

MARSian

Welcome to issue 1, volume 1 of the MARSian, the first newsletter for semester 2 of 2008. In ancient times, MARS used to run a bimonthly newsletter, and in celebration of MARS's 20th year we decided to resurrect the idea. So, without further explanation, we present... The MARSian!

Word from the President

Welcome back everyone to a new semester with MARS.

It's been a tough year for us; losing the room and so many of our older members pushed us to the brink for a while. But we've pulled through and now we're back as strong as ever! This semester is shaping up to be a good one, with several games running, and various other activities planned...though no doubt there will be some spontaneous ones as well!

I want to thank all the current members for sticking by MARS, and all the new members for being willing to give us a go.

In closing, may I just say... Welcome to the insanity!

Naomi Butcher
El Prezidente

Up and Coming

This semester we are looking forward to at least three proposed campaigns. Owen is running D&D, Chris is running a game loosely based on Magician by Ramond E. Feist, John Tan (JT) has suggested running Serenity again (for the girls), as well as possibly Mechwarrior (for the guys). We'll hold out and see what happens to all of these!

There is, naturally, a big bash planned for MARS 20th. It will probably be in the first study break if we can get organised by then, or possibly the second if something goes wrong.



Braving the Dungeon:

Interview with JT, infamous GM of the Serenity campaign

Q: What are the core ingredients that make a good campaign?

A: Players and their sense of fun. The role of a GM is often inflated and should be seen as a facilitator or movie director in verbal re-enactment.

Q: How do you keep a plot going when your players seem to wander everywhere but the right direction?

A: A good GM allows players the illusion of free form while gently shepherding them towards the appropriate direction. And when the players reach the goal, they would feel like they had made their own decisions when in actuality it only appeared they were doing so.

Q: How do you keep players interested?

A: That's the key to the first session. Assuming that the GM is not familiar with any of the players, the GM needs to spend time finding out what motivates the players. A successful GM is one who finds the appropriate lever and constantly nudges it during the course of the campaign.

Q: You seemed rather forgiving and let 'someone' get away with a lot of things...although some players disagreed with you. How do you prevent players from squabbling?

A: [Laughter] Actually, he was rather hampered and I noticed that he was less outlandish towards the end of the season. The key to dealing with "stupid" or destructive players, is to allow them to head towards destruction, but always with an eye and a way towards redeeming the player. Remember, we only shoot those that we cannot redeem. Often when making decisions, I present my decisions in a transparent and logical manner. This should minimize the disagreements amongst players once they understand the rationale governing my actions.



Q: What do you think keeps players coming back every session?

A: Okay, here's what I try to achieve and what I think:

1. The story. I think I managed to craft an engaging story so that all the players feel like they are contributing to part of it. In essence, they "own" part of the story and the way it's shaped.
2. The way the session unfolds. I made the conscious decision not to release character sheets to players in order for them to feel less confined and less stats/character sheet focused. I want players to be their characters and not their character sheets.
3. Finally, the way I run Serenity is very different from my other games. I place a lot less emphasis on combat and offer much more alternatives to resolving situations than by force alone.

Q: Is it different running a campaign for the girls as opposed to the guys?

A: Oh yes. Very different.

Q: How do you manage each one?

A: The fundamental difference between female and male players is their motivations, and the key is to find out what their motivations are.

Q: What do you think is the most important thing for a new GM to remember?

A: Know your players. The session may appear to revolve around the GM, but a good GM will quickly realize that's not true and that the true stars of the campaign are the players. Know what they like and dislike, and you'll have a blast running a game for them.

FROM THE PAGES OF HISTORY

MARS: The Dawn Age

The origins of MARS began with the formation of the Murdoch Gaming Club in February 1988 during Orientation Week. Gathering the better part of my personal collection of role playing games (most of which ended up in the club library) I set up a stall during O-week and begin signing up members. To be perfectly honest it was a fairly slow start with only eight people initially joining. Nevertheless, the club was formed, a committee was elected and we began our initial activities which included a survey among the Perth gaming community but also a gaming tournament (for AD&D, RuneQuest and MERP) held in the Perth Town Hall.

Over the months the club grew and by the following year the club had a membership of forty people. It was at that the second AGM we decided to change the name of the club to the Murdoch Alternative Reality Society and to expand our interests to include genre fiction in any medium. Gaming remained our primary activity, but was no longer our exclusive activity - we were now able to legitimately able to organise group attendance at Swancon, arrange movie nights and so forth; all the things were come under that general umbrella term of "fandom". The decision was a very sound one; although my personal interest was heavily biased towards gaming (and still is), the value of broadening the scope of activity, especially given that there was no other clubs else catering for this need, brought immediate and continuing benefits.

There are some worthwhile lessons in 'club organising' that came out of all this. First of all, be tenacious; a club that simply keeps going will eventually be successful. Secondly, be organised; planning multiple events a long time in advance allows everyone to organise their own social calendar with ease. Thirdly, be diverse; differing people like different things and catering for all in proportion allows everyone to feel part of the organisation and that the organisations caters for them.

