



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

I Regret That I Had But Three Games To Play For This Column

By Bret Funk

In an attempt to explain the difference in quality between SF movies and SF video games, I embarked upon a grand quest, one that put me at great personal risk (To my wife: I apologize for spending so much time playing video games!) and tested my will to its limits (I swore I'd never watch *The Phantom Menace* again!). I wanted to compare similar products released to each medium and see if there were distinct attributes that made one more entertaining than the other. To that end, I decided to return to the Star Wars universe and compare its three most recent video games, *Republic Commando*, *Knights of the Old Republic II* and *Battlefront II* to the three most recent films.

I began with *Republic Commando*, a squad-based first person game in which the player controls an elite unit of Clone Troopers at a nebulous time near the start of the Clone Wars (just after the end of *Attack of the Clones*). This game is interesting mostly because of its complete and utter lack of Jedi. Who'd want to play a Star Wars game without Jedi?

Me. *Republic Commando* was fast paced, interesting, and fun. You play 38, leader of Delta Squad, and it's your duty to command the other three members of your squad on a number of covert missions behind enemy lines. Instead of being mindless drones, your teammates—07, 40, and 62—have distinct personalities, and the conversations between squad members were almost as enjoyable as the game itself. Not only that, but by game's end I felt emotionally invested in the characters, and the surprise twist made me angry at the Republic Officer ordering me around. An emotional reaction is

more than I can credit the prequel movies for providing me with (unless disgust and boredom count).

Following the conclusion of *Republic Commando*, I moved on to *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*. Before continuing, I should admit to a little bias on behalf of this game. I had already played and enjoyed its predecessor and had been looking forward to its release for quite some time. KOTOR II is a role playing game, with stats and dice-rolls (all cleverly concealed beneath a beautiful 3-D graphics engine), and not my ability to aim determining the outcomes.

KOTOR II takes place millennia before the events in the Star Wars movies, but many of the locations and species are familiar. And you get to play a Jedi. Even better, you have a team of NPCs who can accompany you (only two at a time), and each character has a unique history and personality. Manipulate the character wisely, and they become more likely to do what you want them to (and are more attuned to your personal philosophy); rub them the wrong way and they don't go out of their way to help you out of a jam. Even better, the NPCs interact with each other in an engaging and often humorous way, much like the teasing banter of Luke, Leia, and Han.

This game wasn't quite as alluring as its prequel, but some of the original's appeal was the uniqueness of the gameplay, which could not be replicated in a game specifically designed to be the same. It was still much better than *The Phantom Menace*.

My final foray into the world of Star Wars gaming is an ongoing love affair with *Battlefront II*, a first-person multiplayer shooter with the added benefit of being able to (occasionally) play Jedi characters, most of them prominent from the movies. This game is the most intriguing to me because it takes place during the time of the six movies, and utilizes the same characters as in the movies, yet I find it entertaining and exciting, something that can not be said for the Episodes I, II, and III. At the same time, I recognize that of all three games, this one is least like a movie. The only 'characters' are the mindless drones fighting me (or alongside me) or the droves

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RPG Corner v4.8 - Calling It Quits

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Within the RPG community, there is a stereotype that assumes the best games are the ones that keep going and going and going. These games never really end, they just get put down for a time, and they create deep, rich histories and engaging characters that maintain complex relationships born of years of friendship or animosity. I call that shenanigans. While I will not argue that there are advantages to games that take a few years to unfold, the idea of a game that never ends is about as appealing to me as Raisin Bran with two scoops of Siafu. Games *should* end. Just like movies, books and TV shows (that don't suck), there should always be a direction that the plots and characters are moving in, and a goal or set of conditions to be achieved. Without it you just get games that rely on monsters of the week, and problems that seem cyclical because they exist within the same setting with the same precedents. Games like this either get stale and boring, or as the GM attempts to keep injecting life into the game there are a series of escalations that will drive the game beyond the players' abilities to suspend their disbelief. While both of the outcomes can end the game, neither does so in a particularly satisfying way.

For GMs who did not have a specific ending in mind when they set out creating their games, recognizing when to end the game is an important skill to learn. By recognizing the signs early, you can avoid needlessly drawing out a game that isn't fulfilling its purpose of entertaining. The most obvious indicators of an ailing game needing to be put down is boredom; the flagging interest on the part of the GM or a majority of the Players. If there is no drive to play, it doesn't make sense to use the game to bring everyone together and hang out. What if there is a Player who is still interested in playing, who attends the sessions to game, and only ends up frustrated as the games devolve into plain old social time. Just call the game done and then hang out, leaving Players and the GM free to do other things if they choose to.

Other reasons to wrap up an RPG are outside influences causing a disruption of the game (the GM moving away), internal conflicts (Players/GM no longer getting along), and just about anything else that intrudes upon or discombobulates the chemistry of the group.

Once the GM realizes that the game has slid beyond his capacity (or desire) to recall, he should turn his attention to handling the last few sessions. Of course, the GM can simply announce that the game is over, and leave all of the outstanding mysteries and conflicts

unresolved. If the Player apathy has gotten to the point where this seems like a good idea to the GM, they probably won't care. However as a warning, if the Players are still interested enough to pay attention, and it is the GM who desires the end of the game, he had better not do this or he could find himself in some uncomfortable circumstances.

Assuming that the GM has the time and the energy, he should begin to evaluate exactly what kind of ending the PCs would want and appreciate. It is important to note here that if the conclusion of the game hasn't been discussed with the Players as a group, it must be done early on in the shutdown process. Players must prepare themselves and their characters for the end of the game, and surprising them the day of with the announcement that they won't be playing anymore is mean and will guarantee one or two rude gestures or perhaps some colorful language tossed in the GM's direction. Players need to get rid of lingering experience and make sure they tie off loose ends from their end as well.

