my ideas on. Since he was too busy to game steadily, he took over the running of ten major non-player-characters scattered along the path of the adventurers.

He was the FIRST MATE, the neurotic last survivor of the original crew, and had a magnificent shoot-out with an inquisitive party of looting players. He bluffed them with his firepower (something that would never have occurred to me, since I usually ran the NPCs in the most obvious manner) and the players ran away.

He was TARLEENA, LADY OF THE FOREST, loaded down with a magical ability to sometimes make magic wishes. Eventually every player in the campaign stumbled into her hut, generally several at once, and tried to make bargains with her to pay for a wish. The players bargained more energetically with my roommate, who came into the game specially for the occasion, than they would have with me. Even though I may be terrific as a game master, players can still get tired of dealing with the same game master all the time. My roommate was a nice break.

He was also the DARK LORD OF THE RINGS, in search for the lost Captains' Rings which would unlock any door in the ship. When the first player made use of the funny ring he had found, I alerted my partner and the DARK LORD awoke! He made plans for his forces - a horde of mutant men armed with blaster muskets and a few flying lizardmen - and directed their operations. I moderated both for the players and for their nemesis the DARK LORD. The result was a fairer contest-each opponent working on the information he knew, and no more - and it saved me from going schizophrenic trying to both moderate and operate the enemies at large.

Nugget Nine - Don't be afraid to share the responsibility around. Gamemastering is fun, but it can be a real load sometimes unless you let a friend (or a girlfriend or a wife) do some of the thinking for you. Guests who come in just to play a special NPC can be a change of pace for your players, too.

Well, that is the sum and total of my recollected wisdom from my *Metamorphosis Alpha* days. However, one statement - these notes have been laced with my delight for *Metamorphosis Alpha.*

That delight is not untempered. The game originally came out in the Dark Ages of role-playing and is not up-to-date. The combat system is hopelessly vague, for instance. For another, there is almost a total lack of direction on how to actually start out your own starship - you are essentially up to your own there. As a game master in those pioneering days, I invented new systems or grafted nodes from other games into a lodge-podge that I used to moderate with. I cannot recommend that anyone rush out to buy the game today. Even TSR recognizes this fact - although they still sell *Metamorphosis Alpha* according to my latest catalogues, they also sell an improved game - *Gamma World*. However, I have never seen that one so I can't comment on it.

If I have said anything that you want to add to or cast abuse upon, please write a letter to the editor. Or, if you prefer, write to me:

W. G. Armintrout
8N 2W
Tootle, Utah 84074

If you write to me, that gives me the opportunity to comment on your letter before I pass it on to *The Space Gamer*. Otherwise, I won't see your comments on my material until it's in print and any reply I might have couldn't be printed for several more issues - by which time the original letter would have been forgotten.

If you don't want any comments from me, then go directly to the editor.