Cyberpunk and Gaming

Tod Foley, speaking at the "Year of the Steel Rat" Cyberpunk Conference, Dec 27 2020

I have had a great time listening to the last few hours of conversations and there's been so much touched on that I'm really glad was touched on -- political angles, evolutionary angles, societal and cultural angles. It means that despite the fact that I'd love to jam you full of all sorts of anarchist theory, I kind of don't *have to* because we've already covered a lot of that ground; my brothers and sisters out there have been pretty well represented, a broad spectrum of ideas has been represented and it allows me to just sort of... I'm going to try to not be too political. Although it's impossible to be *completely* apolitical when dealing with subjects like this, basically my career as it intersects with cyberpunk as a genre.

So I start off around 1988. I get a call from Pete Fenlon and Terry Amthor at Iron Crown. I've been working for Iron Crown for a couple years at this point. I wrote some stuff for *Space Master*, including the *Spacemaster Companion* which later fed into *Space Master* edition two. That was a very popular thing, and I wrote a bunch of modules for them. So I get this call one day and they want to know if I've read any cyberpunk. I'd read *Neuromancer,* but I was not actually aware that "cyber" was like, a word that was in general use. I needed a little bit of updating. They wanted me to go look at this game by R. Talsorian, this "Cyberpunk" game -- they actually sent me a free copy, but I refused to open it because I didn't want to look at another artist's work before I produced my take on the genre. So instead I started doing a hyper-realist kind of a thing. I started looking at books that were *nonfiction*, presenting realistic emerging technologies. People like Arthur C Clark and Isaac Asimov and Alvin Toffler and those kind of people -- futurists looking at what they expected the future to be -- and then I sort of wove that in with what I got out of Gibson and Sterling and the other cyberpunk authors.

What I produced of course was very very clunky because Iron Crown is perhaps... aside from maybe *Chivalry and Sorcery*, I think most people when you say the word "crunch", Iron Crown is very often the next thing that comes to mind. It's a very crunchy system, and yet I think the philosophy there is the reason I was drawn to their products and wrote the fan letter that got me hired by them in the first place: if you have a character sheet that's so complex, no matter what weird idea happens, no matter what the game master comes up with, there's a number *somewhere* on that page that'll tell us *exactly* how to adjudicate the situation, and that was the goal for having all that crunch. Now... that crunch will fade away in my design philosophy and in the industry as we move forward, but let's continue moving forward.

In early 1989, Iron Crown became the second roleplaying game company to produce a cyberpunk themed game. That was my own book *CyberSpace*. Can you see that? [screenshare] That was the original first edition cover that was made by Rick Veitch, the guy who did *Swamp Thing*. So that was pretty cool. They changed the cover out for the second edition, I'm not exactly sure why, but so that's 1989 and Mike Pondsmith beats me to it right and, isn't it interesting by the way that Mike Pondsmith is both bookends of this conversation? First in 1988 the first cyberpunk RPG to come out, and we're going to end this conversation with Mike Pondsmith's *Cyberpunk 2077* coming out to 2020.

In 1989 we had not yet had the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Well, today if you read the timeline that I laid out -- the obligatory timeline in the CyberSpace book-- I find that of the technological advances that I predicted, many of them actually happened *faster* than I thought they would. Many. Not all, but many. However the political stuff -- it all went completely off the rails less than one year later when the Berlin Wall fell. I had predicted the Cold War becoming a three-way kind of thing with China also involved, going on all the way into the next century. Well, of course the very next year everything political that I had said completely falls apart.

In 1989 *Hardwired* also comes out -- Walter John Williams. We see *Shadowrun* and a couple other lesser known cyberpunk games come out next, and at that point it seems like everyone has to release a cyberpunk game, and *Cyberpunk 2020* comes out because you know, Mike Pondsmith is not done owning this terrain yet. Then *GURPS Cyberpunk* comes out in 1990, which has already been mentioned. So there's Steve Jackson and Loyd Blankenship, the whole story about getting raided, I don't have to talk about that.