Naturally the ending chosen should be governed by the type of game that has been run. Players used to deep meaningful mysteries won't be happy with a prolonged slugfest with some big baddie, while Players accustomed to action and combat will not particularly enjoy a sappy string of goodbyes and wish-you-wells. Common sense will aid the designer greatly in this effort. Once the type of ending is settled on, the GM needs to work the march toward the end in slowly at first. It may be funny, but having the characters go to sleep one night and wake up in the middle of Armageddon the next morning just isn't cool. Introduce things gradually (as much as you can without dragging things on too long) and work into the final moments.

The last session, assuming it is being played as such, should be memorable not as the last time the game was played, but as a great conclusion. Pull out all the stops, revisit characters who were important to earlier stories, and cater to the Players a bit more than you might have before. If there is a chance of going back to the setting, don't burn any bridges that you can't rebuild easily, but if the group is done with a setting and game, don't be afraid to pull the curtains down as you leave. The GM should try his best to leave the Players with as positive an experience as possible when running a climax story, as this will be the final memory the Players have for that game.

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Animator and artist, Anthony Mark Viverito's website is: www.pharoahdesign.com. I asked, why pharaoh? "I'm a big fan of movies and King Kong, and an artist named Mario Laganaga. Years ago I found a website that had photos of eight paintings he'd done of the seven wonders of the world. One of them was the Lighthouse in Alexandria, Egypt called Pharaoh's Lighthouse. I liked the name, it had this mystique to it."

Since I was asking about names, I also had to clear up a name discrepancy. Sometimes I would find him listed as Anthony Marks, other times with all three names. He told me that in Puerto Rico and many Latin countries, both last names of the parents are used. "When I'm working on a movie and they are listing the credits, I like to have both last names out of respect for my parents, my family and myself. My father has passed, so it makes it important to honor him, to keep his legacy alive.

With that cleared up, we went on to what he planned on doing after his vacation. Now that he has returned, I learned he'd been working on short pieces and other projects for commercials. The reality is that many of the animators who did not move on to projects like *The Matrix* movies, *Star Wars* saga, *War of the Worlds*, *King Kong*, or other movies had a challenging time being independent and making a living doing what they enjoy most. There are, sadly, only a handful of movie/animation houses that hire, if an animator wanted to continue working for someone else. It is also a "who you know", "good ole boy" hiring mentality, with a loyal following. Though if you don't have talent, don't bother. Few animators of the hundreds who worked on the major motion pictures in the last three years went on to be independent and could make a living at computer graphics and animation. For many, it was back to hobby status.

For Anthony, it *could* have been a repeat performance of what the original animators using Stop Motion experienced—no market for that effect, so no job. Not because he was a poor animator, but because the industry moves and develops new techniques at a similar rate as the technology used to create it does. There are fewer jobs to bid on and an enormous pool of animators, so competition is, well, competitive. When I spoke with Anthony about this, the emotion was obvious as he grieved for the Harryhausens-of-the-animation world who could not get hired because new techniques had been invented, and the original special effects inventors were unwanted—like unused dailies on the cutting room floor.

Fortunately for Anthony, he's been able to continue his passion, but there is a price. Though he worked in graphic arts, he still had to find a job—currently, it's in an unrelated field. But he's a tenacious man. He will continue in animation and graphic arts using all the techniques he was formally trained with, in addition to learning and developing groundbreaking special effects that viewers appreciate, and demand. Science fiction without special effects? No way. But from now on, I never look at a movie or picture the same, wondering how they developed this or that effect. Is it real, or is it photo-real/HyperReal? Did they use lasagna? And just how big is that miniature, really? Thank you, for opening my eyes, Anthony Marks Viverito!

Some S/FX terms and techniques:

Element: One piece of film that can later be combined with others to form a composite.

Rendering: Also known as CG, (Computer Graphics) or CGI (Computer Generated Images). This combines the elements, miniatures, individual cels, film footage, mattes, and applications like paint and texturing to create the finished image.

Matte: One of the basic effects. Originally, these were often plates of glass with foreground (or background) scenery painted onto it, allowing the clear places in the glass to show action in the background. The original *King Kong* movie used this extensively to show the actors running through the jungle.

Stop-Motion: A miniature is shot one frame at a time. Between each picture, the object is moved in minute ways (an arm moves, the position on the set moves). By projecting these in succession, animation occurs. *King Kong* was animated using Stop-Motion using 24 frames a second. A one-minute segment had hundreds of tiny moves—per animal or object. You do the math.

Lightning: This old-school effect is also done frame by frame. It is hand drawn/placed in the scene by the animator. Sometimes filters or elements are used to manipulate the craggy look of the lightning bolt, thickness, color, etc.

Hard Roto-ing: The is a frame by frame drawing that creates 3D effects.

The Writer's Block: Writing With Purpose

by Charles Gramlich

Why does anyone want—or feel like they need—to learn how to write? And for this question it doesn't matter whether we're talking about fiction, nonfiction or both. What do people hope to accomplish by the solitary and, frankly, somewhat odd behavior of writing?

Do they want to amuse their friends with their quick wit, or perhaps amaze them with their erudition? Or do people think that good writing will help them get better grades in school or earn more money in their jobs? Could it be that some would-be writers want to get famous, maybe go on a national book tour where they sign autographs for fanatical legions of admirers and have talk show hosts like Oprah clamoring for their attention? Maybe some folks just want to get rich and conclude that if Stephen King can do it then so can they.

Although some of these possibilities are more likely to occur than others, all of them are perfectly legitimate reasons for writing. In fact, there are no illegitimate reasons to write. Each writer has his or her own inner purpose, and his or her own unique way of putting information down on the page. Ernest Hemingway often wrote standing up (Lynn, 1987). Truman Capote and Mark Twain preferred lying down to write, while Edgar Allan Poe liked to have his cat on his shoulder while he created (Fryxell, 2001). I prefer the more standard "sit at my desk and stare at the computer screen until words begin to appear," but anyone who writes will find their own way, of course.

Given the *many* legitimate reasons for writing, and the many ways of going about it, is there any point in trying to identify a primary or *best* reason to write? I believe there is. I believe that we can, in fact, start by eliminating all but one reason for writing, and that is writing to communicate information. This doesn't mean that other reasons are wrong or bad. It means that they are secondary to the need to transmit ideas, which is really basic to *all* writing. No one gets rich or famous from writing unless they can convey something interesting to a large number of people. No one amuses anyone unless the person being amused "gets" the joke.

