

MAGAZINE

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What
planet
are you
from,
anyway

It takes all
types to make
a WorldCon

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Babylon 5

The final
season begins
on TNT

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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 access so 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 in 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.

What planet

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A convention is not just parties. Movies, recent and classic, as well as theater-style 70mm projection are shown in video rooms. There are video rooms showing continuous animation, TV series, or other specialty interests. Gamers of all sorts are given large rooms to set up and play for hours on end. Workshops in writing, costuming, drawing, computer application, and swordplay are offered. Some people roam the convention and parties in "hall costumes" while others compete in the Masquerade, where professional and amateur costumers strut their stuff.

Up to seven tracks of panel discussion bring experts together for open discussion between themselves and the audience. Panel discussion ranges from "How to enjoy your first convention" to technical panels like "Materials of the Future" to social issues such as "Censorship" to offbeat interest like "How to care for your stuffed animals." Professionals such as engineers, scientists, lawyers, doctors, Hollywood special effects artists, and others often share a panel with authors who have written about a given topic, combining "real life" with fiction.

However, some of the best attended panels are the "professional panels," where writers, editors, agents, directors, artists, and other pros tell others "how to go pro." "Professionals who come up through fandom definitely have an advantage," said Bujold. "You learn the etiquette. You learn how (the business of SF) works."

WorldCon is also where the Hugo Award is presented. This prestigious award is SF's highest honor and receives international news coverage. Instead of an "Academy" or some other select group, the Hugo is voted upon by supporting and attending members for that year's WorldCon. Everyone, fans and pros alike, have an equal say in recognizing the previous year's best writing, magazines, artwork, movies, and television shows.

Cat, or R. Cat Conrad, is an artist exhibiting at WorldCon's art show. "It's my real name," he said with a grin. Reflecting the spirit of fandom, WorldCon's art show often features some of the best talent in the genre side by side with fan art depicting fictional characters. Cat is a full-time artist with a commercial and fine arts background, usually selling his work directly to fine art buyers. His starships and portraits, realistic and fantastic, reflect his love of science fiction and fantasy. This was his first WorldCon, but he was impressed with what he saw.

"WorldCon is definitely a more serious art show. There are scouts from publishing houses and magazines looking for new talent. There are paintings and sculptures being sold for thousands of dollars."



©1998, Bart Kemper photo

Author Harry Turtledove, left, signs copies of his book for a fan at World Con.



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The ambassador from Sarquaana, a journey entry for the 1997 World Con Masquerade

Like many artists there, before the convention was over he had sold several pieces and made some contacts for other work. Most of the pieces are sold as a silent auction, but there is usually a live auction to benefit a charity.

The Dealer's Room is its own event. Hundreds of merchants from across the nation selling books, shirts, costumes, collectibles, art, video, memorabilia, jewelry, swords, and anything related to SF or fantasy fill the convention hall. While many of these merchants have off-beat, unique, or hard-to-find merchandise, most have catalogs and websites so you don't have to travel thousands of miles to find that one thing you forgot to buy at the con.

In addition to independent merchants, large companies like the Sci-Fi Channel, Ballentine Books, and Wizards of the Coast exhibit, sell, and even conduct marketing samples. Upcoming movies are touted by studio displays, complete with free posters and buttons. Movie studios show teaser reels and prompt discussion with the audience. Even for big companies, WorldCon is important.

"It's a chance to see the reader's reaction," said Stewart Wieck, publisher of White Wolf Publishing. Based in Clarkston, Ga., White Wolf Publishing is capitalizing on being different than the traditional "big city" publishing houses.

"A lady came up to me today and thanked me," Wieck said. "She said we gave her the first real alternative to the 'cookie-cutter' books being churned out. That's part of why we go to WorldCon — to forget about the cold hard business of publishing and remember why we started this company: to give something special to the readers."

Their close relationship with authors and their readers is more than a philosophical success. Started in 1986, White Wolf was recently listed in *Inc.* magazine's top 500 fastest growing independently owned businesses. White Wolf is also the publisher for the popular "Vampire, The Masquerade" game and others. According to Wieck, publishing games as well as books gives his company more marketing depth and diversity within the SF and fantasy market. Going to WorldCon helps him keep focused on his market.

WorldCon audiences often get special previews and showings. Francis Ford

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— Lois McMaster Bujold

Copolla previewed *Dracula* at a previous WorldCon and last year featured previews of *Men In Black*, *The 5th Element*, and *Starship Troopers*, including a casting call for extras for *Troopers*' battle scenes. For many, this year's convention highlight was the special *Babylon 5* presentation.