Okay, in 1992 Neil Stevenson writes *Snow Crash.* Here's the point where postmodernism in the real world catches up with cyberpunk in the fictional world. Cyberpunk as a genre becomes a parody of itself, and it's not that long from Neuromancer to Snow Crash. For a genre to go that quickly to a parody of itself says something about the rapidity of the media, and the speed at which we move through what we might now call "memetic" structures. The postmodern is catching up with itself, starting to eat its own tail. Everything is moving faster and faster. So cyberpunk becomes a parody of itself really quickly in the same year 1992.

By this time I've decided to take roleplaying into other avenues, trying to extend it, to see where I could go with roleplaying theory and roleplaying design. So I started working on what would later be called a LARP, although at the time we called it "HyperTheater." We didn't know the word "LARP" yet. I produced something called *Ghosts in the Machine,* that fused a sort of cyberpunk corporate dystopian world with a supernatural world, in which spirits from the other side could be contacted through cyberspace, and they were joining up with the downtrodden in the revolution against the elite powers that rule the world. So there I'm trying to stretch beyond the existing genre, and beyond the existing model of what a roleplaying game could be. Ghosts in the Machine was an eight-hour long experience that presented a fictional party taking place 50 years in the future. You were given a short Myers-Brigg evaluation on your way in, and this is how you got your character, two pieces of information, a little bit of play money, and then you were thrown into the game. Over two hundred people came through this little semi-scripted party over the course of eight hours, and then we ran it again the next day and it didn't work out exactly the same way -- which is good, because the whole point of an interactive presentation is that it can wind up differently. This is a semi-scripted roleplay involving a revolving live audience, in which you could take part in changing the end of the story, right, so there are a couple different tiers going on in it. There's a first tier where you could have minor encounters and maybe win some money, lose some money, pick up an interesting piece of information or an artifact. There's a second tier where there were short story lines. What we would today call "quests," sort of floating freely out there. Most of these were attached to one or another NPC played by actors. They too were semi-scripted: once in a while we'd do what today's video games call a "cutscene," a couple actors

would interface in a very loud way and drop a couple clues, and then people would start moving again. Basically at that point both cyberpunk as a genre and roleplaying as a medium had started to feel to me like a well-paced cage. I was trying to find ways to get out of both of them. I got out of cyberpunk by mixing it with my mystical spiritual ideas and pushing that genre into some other kind of hybrid genre.

I got out of the roleplaying industry and I started working first in theatre and then online, as soon as I saw that the Internet had developed enough complexity to program virtual interactive environments that were graphical. I jumped from BBSes to the Internet immediately. Even before the web I was building MUDs and interactive fiction branching narratives online, and this became my new medium. For the next ten years or so I would go on building virtual worlds and virtual spaces online. One of them I won a GII award for -- a Global Information Infrastructure award -- that was *The World of South Park*. I was hired by Comedy Central to use *The Palace* software to build what eventually became a 200-room virtual chat environment where you came in and you chose a head and a body and some pants and props -- yes you could play Mr. Hankey -- but most people assembled a human out of hundreds of props that myself and my team put together, and then you'd enter the world of South Park and again everything was semi-scripted. I had a staff; a staff of people running around in a cartoon world, involving people in plotlines just for the hell of it. We actually got *paid* to do this! That was something that could only happen in the 90s. As soon as the dotcom crash happened, suddenly no huge properties were willing to drop a couple hundred grand into exploring the possibilities of virtual worlds online with their IP. What do you know? It would be a long time before you saw that sort of thing happen again.