Some people just like the act of writing, the simple behavior of putting words down on a page and then changing them around. They care more about the process than they do about seeing a grade on the finished product or seeing it in print. And even though I don't completely follow that model with my own

writing, I honestly believe that it's the best attitude to have. It certainly helps insulate a writer against the inevitable criticisms and rejections.

But for those who need a publishable (or gradable) written product and cannot just enjoy the writing process, the first thing they need to learn is how to clearly communicate information and ideas. Of course, whole books have been written about that subject (see Strunk & White, 1979, and Zinsser, 2001). I'm not going to cover all that territory in this column, which is almost at its end already.

What I will say is this: to communicate effectively, whether in fiction or nonfiction, the writer has to think like a...*reader*. The writer's primary purpose is to make the reader's work as easy as possible. At every point, with every sentence and every paragraph, writers must ask themselves: "What is my reader hearing from me?" "Am I saying exactly what I think I'm saying, exactly what I intend to say?" And unless the writer achieves this (or at least a close approximation) then no other purpose for writing will *ever* be achieved.

Being able to write well translates into good grades in school and good money in jobs. Good writers get better entry level positions, more ready acceptance into graduate and professional schools, and more rapid promotions. Good writers sell stories and novels, and they hear from people who have connected with their work and enjoyed it. Good writing pays off. But that payoff only comes to those whose ultimate purpose is clarity.

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KeyCOMmentary: The Chronicles of Ignorance (Part I)

by garrie keyman

A Personal Revelation on the Difference Between what Alters and what Falters in Fantasy

Originally, I approached this month's column with the intention of pitting two giants of fantasy against one another in a sort of Super Bowl of Speculative Fiction extravaganza. I meant to examine the screen versions of these highly regarded fantasy fiction superstars – *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Lord of the Rings* – from what I suspect is a fairly unique position for any writer who is herself an aspiring fantasy novelist: sheer ignorance.

That's right. I have read neither Tolkein nor Lewis. A daring confession, perhaps, but one guaranteed, I thought, to lend freshness to my point of view. Whether or not the screen versions actually followed the novels or not, I wouldn't be able to say, but then neither would either movie's effect on me be warped by any pre-existing bias.

I prepared for the kick-off by going to see the the victorious *Narnia* a second time, then by borrowing *Rings* from my sister to see it for what would be a (painful) third go-round. In the final analysis I can assure you this: whoever coined the phrase, *The Third Time's the Charm*, hasn't had to sit through *Lord of the Rings* more than once. For both shows I was in the company of my plain-spoken thirteen year old son, a rampant *Star Wars* fan who, like me, enjoys older sci-fi television shows such as classic *Star Trek*, *Quantum Leap*, *Time Tunnel*, *Sea Quest* and *Lost in Space* (thank goodness for the miracle of DVDs so we can ween our kids on the same shows we grew up on instead of the great gobs of garbage they air today, eh?).

Like me, Cooper has read neither Tolkein nor Lewis. His comparative analysis went like this: "Well, I liked *Narnia* better in as far as I could actually understand what was going on, and I liked *Lord of the Rings* better – even though I didn't know what was happening -- in as far as there was more fighting."

All right. He's thirteen. He's a boy. Wha'd'ya want? Time to cut to some background commentary by the senior announcer.

For me, fantasy -- good fantasy -- has always been transformative: a heady medium, able to uplift the spirit while engendering whole new manners of thought that at once deepen introspection while broadening perspective. Think of truly enriching fantasy,

then, as *Vitamin F*, the essential nutritional component vital for the proper development and maintenance of the imagination.

As a child, I was dosed on *Vitamin F* first through some of my earliest (and favorite) reading material (*Peter Pan*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*) and soon after on TV; the Sixties were, after all, the proving ground of fantasy legends like Irwin Allen and Gene Roddenberry.

But I soon learned that not all fantasy is good by my definition of the term. Some fantasy is written with no higher purpose than to shock, to be the first to tread some new ground no matter how appalling (think Stephen King); that, I suppose, and to line the author's pockets with green -- and I'm not talkin' *slime*, here, either. You may argue that I'm straying into an entirely different genre: *horror*, of which I am, admittedly, no fan; but there are epic fantasies that stray it such territory of their own accord.

Needless to say, then, any foray into speculative fiction that blurs the lines between horror and fantasy will already be at a disadvantage for winning my favor. Thusly, I am sure, did *Narnia* score its first touchdown of the game: there were no beastly, drooling creatures, almost too unbearable to gaze upon, sloshing out of mire and darkness. In short, *Narnia* was prevailingly bright. To be sure, there was evil; it simply wasn't sterytyped from a page out of Dante's *Inferno*. *Narnia's* variety of evil was more akin to that of the world as we know it: not instatly recognizable for what it is; deceptively attractive; trecherous.

But more than this -- a simple division along the lines of what I'll call a largely mumbled, monster-infested, sword-wielding testosterone-fueled film versus an well-crafted estrogen-infused flick full of breathtaking beauty and dynamic emotional power -- divided *Narnia* from *Rings*; but *what* more? I spent hours wracking my brain in search of the secret ingredient, for the molecular structure of *Vitamin F*.

I am happy to report that earlier today, while taking a snowy Winter's walk, I happened upon the answer. Now all I need to do is come up with a name for it. What shall I dub it? Let's see. I know. I'll call it... *linkage*. *Narnia* had linkage. *Rings* did not.

For a a truly fascinating explanation of just what the *%^# \$ linkage* is supposed to mean, be sure to tune in next month -- same Bat time, same Bat website -- for the exciting conclusion to...(insert wavering, dramatic tone of voice)...keyman's *Chronicles of Ignorance*.

Reviews

Crown of Stars

Kate Elliot

Daw, Feb 2006

\$25.50, Hardcover, 540 pgs.