The "MARS Experience" during these times was certainly a most entertaining and interesting one and I believe that the club has contributed a great deal to the spirit of Murdoch University. We certainly fitted well within the founding educational objectives of the University (the "Murdoch ethos"), which emphasises multidisciplinary approaches to problems. In which other club but MARS could you find people from all schools of the campus rubbing shoulders and discussing the most outlandish possibilities, each drawing upon the knowledge and teaching of their own field. There was never a dull conversation when one was with MARS members - never! Expressive interest in the mythic, the fantastic, the futuristic is certainly the sort of visionary experience which is lasting on the psyche. Doing so with others strengthens and generates a culture of its own and especially when that can be carried out with persistence over two decades - and that is what MARS has provided.

All hail the red planet!

By Lev (a founding MARS member)

From the Gaming corner



The hype has come true and the emails are sent out. The lucky first 2000 people who purchased Command & Conquer 3's expansion pack "Kane's Wrath" and registered the enclosed key online are now playing the first version of the public beta of EA's Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3!

If you have played the previous iterations of this Real Time Strategy based in an alternative timeline where the cold war never ended, you will have come to expect crazy technologies, funny voice acting and in general a rather comical approach to a generally serious video game genre. Don't expect any less than that this time around as well! The graphics are rich and colourful, creating an almost cartoonish feel to the world, while still maintaining a high level of detail and interest like what we have seen in the previous game, C&C3: Tiberium Wars.

The controls and GUI layout are a combination of the best we have seen from the previous installments of all three C&C series. Yes the sidebar is back, this time with six tabs to separate the types of units and buildings. Individual unit behaviour can be set just like it can in C&C3. Also, support powers are introduced into the Red Alert universe, very akin to the system we saw for the first time in C&C Generals where the player earns "power points" which they spend on whichever powers they would like to gain.

Each faction builds in their own unique way, which has never been done before. The Allies are back with the standard method of building in the sidebar before dropping it into the world instantly. The Soviets can build their structures the same way they were built in C&C Generals where it is first placed in the world and then built up, leaving it vulnerable to attack. Meanwhile the new faction, Empire of the Rising Sun, have a brand new method all together. Your main MCV will produce little, moveable, controllable "cores" which can then unpack into the building pre-determined by you when you create the core. This allows you to do away with the old build radius completely and build anywhere on the map! However, the cores are vulnerable to attack and unpack slowly so keep a watch on them.

So far the beta is what you would expect from a beta... buggy, but nothing too serious to stop the fun! I can't say much more for now but my quick overall impression is this: Allies are underpowered and need a balance tweak, Soviets building placement is still in need of work and the Empire's units are difficult to control at first but can be very rewarding once you get a hold of their secondary abilities!



The game Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3 is coming out anywhere between late October this year and early February 2009 but no official date is set yet. If you have your copy of Kane's Wrath, keep a watch on your inbox as more beta keys are being activated soon!

By Aidan – gamer

From the text RP world

Currently on the MARS forum there are three major stories. First Dawn is a vampire story set in a post-apocalyptic world, with a basis in the anime Trinity Blood. The plot is a little wild at

times, but always looking for new players. Chronicles of Mereton was originally a generic fantasy, but has become an epic tale of Dream kings and Death angels all the way. From realm to realm and place to place, Chronicles is a strange story to be in and enjoy. In the third story Torus Versus, Firefly meets Battlestar Galactica. The human race is at war with...the human race. Let's just say that when all the smart people were chosen to be shipped off a dying Earth, those left behind were none too happy with it.

Aside from our lovely MARS forum there are several other text role plays you can find online run by the MARS crowd. There are several games on RPoL.net, including on I personally run called Masked

Intentions. It is a mystery horror style role play, where Vampires, Weres, Fairies and more all live in one dark gothic city and are faced with everything from a Lich to a strange library.

There is also Marauders Map for those that like Harry Potter. Don't groan my loves; this is Harry Potter like you have never known it. Our little Harry hasn't been born – his parents aren't even together yet! The Death Eaters we know are still in school, the beginnings of the Order are in the air, and plots abound.

For details on any of these simply check out the forum or enquire of Lady D or Zyrieen.

From the Bookshelf

The Fionavar Tapestry, by Guy Gavriel Kay

Set in multiple dimensions, with characters that are imperfect and faulty, this trilogy by masterful fantasy author Guy Gavriel Kay takes the darkness and brightness of the worlds, and distils them into three intense books. Beginning with The Summer Tree, five young adults are taken to the First World, Fionavar, as part of the celebrations around a High King's fiftieth year on the throne. It is readily apparent, however, that there is more to the invitation than meets the eye, and they are quickly embroiled in an ages-long struggle between the powers of the gods and the Weaver and the Big Bad: Rakoth Maugrim, the Unraveller.

Packed with magic and mystery, the Fionavar Tapestry weaves a tale of reinvented myths and old prophecies, the intense struggle for identity and the morality of war. It is a story that ennoble self-sacrifice, the suppression of the self for the good of all. And, past all that, it is a trilogy of books that call upon ordinary people to make extraordinary choices, often when to do nothing would be the easiest thing in the worlds.

Publications speaks: In producing this newsletter I get a chance to stick my nose in all kinds of places. Your facebook profile for one! Joking. I just wanted to finish this by thanking all those that tolerated my nosing and questions. I also want to remind people that now is the time for bringing out photos and things for the MARS year book.

Special thanks go to Naomi, John T, John S, Aidan, Charis and Lev, who all contributed or gave advice.
- Lady D.