Now we zoom back in, then zoom forward again, because stuff is going on in the culture. We see the advance of neoliberalism from the 80s into the 90s, and a resurgence of direct action. We see activists on the ground. We see people identifying as anarchists and socialists, publicly and openly. We see the Battle of Seattle. We see socialist groups. We see eco-activists. This comes along with a newly dawning postmodern mindset, which is entering the culture both in our media and in our consciousness, and in our awareness that it's harder and harder to view politics or grand narratives seriously with an unsuspicious eye. We've entered the age of irony. If you look at our television commercials today, in which products mock themselves or fail to even identify themselves, we see that both in our media and in our mindset we've entered this age where nothing is certain. The Internet has come along, and that's about to make that even more so. You think about the Deep Fakes phenomenon and very soon you're talking about a cyberpunk dystopia. You're not only not going to be able to tell the difference between what's real and what's not, but even whether the person that you're looking at using your AR goggles or VR lenses or whatever is who they say they are, or saying what you're hearing. There's very little to prevent us from falling into just a complete, I want to say a Baudrillardian nightmare, but something I like about Baudrillard is he has sort of gleeful positivity, like there's something *fun* about the falcon not hearing the falconer, and everything's dissolving into a revolving chaos in which we can all be anything. It's kinda cool.

So all that's happening through this postmodern mindset, which comes mostly from French postmodern philosophy and has a lot of leftist tendency to it, so critical theory begins to creep into

public awareness and into the academy, which is where a lot of roleplaying game designers come from. I mean, that's where we first play when we're in college, and then we get out and think stupidly "I might be able to make a career out of this!" And what you see is that the theory becomes part of the academic conversation all the way up to today's left-leaning Indie Games, the "dirty hippie" games, and today's social justice movements. That's a continuous thread in the world of roleplaying. It would not be long before the rules and the players, and the gamemaster, and even the whole question of *what it is that we're doing when we play a roleplaying game* would come into question. The year's 1999 when *The Forge* is founded by Ed Healey and Ron Edwards, and this becomes a sort of a hotbed of indie game development: new ideas about games. *Sorcerer, My Life with Master, Dogs in the Vineyard, InSpectres*, and the biggie, 2010's *Apocalypse World* by D. Vicent Baker. These were games that started to break down the traditional structure of the GM, the players, and what exactly we were here to do, and start looking at things on different levels, where the player might prefer an actor stance, or a director or author stance, or where the role of the GM might be spread around the table. It could be done in round-robin fashion, or it could just be distributed as a set of general features that anyone can do at any time. So the whole hierarchical structure of games, like the hierarchical structure of our society, begins to come into question.

In 2012 The Forge shut down, but the Indie revolution had already occurred. You can't put the genie back in the bottle. And because the Indie revolution had infused game design theory with so much left-leaning politics again all the way up to the present day, the reaction -- which came from the OSR -- tended to lean to the right. Now, I find this bizarre because as an individualist anarchist, I kind of consider myself off that map completely. But it's funny and I've seen this many times -- maybe you have too -- any time you set up a large-scale roleplaying system of any kind, it could be a LARP, it could be a roleplaying game with like ten or more people in it. It probably even happens in group encounters sessions and things like this. Basically it really doesn't take long for any social group to *break into two parts*. They will choose an issue, and they will form two groups. They will bifurcate. Then *that* becomes the purpose of the society: to decide which of these two is "right." I know this sounds like I'm talking about Left versus Right politics but it really could be anything. It's just a tendency that social groups have once they reach a certain size. So the whole hierarchical structure comes into question, you start seeing things spread out, you start seeing a tendency toward democracy, and that's the whole idea of distributing the role of the GM, questioning whether or not the GM is an authority figure or some sort of facilitator, or another word. It comes straight out of the social justice movement.

There are some of us who don't fall into this division, this conflict. There are some of us who see the entire toolbox -- that is the "left side" of the narrativist structures and shared control, and the "right side" of the toolbox with the rigid hierarchical structure and GM control and you know, maybe even railroading. (Who knows? I think it can have its uses.) But yet that whole *spectrum* is really available to *any* designer, any time. It's there. There's no reason to limit yourself to one side of the toolbox or the other, and so we begin to see the first of what we now call "hybrid" games. This is a game that fuses some traditional structure with some narrativist twist or angle or change in the player's perspective, for instance from character stance or active stance to director stance or author stance.