ISBN 075640326X

Review by Harriet Klausner

When the Aoi crash landed on their return to Earth after centuries in the aether, the collision caused a cataclysm that led to earthquakes, flooding and the disappearance of the sun. The people can't plant crops because frost lingers, and food is in short supply. New lands and alliances are formed, and King Sanglant of Wendor is trying to bring his people together to ride out the after effects of the collision. When he consolidates his reign, he wants to annex Varree, as it once belonged to the empire.

Sanglant knows that he will not have an easy rule since many want what he has, and the church refuses to recognize his marriage to the excommunicated Liaeth, a fire daimon who is not quite human but a woman he will not forsake. Relatives in his family who rule in their own realms want to conquer Sanglant's land and annex them into the Lady Sabella's dominion. The Ashioi, who are finally reunited with their exiled brethren, plan to invade the human lands in revenge for what was done to them. Fighting battles against their enemies, Liaeth must prove she is a worthy consort for her one true love, while Sanglant tries to hold his country together.

In a land where the creatures of myth and legend are very real, humans must learn to understand and, if necessary, fight those who want nothing less than all humans dead. Political intrigue and battles abound in *Crown of Stars*, but the love that Sanglant feels for his wife is the shiniest light in the heavens and gives him the strength to do what he thinks is right. Liaeth is a woman of incredible strength, power and beauty who battles deadly magical creatures, befriends people who reject her and learns that her strength and love for Sanglant makes her a formidable foe to his enemies. Kate Elliot concludes her series with a powerful and brilliant epic fantasy.

Sebastian

Anne Bishop

Roc, Feb 2006

\$23.95, Hardcover, 448 pgs.

ISBN 0451460731

Review by Harriet Klausner

In a distant past, beyond the handed-down memories of humanity, the Eater of the World devastated Ephemera. To stop this global assault, a desperate plan was developed by the most powerful magic practitioners, the Guides of the Heart. The planet was split into numerous lands connected by strange magical bridges, while the Eater of the World was "imprisoned" without a land base. Over time the pandemic attack by the Eater of the World became part of mythology, though the Landscapers know of his presence and continue to insure his isolation.

At the Landscaper's School, angry at the world student Nigelle enters a forbidden zone that everyone fears. Her action is the prelude of what the Landscapers hoped would never happen under their watch: the first opening of the prison that restrains the Eater of the World.

At the same time, Sebastian the Succubus is bored of sexual fantasies, a bad condition for a sexually charged being. His only pleasure comes from his nocturnal visits to Lynnea the maid, who dreams of love. Though he wants to pursue her even in daylight he fears his kind only destroys her kind. Meanwhile a Landscaper and a Bridge enlist his help on a quest to prevent the Eater of the World from returning.

This terrific romantic fantasy rolls out on two delightfully interrelated subplots: save the world segue and a star-crossed love story. The story line is fast-paced once the quest begins, but takes a wonderfully original twist involving Lynnea. The title character is an intriguing protagonist who at almost thirty is bored with sex games, which is the essence of a succubus. Fans will treasure Sebastian's duel sagas.

Reviews

Lady of Mazes

Karl Schroeder

Tor, 2005

\$24.95, Hardcover, 286pgs

ISBN 0-765-31219-0

Review by D. L. Parker

Some stories stride briskly forward on the legs of well-crafted plots. Others show us fascinating faces; these are the stories that live by great characterizations. Others shine by the glow of their *ideas*. The latter kind of story has a long and honorable history in science fiction. George Orwell wrote *idea* stories. Aldous Huxley wrote *idea* stories. Philip K. Dick did, too. Some of these ideas transcend the thin covers of their books and step into, or even change, popular culture. Others don't make the grade. There's nothing more passé than an idea whose time has come and gone, or which maybe never came in the first place.

Karl Schroeder is an *idea* man. The jacket of the book describes him as a hard-sci-fi writer, but that's not really true. The science in his story "Lady of Mazes" is, as the good doctor was famously quoted, indistinguishable from magic; it's there, and it does stuff, and consider it magic, because the *how* of it doesn't really matter. Schroeder's story is more focused on the social choices humans make. In a way, that's what a good writer *should* focus on: how technology, social engineering, and our own moral choices affect *us*. Otherwise, what we'd be looking for is a physics manual, and not many of us want to volunteer for that.

Schroeder's humans live somewhere off in the blue beyond. Where and how doesn't really matter, except that you should know it's an enormous artificial environment, and extraterrestrials called the "anecliptics" maintain and manage its myriad human-inhabited realms. Imagine a huge continent (called Tevan), spotted with its own artificially separated kingdoms, which Schroeder calls "manifolds". Right next to the pretty manifold of Westerhaven, with its fancily dressed and sword-bedecked inhabitants, is the forested realm of the Raven, where bare-chested warriors live in a sort of pure noble savage heaven. Beyond the horizon is Oceanus, whose inhabitants never come to land. There's more: realms that look like cartoon landscapes and every variation one can think on, shaped and constrained only by the desires of their inhabitants. Yet strangely enough, all these wildly diverse environments share much the same physical space.

It's all *inscape*, a sort of virtual reality, that lets Raven's noble savages wander through the deep woods while Westerhaven's courtiers duel and joust on the mowed lawn nearby. *Tech locks* provide the other key. It's Schroeder's idea that *technologies determine society*. If guns were allowed to enter Raven's primitive realm, it would destroy or change its culture. Thus no guns are allowed in the noble savage paradise; no technologies that are inappropriate, in fact. There's a master database up there somewhere that controls what's allowed where. *Inscape*, in fact, which in the author's own definition is a *value-driven interface to technology sets*.

Only there's a group of mysterious strangers led by the secretive "3340" who want to tear down this pretty play-picture in the name of facing up to cold, hard reality. The artificial boundary (horizon) between Westerhaven and its neighbor collapses. The monstrous myth-creatures that exist in Raven are allowed to pillage and kill in Westerhaven; more disastrous collapses soon follow.

Livia Kodaly is one of the few people in Westerhaven who has survived – albeit in a traumatized condition – facing reality unfiltered by *inscape*. She flees her burning home with two companions. She doesn't know what's out there, but she needs to find out what 3340 is and what it intends in order to save Westerhaven and all it means.

