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Babylon 5

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J. Michael Straczynski, creator and executive producer of the *Babylon 5* science fiction television series, talks to the crowd at the 1997 WorldCon science fiction convention in San Antonio, Texas. Straczynski's series premieres a prequel tonight, Jan. 4, in its move to the TNT network. (see Page 26).



What planet are you from, anyway?



An elevated view of the dealer's

or How the WorldCon science fiction convention brings the universe down to Earth

By BART KEMPER
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The phrase "science fiction convention" can conjure images of people in *Star Trek* costumes spending hours debating who is better: Jean Luc or Kirk? Then again, some people think everyone in Louisiana sounds like, dresses like, and acts like Justin Wilson. Not even Mr. Wilson acts like that all of the time.

Science fiction, or "sci-fi" or "SF," is a broad term covering the "what if" in media and entertainment. "What if" we could go into space? "What if" aliens landed on Earth? "What if" computers became smaller than a barn and everyone had access? Some of these "what ifs" have gone from science fiction to science fact. The very world we live in today was "science fiction" a generation ago.

"So many of the visions of science fiction have been carried out into reality," said award-winning novelist Lois McMaster Bujold. "By now, it is obvious to most people technology ... and changes in technology has a direct impact on their lives. It makes sense science fiction has become more popular."

SF is now a full-fledged industry. This year's summer movie releases were full of science fiction. Television has *Babylon 5*, *X-Files*, *Highlander*, the *Star Trek* series, and the Sci-Fi Channel. Most bookstores have racks of paperbacks devoted to science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction and fantasy are common themes in computer games as well as the latest "hot ticket" in games: card-based games like "Magic: The Gathering."

There is no doubt there are billions of dollars in science fiction media. Some of the most prominent writers, directors, and commercial artists today work in SF. What may be surprising is how close the link is between the fans and "pros." Perhaps in no other segment of the entertainment industry is consumer as close to the "stars," with conventions keeping this special relationship alive despite the industry's growth. The World Science Fiction Convention, or WorldCon, is the grand daddy of "cons."

Typically up to 6,000 people from across the United States and around the world register for WorldCon. Like a traveling roadshow, this convention is a different city every year. This year, the 55th, it was in San Antonio. Like most of the larger cons, WorldCon is part trade show, awards show, bazaar, dance club



Stewart Wieck of White Wolf Publishing with his company's works at 1997 WorldCon. Started in 1986, the publishing company was recently listed in *Inc. magazine* as one of the top 500 fastest growing independently-owned businesses.