In 2015 my first hybrid game was *DayTrippers* -- the first manifestation of what today is called the *CORE* system (the Creative Options Roleplaying Engine) -- and it intends to aim right down the middle, fusing the traditional structuralist approach with a hybridization of narrativist approaches, freeing up control so that both players and GMs contribute, and more "prompting" than "adjudicating" to determine details. So it sort of shares the simplicity of a traditional structure with the flexibility and on-the-spot collaborative creativity that narrativists enjoy, when you sit down on a table and nobody really knows what's going to happen.

DayTrippers is set one hundred years in the future, and there's this piece of technology that's been invented. It's... I don't want to get too much into it, but basically it allows you to slip into other dimensions and travel back again for up to twenty-four hours. These dimensions form a massive multiverse including multiple timelines, Earth's past, Earth's future, alternative dimensions, dream worlds, pocket realities, chaotic dimensions, you name it, it's out there. It's the multiversal interpretation of quantum mechanics, right? It's that personified, with a vehicle that allows you to travel to any one of these spots, map it, exploit it, and come back to Earth hopefully alive. I didn't really think too much about what the regular world was like, but I dropped in a bunch of sardonic hints because this is the age of irony, right? This is the Age of Suspicion. My view on the future is pretty sardonic, and absolutely anti-corporate. So my idea of the dark future where corporations rule everything is dimly appealing but it's also something I want to poke fun at, so the world of DayTrippers is a cyberpunk dystopia but it's full of irony, just dripping with irony. It's more Stephenson than Gibson, and painted with a very broad brush.

Around this time *The Sprawl* comes out from Ardens Ludere, and then *The Veil* comes out in 2016, by Fraser Simons. Both are based on the "Powered by the Apocalypse" engine. This engine had helped revolutionize everything back in the days of The Forge, and they pushed it into a cyberpunk orientation by adding some very new and very cool ideas. Around the time Fraser's writing The Veil, I'm asking myself "What really *is* the world of DayTrippers like?" Because it's fun, but now I'm actually running the game and my players, once in a while they want to do something that's not just slipping in another dimension and coming back. Who knows, maybe they want to explore the world a little bit. So what does that world look like? Can we ask that question realistically? Is it even a smart idea to ask that question realistically in a game that has its tongue so far in its cheek?

But I couldn't stop gnawing on that question, so I started doing a lot of research. What were the futurists saying *now*? Back in 1988 I had read everything that was available and had postulated a future based on that. So I started doing it again. But there's a lot more going on now, and it's all so fast, it all moves so fast, we have biotech and nanotech, we have, you know, 3G, 4G, 5G... We have the Internet as a phenomenon. We have social networks. We have quantum computers. And all of these things are going to converge in ways that quickly become too much for one man to get handle on, so I pulled together a team to help me build a world, calling the genre "Fractopian Fiction" for reasons I'll get to in a minute, and we called the setting "Ubiquicity." It's a city of ubiquitous computing. One feature of this world is that, at least in the most up-to-date zones -- that is to say the most wealthy zones -- everything is automated. Everything is assisted by AI, everyone's accompanied by a digital system who speaks to you, either in your head or in your glasses or through your PDAs... These AIs are

aware of you, they know you better than you know yourself, and can predict things you're going to want before you actually open your mouth and ask for them. This sort of "Mercutious Character" rides along with you like a sidekick. You need that because everyone's going to be living in a different world -- because you've got an augmented display, and the ability to choose the filters you wish, the games you wish, the menus you wish, and the types of information you're interested in. So the person standing next to you is no longer living in the same world. You're facing the same direction, but you're seeing very different things. This is a world that becomes fragmented not only in terms of vertically-stacked socio-economic layers but horizontally-divided columns of completely separate worlds, everyone's living atop each other or alongside each other, and the social terrain becomes fragmented, the world is fragmented. Everyone has their own sort of personal world.