The traveling companions soon leave Tevan and its myriad manifolds for an unknown Archipelago. Here are none of the boundaries of Tevan. *Nothing* is restricted. People live within their own individual virtual realities, aided by *narratives* that try to fulfill their deepest wishes; *sympathy agents* to soothe the slightest hurt; aggregate personalities called *votes* that naturally coalesce to take care of their group interests. People no longer have normal human reactions because they've lived with virtual reality too long. Drowning? What fun!

Only here, too, Livia and her companions find the subtle hand of 3340. A mysterious role-playing Book has just become wildly popular. The Book and its players have seemingly evolved out of the Archipelago's society naturally, and the latest version is called... 3340, of course. What does the mysterious Book *want*? Read and find out.

Schroeder's story is not great in terms of either plot or characterization, but his ideas are interesting. I think it's the lack of understanding of the purely human element that makes his *ideas* fail, however.

One of his key premises is that *technologies* determine a society or culture. There's some validity to that thought. No one denies that the Industrial Revolution

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changed British society in a fundamental way, for example. But let's take, as another example, the bloodthirsty kingdom of the Aztecs, and compare it to the world of the ancient Egyptians. Technologies were roughly comparable; both civilizations built pyramids; both were top-down and hierarchical and essentially static. But there was a world of difference between the two societies.

Schroeder's other premise is that *societies that enforce specific set of constraints and restrictions* may yield more satisfaction, in terms of the human spirit, than those that are wide-open and focused primarily on self-actualization. Again there's some validity to this thought. But I notice that all of Tevan's little kingdoms of like-minded souls are pretty *good* places. What sort of kingdoms would we *really* see if all like-minded people could group together and build their own little world and its no-exceptions-allowed rules? Are we all saints?

So *here's* a revisionist view of history for you to ponder. One could say that the Puritans set sail from the Old World to the New *not* because they were persecuted in the relatively open-minded society of England, but because they wanted to build just such a restrictive kingdom. Left to their own devices, fully in control of their new little world, the Puritans soon instituted witch-burnings and gross oppressions for not attending church on Sundays. Did they *really* leave to gain freedom, or did they leave because they wanted to *avoid* it? Were they noble heroes, or narrow-minded zealots?

Though I think Schroeder's ideas are flawed, it's still wonderful to read a story that bothers to *propose* ideas about the human condition at all. Thank you, Mr. Schoeder. I'd love to have a great coffee-shop argument with you some day – and in the meantime, keep writing!

At its best, science fiction has no peer in creating another universe of experience, in showing us what we look like in the mirror of technological society or through the eyes of a non-human.

— Dick Riley

The King's Own

Lorna Freeman

Roc, Feb 2006

\$7.99, Mass Market, 432 pgs.

ISBN: 0451460715

Review by Harriet Klausner

Lord Rabbit, heir to the throne of his cousin King Jusson IV of Iversterre, is in the town of Freston with the royal retinue. The townsfolk and much of the kingdom do not want to see Rabbit on the throne because he was raised in the Border where the Fae reside. He also has the magical powers of the four elements that will make him a powerful mage once he learns to control his skills. His teacher, Lurel, a sentient mountain cat who walks on two legs, and the elf Wyln are with Rabbit, adding to the local fears as most remember losing the war of acquisition to these species.

Rabbit is also claimed by his His Grace Loran of the Border making him a bridge between the two cultures and a weapon to be used if the Taurlian Empire tries to annex Iversterre. When invisible hands touch him in the town square, Rabbit uses his powers to repel the attack, frightening the townsfolk even more. Afterward he is sent to jail but freed by his monarch to work under Thadra, Commander of the Army. Laurel fears that someone is trying to bind him so that they can use his magic as theirs. When dark magic kills Rabbit's jailer, the townsfolk assume he committed that atrocity. He wonders if agitators are in league with a sorcerer who wants the king dead and to accomplish those ends conjured a soul eating demon that only Rabbit might be able to stop.

Fans of Shannara and the Lord of the Rings will relish this richly descriptive and enthralling high fantasy saga. Fully developed characters and an action-oriented story line keeps readers' interest at extraordinary high levels. Rabbit is a wonderful principled protagonist, who is an innocent but is learning quickly to be politically savvy soul. His efforts will endear him to the audience who will demand more thrillers starring this likable hero.

Reviews

Eragon

Christopher Paolini

Knopf Books, August 2003

ISBN: 0375826688

Review by Terry Crotinger

Christopher Paolini's, *Inheritance Trilogy*, has potential of developing into an epic. Let me rephrase—he already is a legend, having published his first book at the impressive age of 19. His name and his first book, *Eragon*, have long been known by the home school crowd—he is a celebrity, (“See, Junior? Home Schooling is good!”) inspiring youth (public, private and non-traditional schooled) to not only write, but to compose music and create artistic works. Who knows how else Mr. Paolini's accomplishments have influenced young English readers? While his first work is aimed at a “youth” audience, after reading *Eragon* (Era gone?) I believe it is a tale for all ages. And, other than a few chapters at the first that remind me of something that might be written for a college English course, I soon forgot the writer's youth and that his parents had helped him edit this first accomplishment. The book was that good!

It is tempting to compare *Eragon* with Anne McCaffrey's *Dragon Riders of Pern* series. And Tolkien's maps. And Fiest's *Magician* series. And a few others fantasy writers that according to Paolini's website, he *had* read so they *may* have influenced him. Though some aspects seem familiar, there is no doubt he has the potential as an emerging author capable of using some fine fantasy standards—dragons, dragon eggs, magicians, the wise companion to guide him, “The Girl”, and of course, “The Quest”—independent of their usage in other tales.

Eragon is a tale about a boy and his dragon. There are McCaffrey-ish devices—dragon egg, imprinting and telepathic communication—but special powers, a developing wizard-hood and an intriguing backstory of Brom, the Storyteller (which may deserve it's own series) add to the tale enough that any similarities are eventually absorbed, and the reader accepts them as critical to this original story without being able to name each device as Tolkein, McCaffrey or others.