"I guess you guys want more." J. Michael Straczynski, director, writer, and creator of the immensely popular TV series *Babylon 5* gave a special two hour "intimate conversation" to over 2,500 fans, who in turn gave "Joe" repeated standing ovations. This Hugo- and Emmy-award winning show has earned a huge following which Straczynski in turn honors by making a special appearance complete with "top secret" material that hit the Internet almost as soon as Straczynski left the stage. Bloopers and previews of new episodes were intertwined with stories of cast members and dealings with management as well as questions from the audience. (A story on *Babylon 5*'s premiere on TNT is on Page 26 of *Magazine*.)

Half of "science fiction" is science and is evident throughout the convention. The National Space Society and other technology groups have displays and recruiting drives at WorldCon. Panel discussions ranging from the Mars Rover to nanotechnology to "zero gravity beer brewing" reflect the broad science interests of fans. Several popular SF authors like David Brin were scientists or engineers before becoming full-time authors. Not only does science influence science fiction, science fiction influences science.

As a professor at LSU for over 20 years, Levine has seen the fiction of his childhood become every day reality for his students. "I encourage my students to read science fiction. It goes beyond the straight progression of scientific development taught in school. It presents of the good side and the bad side of a given technology, a context of how it may be used. It's not just a question of 'Can you do it,' it adds 'Should you do it?'"

"(Reading) science fiction gives you a more visionary habit of mind," said Bujold. "It puts you in the habit of thinking past the most immediate or obvious solution."

Bujold grew up reading SF because of her father, Robert C. McMaster. McMaster has been credited with some of the founding work in non-destructive testing, now used throughout industry to test wings, pipes, pressure vessels, and other critical equipment for flaws before accidents can occur. He has also been credited for developing the pioneering techniques for baggage X-ray machines and mammograms. These real-life "scanners" were first visualized in fiction, which helped engineers like McMaster to bring them to life, according to Bujold.

"There was always science fiction in our house," Bujold said. "My father read *Analog* (Magazine) on flights to and from job sites. It definitely had an influence on his work."

Most science fiction conventions are similar to WorldCon, only on a smaller scale. Crescent City Con, held during the

summer in New Orleans, will be coming up on its 13th year in 1998. Last year they had cast members from the TV show *Highlander* as well as authors George Effinger and Barbara Hambly plus panel discussions, a masquerade contest, a rock concert and dance, a dealer's room, and parties galore. There are a few conventions run by corporations touting their franchise shows, but without fandom's drive they are a far cry from even the small one-day local conventions.

Most conventions, like Crescent City Con, are held in the same city every year while others may wander to a new city. WorldCon is held in a different city every year. Next year it will be in Baltimore, followed by Melbourne, Australia in 1999 and Chicago in 2000. Besides being the grand-daddy of all SF conventions, WorldCon is also a great excuse to travel.

Science fiction is big business, but in this business the fans are in charge. The fans decide on the awards, the fans buy the books, videos, and merchandise, and more fundamentally, the fans are the next generation's professionals.

Conventions are vibrant, colorful, and most of all, fun. At first glance a science fiction convention may seem as alien as the Martian landscape to you, but if you have any interest in science fiction and fantasy, you'll discover you will soon be at home. ■

Surviving a con

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videos or games. Most larger cons also have some sort of children-related facilities.

All fans benefit from the Hospitality Suite found at almost every convention where free snacks, drinks and sometimes "real food" keep the fans fueled throughout the day. Most conventions also have special provisions for the many volunteers, or "gophers," who make conventions possible.

There are science fiction and fantasy conventions occurring throughout the year, but most occur during mid-semester breaks and the summer. WorldCon costs the most, usually \$150 for the full five days, but others cost considerably less. Already scheduled is Mississippi's CoastCon 21 and MidSouthCon 17 and Texas' AggieCon 29 in March.

Crescent City Con is one of the region's best conventions and takes place during the summer. You can see last year's con at www.fatsnake.com/ccs, which will also be the address when next year's information becomes available. Perhaps one of the largest cons besides WorldCon is Atlanta's annual DragonCon, held this coming year Sept. 3-6 (www.dragoncon.org).

If you are interested in the upcoming WorldCons, you can find Baltimore in '98 (Aug. 5-9) at www.buccooner.worldcon.com, which has links to Australia in '99, Chicago in '99 and upcoming bids. For more information about fandom and conventions, try the Southern Fandom site (www.concentric.net/Kelly/cons/), the SFF Net (www.sff.net), the Fandom Directory (www.fandata.com), and the Con-Tour Magazine (www.con-tour.com) as well as the related "rooms" on America On-Line and Compuserve. However, you don't need a computer to find out more locally. Little Wars in the Village Square shopping center not only has an excellent collection of science fiction and fantasy books and related games, they often post information about local conventions and activities. ■