Some of the features of this Fractopian world that we came up with... I'll give you the core assumptions: We don't destroy ourselves within one hundred years (because there'd be no point playing in that game, right? Someone already wrote that game.) Things become more and more privatized, we get corporate charters leading to something like corporate feudalism, with corporations usurping many of the roles once played by governments. And it happens willingly because the market moves faster than the government, the government runs out of money but the corporations haven't, and they persist in gaming the data which allows them to further exploit the control that they already have, and that improves a *lot*...

I'll just say Huxley's future seems much more likely to us than anything that would lead to a 1984 scenario. It's not government control that you really have to be afraid of anymore. I think Huxley's vision was much more right on: we will happily take the virtual worlds -- the soma -- you know, call it whatever you want to call it, but it's the "bread and circuses" of the digital terrain: the flashy advertisements, the virtual worlds, the ability to not see what you don't want to see and only interact with what you *want* to interact with. It's just so damn appealing and so damned convenient, you end up with a world that Balkanizes *almost all the way down to the individual level*.

So this is the world we're looking at: green technology, even nano engineering for those who can afford it, ubiquitous computing, the Internet of Things. So ubiquitous that you don't even *think* about anymore. Nobody says "Internet of Things." It's just whatever you're doing. There's not even a word for it. Just a foggy movement through augmented reality, virtual reality, AI, leading to robotics and artificial realities of all types, it's quite complex when you take all this stuff together. Any *one* of these technologies is going to change your world, your children's world, your grandchildren's world... but the way that they *converge* is going to cause ripple effects that are very very hard to foresee.

So after producing two books based in this world -- and I've been working now for three years on the GameMaster's sourcebook based on the same material -- I decided in this climactic and devastating year of 2020 to open up the *Fractopia Wiki*. This is actually the first public announcement, I guess I'll just paste the link, because I don't know what else to do. There you go.

FRACTOPIA WIKI:

https://fractopia.fandom.com/wiki/Fractopia_Wiki

Despite the fact that most of the material I'm working with here was designed for a particular world I called UbiquiCity (and I hope to produce a third book in 2021), it draws from a genre I'm deliberately trying to create: Fractopian Fiction, some sort of well-informed predictive hybrid. What I *don't* want to do is fall into the error that I did in '89 when I wrote CyberSpace; I don't want to make any ridiculous ideological political predictions. I want to as much as possible avoid that. So instead, I focus on social and technological issues without so much getting into the weeds about politics, and this means I take on a sense of "Capitalist Realism," okay? The Fractopian world is neither dystopian nor utopian; it has aspects of both. It's a lot like today's world writ large, and more fractionated, both horizontally and vertically.

"Capitalist Realism" (see Mark Fisher) is basically the extension of the idea that there is no alternative to Neoliberalism. Fractopia is what you get if you take what we have now and put a layer of augmented reality on top, and you put artificial intelligence driving the whole thing in back. Then you network all of these things together and release human society into this augmented, digitally driven, AI-manufactured world, but you keep capitalism, and you keep automation. You come up with some sort of UBI (universal basic income) -- just enough to ensure that the masses don't revolt and overthrow the upper classes. You end up with the Fractopian world.

So in closing I want to welcome you all to not only check out the wiki, but you can hit me with any questions, content, or comments that you have on Fractopian Fiction as a genre, because there are lots of ways you can springboard off Cyberpunk. We've talked about many of them in the last couple hours. The one that I'm proposing here attempts to be a scientifically conservative and non-ideological projection. If we put many minds together to try to predict the convergence and its effect on all of us... maybe then I'll finally know what the world of *DayTrippers* is like.

Thank you.