When *Eragon* first starts out on his quest/adventure to seek revenge on the ones who killed his family, he goes with Brom, an old storyteller who often just repeated the same stories, cleverly coloring him as slightly incompetent in the eyes of the townsfolk. As the story ends, the reader is hooked with a cliffhanger

that isn't so climatic that the reader is frustrated. But I was excited to know the next installment, *Eldest*, was released in August 2005. A Google search for the author will reveal his website and even an Alagaesia Adventure Game (free) based on the series. Because the first printing of *Eragon* was self-published, that original printing should be on a collector's wish list. Once Alfred A. Knopf Publishers mass-marketed *Eragon* and *Eldest*, they became a must-have in itself. But that very first printing, now *that's* original!

Sorceress of Faith

Robin D. Owens

Luna, Feb 2006

\$13.95, Trade Paper, 400 pp.

ISBN 0373802218

Review by Harriet Klausner

Monsters from the Dark were getting through holes created when segments of the magic fenceposts died. The people of Lladrana did not know how to repair the damage or recharge the magic until the Exotique Alexa from Earth figured it out and destroyed the monsters in the latest battle. Unfortunately one of the monsters, a sangvile, escaped and killed the parents of the sorcerer circlet Jaquar.

The Sorcerers summon a new Exotique and Jaquar plans to use her to travel the planes and kill the malevolent maw spawning new monsters. Marian is conducting a Wiccan ritual when she is thrust through the dimensional portal and ends up in Lladrana where she is first trained by the master sorcerer circlet and later by Jaquar himself. As he gets to know Marian, he abandons his plans because he does not want to send the woman he loves into danger that probably means her death. Although Marian wants to stay in Lladrana she has a brother that she loves very much on Earth that she can't abandon and a betrayal by people she has come to trust makes her doubt her feelings about those she came to save.

One of the great things about Robin D. Owens' ongoing Luna series is that each book can stand alone yet there remains continuity through the return of heroes and champions from the previous tale. This sword and sorcery fantasy, complete with Pegasus and a sentient hamster, and an enigmatic fairy is so fascinating that readers find themselves caught up in the magic of reading. *Sorceress of Faith* is romantic fantasy at its very best.

Reviews

The Weapon

Michael Z. Williamson

Baen, 2005

\$25.00, Hardcover, 487 pgs

ISBN 1-4165-0894-5

Review by D. L. Parker

My first experience of filthy language as an emblem of masculinity came with my first post-college job. I was twenty years old, naïve but not stupid, and on my first day at work was shown into the office I would be sharing with an excessively good-looking, sophisticated, thirty-something man I'll call "B".

Little did I know at the time how my manager and new co-workers were laughing up their sleeves. "B" was a sexual gymnast who conducted all his affairs for the public benefit of the medium-sized IT department we both worked for. Shoe-horning a green-as-grass girl into a tiny office with the local killer Warren Beatty was meant to be the corporate equivalent of a live porn show. My colleagues were licking their lips to see the forthcoming action. Others had fallen, to the great entertainment of the on-lookers, and I was to be the latest.

Only it didn't quite work out the way it was intended. "B" put the moves on within a few days, of course. I got the unwanted shoulder massage "to help me relax"; within a week, he coolly asked me to come home with him in front of several ear-flapping colleagues. But in spite of the fact that he was as good-looking a specimen of stud-muffin as I've seen before or since, I disliked him from the start.

One of the reasons was his habit of using filthy four-letter (mostly sexual) words. I asked him to refrain. He apologized profusely, but it instantly got worse. Every time (and even more frequently than before) that he swore, he would now turn around and ostentatiously apologize to "the little lady". Dirty words were the sort of emblem of masculinity that the painted codpiece probably was to those old-time dandies. Swearing was like his public sexual liaisons. It meant he was a *man*.

I was reminded of "B" (something I try to avoid, even now) when I read Michael Z. Williamson's new book, "The Weapon". Kenneth Chinran, the protagonist of the story, is a self-described "ass-kicking, hardcase killer", and like "B", he's got the foul language and the over-active codpiece to prove it. More than the first hundred pages of the novel are devoted just to Chinran's military training, where we get the grunt-level view of how hard-ass, real-*man* Our Hero is. Are you over-loaded with testosterone? Do you have

a small shaved head without much between the ears and hard-rock bulging biceps? Do foul language and sexual boasting turn you on? You'll love this book.

There are no doubt hundreds of "military" themed novels that follow this well-worn track, many written, like this one, by former members of the armed services. Mostly they're harmless fantasy-fulfillments: little boys pick up sticks to play war with, and I'm not naïve enough not to recognize that there are valid reasons – some of them essential to the survival of the species and of the nation – for the masculine gender's greater interest in combat and conflict. So I'm not against war-themed books per se. The fantasies feed male archetypes, whether you consider them healthy or not, just the same way romances feed female emotional needs. For the most part, I say viva la difference. There was a reason those shrewd cave-women picked the toughest looking hunks they could cajole – at *least* when a cave-bear was around.

But Williamson's book gets a lot worse, and I totally lost patience with it. Chinran, after his one-hundred-plus pages of primping, gets his first assignment. He's sent to intervene in a civil war on a planet that has (surprise!) Muslim fanatics of various stripes (Sunni and Shia) as well as some rightwing, fanatic Christian Baptists. Sounds familiar for some reason, doesn't it? The protagonist describes them all (especially the Shiites) as "dirt-stupid" and "cowardly". Terrorist tactics are the act of a coward; he wants all the Shiites to stand up and be shot like a man. Contempt oozes; squirts like *Niagara*, I should say.

Never once does the protagonist ask himself what *he* would do if he, like the Shiites he despises, were fighting against a superior and heavily armed enemy. It reminded me of how the British ranted against the rebellious colonials during our own war of independence. Those *cowardly colonials* kept firing from behind trees, while the British, as *real* soldiers should, wheeled in their bright red-uniformed ranks and marched in step toward the volleys that dropped them, without once gaining a sight of their raggedy enemy. Folks, let's look at terrorist tactics as what they really are: a *method of fighting from a position of weakness*. Terror itself is nothing new in the history of conflict; witness the Mongols, who heaped the skulls of their victims into mountains to spread the news. I'm not equating our war of independence with a monster like Osama bin Laden by *any* means; I'm just saying we'd better find a hardheaded solution to a highly successful methodology of war.

Reviews

Did I say things get a lot worse in this story already? We start heading downhill at the speed of an Olympic luge. Believing that fire can be fought with fire, Chinran castrates an unlucky Muslim as a warning. As another shining example, he shoots (starting with the kids, on the theory they'll grow up to be bad eggs themselves) eight-seven civilians (men, women, and those aforementioned bad-seed children).

Then he and his team get sent to Earth, which is ruled by an incompetent and apparently crazily jingoistic United Nations. (I admit, I fought off the hysterical giggles at that thought). The UN launches an attack upon Chinran's home world in order to "free the natives from oppressors", and Chinran and his team, now infiltrated on Earth, cut loose with all the dirty terrorist tactics he seemed to despise in the unfortunate Shiite he castrated. They develop blister agents and chlorine gas. They manage to kill more than five million people in Minneapolis (an activity I *greatly* resented, since Minneapolis is a lovely city I called home for more than five years of my normally peripatetic life).

What redeems the character, a self-described weapon of mass destruction (notice the title of this story), from the hell he apparently believes his fellow terrorists (of the Muslim and Christian variety) are bound for? One simple difference, it seems: he feels *guilt*. He *vomits* after killing five million people. That makes it all right! *That's* the wonderful difference! And *then* he goes out and does it *again*. Bye-bye, Chicago.

Once in a while I read a book that I can put down with only one simple question ringing in my head: *what the heck was the publisher doing green-lighting this thing?* Baen, you made possible a book that showcases what I would only call a *war criminal*. You should *pay* to take this one off the market; and by the way, *thank* you from the bottom of my heart for briskly rejecting *my* book.

The ludicrous happy ending sure doesn't excuse it. Our Hero, now a single father, looks forward to a rosy future raising his sweet little daughter Chelsea. He's a great dad; he even changes his own nappies. What stories he'll be able to tell his grandchildren! *Now son, do you want to hear about the time I castrated that cowardly Shiite... no? You love that one about Minneapolis the best? Well... snuggle in, here it comes!*

Shame on Baen and double shame on Mr. Williamson. Obviously, I don't recommend this one. What do I recommend instead? Read Robert Kaplan's newly released "Imperial Grunts". It's a wonderful story of our armed forces in real-life situations around the world, and I'm convinced *every one* of those soldiers would be *deeply* ashamed of Kenneth Chinran.

And now I'm going to take a run around the house. I have some excess emotions to work off. And if I meet anyone named Kenneth Chinran, I plan to kick in his over-sized codpiece with my steel-toed boot.

RPG Corner (con't)

Who knows, in the process of running the stories leading into the wild finish for the game, the GM can be re-inspired, and the Players' interest can be rekindled in the sweeping new events that are happening to their characters. There is nothing written that says a GM has to follow through with a game's end. He could choose to keep going, either rewriting the ending to leave the possibility of squeaking through to plots and characters beyond, or running a ferocious climax with death and destruction and simply having the Characters survive it, to continue in the world that comes after.

I myself am foraying into this very topic in the coming weeks, as my long running World of Darkness game goes onto hiatus once again. Originally envisioned as a 5 part story, following an ever increasing number of characters through the inexorable downward spiral toward the end of the world, I will have, by the time I'm all the way done, have ended 5 complete campaigns (or chronicles as the WoD stuff is called). The first 4 endings aren't true endings in the sense that there will be no more after, but they are stopping points, designed to wrap things up for a while. This most recent chronicle has been running for a little more than 4 years, so my abilities will be tested as I try to create a satisfying conclusion, and still leave enough mystery to keep the Players interested in the next installment. The pressure is on, but by the time you all (both of you) read this, it'll be in the bag, so I'll go ahead and let you know that the ending rocked, everyone was happy and that I'm freakin' cool.

But you knew that already.

Those who cling to the untrue doctrine that 'violence never settles anything' would be advised to conjure up the ghosts of Napoleon Bonaparte and of the Duke of Wellington and let them debate it. The ghost of Hitler could referee, and the jury might well be the Dodo, the Great Auk, and the Passenger Pigeon. Violence, naked force, has settled more issues in history than has any other factor, and the contrary opinion is wishful thinking at its worst. Nations and peoples who forget this basic truth have always paid for it with their lives and freedoms.

— Robert A. Heinlein

I Regret (con't)

of Internet users who, like me, enjoy shooting and waving lightsabers at each other. The single player mode has a plot, of sorts, and some of the missions are deftly woven into the context of the movies, but the mission plots are more to provide an excuse to shoot things than for actual enjoyment.

After I finished with the games, I sat down and watched the movies again. I tried to observe them objectively, without the biases I've developed over the last few years in regards to the prequel episodes, but I'm not sure how successful I was. When something caught my eye, or when something disappointed me, I jotted down a note. After an exhausting day of reflection, I have compiled the following observations:

1) Great graphics do not a great product make.

The movies had stellar special effects, one could argue to the detriment of all other aspects of film-making. The video games also had great computer graphics, maybe not video quality, and in some cases decidedly cartoonish, but the games were all more enjoyable. So perhaps Mr. Lucas should remember that you need more than just state-of-the-art special effects to make a memorable film.

2) It helps to have believable characters.

It may be the screenwriters' or the actors' fault, but it is a sad state of affairs when the characters following me around puppy-like in a video game are more believable than the characters portrayed by real live people. When the death (or potential death) of a computer generated ally evokes more of a response from my cold, hard heart than Anakin Skywalker's should-be-convincing angst, that does not speak well for an actor's performance.

3) It helps to not have expectations of the characters.

With the exception of *Battlefront II* (in a killing spree sort of way), the games only utilize familiar characters in a tertiary way, using them to bind the player to the story without actually giving enough of an insight into them to destroy any preconceptions. The prequel movies focus on a number of characters integral to Episodes IV, V and VI, and unless you had a vastly different interpretation of the younger versions of those characters than I did, you were most likely disappointed. Yoda should have been more force push and less limber lightsaber-wielder (though those scenes

were entertaining). Anakin should have been more sullen brooding and swallowed pride and less whiny crybaby. By destroying my preconceived notions about these characters and the events surrounding them, the prequel movies interfered with my imagination, and that's always a bad thing.

4) What happened to the dialogue?

One of the things that made Episodes IV, V and VI so enjoyable was the witty repartee between the protagonists. It was also an element of *Republic Commando* and *KOTOR II*. But if Lucas feels that the prequel movies retained this dynamic and comical wit, he is sorely mistaken. Much of the dialogue seemed forced and unnatural, some lines were too cheesy, and there was far too heavy a reliance on the catch phrases established in the later episodes.

5) Knowing the outcome detracts from the enjoyment

While this is a factor that Lucas might not have been able to adjust for, it is a critical one. Why are books better the first time they're read? Why are so many games, *Republic Commando* and *KOTOR II* included, significantly less enjoyable to play a second time through? The player knows the outcome, and knowing where you're going makes getting there less fun. Why is *Battlefront II*, on the other hand, continuously enjoyable? Each game is a unique battle, and the outcome is undecided until the players determine it.

The prequel movies suffered from this same phenomenon. We knew that Yoda would go into hiding. We knew that Anakin would turn to the Dark Side and become Darth Vader (though we didn't know it would take six minutes to go from responsible Jedi Knight to baby killer). We knew that Obi Wan would be the sad hero left alone to defend the galaxy. Where's the excitement? Where's the mystery? Where's the joy in getting to the end? By knowing the destination, it made the stops along the way lackluster at best, tedious at worst.

6) Direct participation trumps passive study.

I had to watch the movies. I got to *play* the games. Regardless of whether my character became a paradigm of virtue or the most dreaded Sith Lord ever to travel the galaxy, my choices created the path, my skill made it possible. I was not a fly on the wall watching events unfold; I made events unfold! I *was* the event.

I Regret (con't)

Until interactive movies exist, I fear that video games will always have this ace up their sleeve, but even adjusting for it, the quality of the individual storylines was better for each of the three tested games than they were for the movies. Is this because Lucas knew he had a captive audience and didn't feel he needed to cater to their needs, while the video game writers know they need an engaging story to bring players back for the sequels? Is it because Lucas had a story to tell and didn't care if our views differed from his, but the game writers had a vision and needed the spark of life provided by the players to make the vision a reality?

I can only venture guesses as to why Lucas made three less than memorable movies, or why the gaming division of LucasArts seems to have a better finger on the pulse of the fan than the screen writers. What I know is that many of the observations I made above also apply to writing, and by taking care to make sure characters are believable, three-dimensional, and don't blatantly tread on a reader's preconceptions or take him where he already expects to go, then your writing will be better for it.

And it will certainly be better than *The Phantom Menace*.

Special Effects (con't)

Pool Effect: Used when people fall through a hole or water and the viewer sees them on the other side falling through the hole, or sometimes, climbing up out of the hole. A hole is made in a raised platform with a cushion underneath to break the stunt actor's fall. The people are filmed first as they fall into the hole. Then the camera tracks the fall, or roto's it using a 3D model to that. It's an older effect; using the computer and 3D creates new effects. Animators for *Buffy, the Vampire* series often wanted this effect and used Alias Wavefront—a software program that specializes in water-tools.

Morphing: This is a warp and dissolve technique: two different pieces of film that dissolve and warp into another. This one is an older technique, but by using computers, it can be almost undetectable as they merge. This can be used with dust, rubble or foam to make an solid object go from having form or shape to dissolving or exploding with the results being particles that float as dust or vanish slowly. This technique and Dusting is a *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* signature effect.

Compositing: A morphing technique that manipulates and repositions morphing elements. In my opinion, (and who am I to have such an opinion?) this is true morphing. *Manimals* would be an example of compositing where the actor's face or form transposes to that of an animal over a quick series of layers carefully blended to keep it realistic. *Power Rangers* is not—it is old style *Star Trek* type-bright flash and poof, a Power Ranger is born effect, not compositing.

Dusting: A type of compositing that layers the elements on top of one another in order to form a shot. This was developed by Chris Jones for the *Buffy* series. It is created in stages, often eroding away parts of the film to reveal something underneath. It is then surfaced with a "noisy matte" which may also be eroded away as the animation continues. The best example of this is in the *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* episodes where vamps explode into dust particles. At the end of the series, Spike's death was a startling example of how even "dusting" has advanced in the industry. Each minute effect can be seen as he erodes away, smiling, laughing, and dying all at the same time, while parts of the actor disappear.

Now for some examples of these effects.

LucasFilm's *Industrial Light and Magic/Lucas Ranch* are well known animators—used on all the *Star Wars* movies. Those effects are worth an article in itself.

Weta Digital, did the effects for *The Lord of the Rings*. According to WD's website, 500 animated shots comprised *Fellowship of the Rings*, 900 for *Two Towers*, 1500 for *Return of the King*, and forty-two new creatures were created like Sheolob and Monucle, that elephant-looking animal. There were some live-actors in costume and makeup who were shot in close range, then morphed, using CG to long range for those fantastic battle scenes in *Return of the King*. If you saw the movies, you might remember how animated Golum's face was at times. Those effects were CG. The *Weta Digital* website announces, "Most graphics are Maya [rendered]. We established a whole pipeline around Maya." Maya, if you recall, is one of the top software programs graphic animators use. According to my research, some effects for the remake of *King Kong* have never been done before—it broke records with the original movie and the remake.

Between great movies and an insider "life-line" with Anthony Marks Viverito, I'm inspired to try a little stop-motion photography, and make sure I get those blockbuster movies rented for inspiration!