

VENUS 2141

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General setting

Earth underwent drastic global warming in the 21st century, making a desert of the southern hemisphere and forcing terraforming Mars, as well as the beginnings of habitation in the clouds of Venus. The catch is that in the 2100's, Earth's climate underwent a second paroxysm, rendering the northern hemisphere a new ecological disaster and forcing a huge refugee crisis on Mars – prompting an Earth-Mars war – and especially on Venus, where mass access comes in four-year cycles, and in the past ten years, the population has jumped from 50 million to 500 million through immigration, with 11 million gummed up at the entry point in orbit.

In 2141, the solar system features human inhabitants on Earth, in Earth's orbit, on Mars, in the asteroid belt and similar non-planetary resource area. On Venus, or more accurately in Venus' atmosphere, the key technology for living there successfully relies on rafts, organic machines that float freely or are tethered, which can clump together and combine ecologies. As many as fifteen super-rafts, or hives, create what amount to city-states. Venus is still nominally under the government of Earth's UN, which in practice means Earthforce, its military arm. However, local raft governments, general lawlessness, and the refugee problem create a much more varied situation. Religious and political groups like the Watchers of Light, NeoComs, and Evolutionists proliferate there in new and strange forms.

What we're doing here

Play goals are not very Premise-heavy in structural terms, but I think it's already there in spades in setting terms. The odd phrase from the book jumps out from time to time: *I like the idea of remaking society in a situation where human nature rather than wealth is what's keeping us back from an equal society.*

Similarly to Ruby, the rules offer no canonical events after play starts. The setting is internally unstable and play, properly applied, should alter it significantly. The text even advises “smashing the snow globe” as one of the primary goals.

Tech: “the future has goo all over it”

A lot has happened in three centuries-plus, so miniaturization and molecular-level technology have gone about as far as they can. Yes, there’s computronium for data processing, yeah, there’s carbonite tech for precision manufacturing, and insanely powerful computers are so cheap that they’re effectively like one-use cell phones. War technology would make Donald Rumsfeld’s toes curl with gratification.

Furthermore just about everything feared or fantasized regarding identity, personality, media, and advertising has come to pass. Equipment which renders one’s perceived surroundings in the genre of choice, including hard-core porn, is not only available but standard, as is constantly-beamed advertising designed to transfect it. Identity theft and subversion are so common as to be an ordinary feature of life.

But the fun take-home about all this is how certain things are simply the same: all software still sucks, AI remains a pipedream, “people are slaves to advertising” turns out to be no more insightful a comment with all the intrusive psych-tech than it is without it, drugs both alter moods and ruin lives to varying degrees, and advanced military drone technology renders warfare even more incapable of coping with insurgency. And personality-pollution or not, people still live, watch the tube, marry, have kids, conduct politics, sell stuff, pay rent, and generally do their thing. They also steal, gamble, fight, die, starve, enslave, overdose, mug, and murder, which strangely enough look exactly like they always have.

Genuine future shock is indeed under way, as well. Venus leads the way in complex, organic cyberpunk, the basic living platform on Venus, or in the atmosphere, is the Raft, a cellular construct inflatable – even breathing – units that float and propel it. A raft is technically alive, although more of an ecology than an organism. The larger communities, called Hives, are effectively masses of Rafts. But the main innovation is the Womb, a device which utilizes cellular processes to grow pretty much anything made of proteins or carbohydrates. Which is to say, you can design a gun made of polymer, program the Womb, and it grows it and spits it out. Whole factories based on Womb technology are dominating exports and a design culture all the way down to one-man rogue labs using bootlegged Wombs is rapidly outpacing everything else.

For instance, older notions of inorganic prostheses and cyborgs are becoming obsolete with the appearance of “softer” biosuits composed of Smartcloth and bio-implant applications, many of which involve personal weaponry. These are highly customized and frighteningly cheap. BiCell technology can regrow any human part – and when it gets too effective, a person can find himself or herself subject to Narciss syndrome, literally replaced to the extent of being a reborn adult. Viral applications are completely out of control, to the extent that an Evolutionary terrorist might spray with stuff that makes you regrow your arms into cows. And then there’re the Bugmasters, human hives who are rapidly becoming the new cyborg.

A new hard currency has arisen, the “eco,” about a gallon of processed honey with proteins. It serves as fuel/food for Wombs and also for their more sophisticated products like second-generation factories and Rafts, and it will do as human food in a pinch too. UN scrip (or “dollars” as we would call them) is swiftly becoming a polite joke, as eco-based exchange is getting further organized by new banks and personal, computronium-based accounting.

Website support

Wiki at venus2141.com

Characters and groups

The text strongly recommends making a team or squad of some kind, and the setting offers a whole constellation's worth of possibilities, starting with concepts from Cyberpunk (medical team, media team, corporate merc team, direction-action political cell, band, biker/survivalist group, et cetera). It's worth considering that such a team's members may cut across a number of social and wealth divisions. Also decide upon a given colony, raft, or even a ship as an area of operations. The various gear and resources available will come with the characters as they are made, as will a substantial supporting cast.

Character creation is simple: choose six lifestyles, or steps in your character's history, each of which provides four check-marks to fill out a branching tree of skills.

- One for childhood
- One concerning how he or she got to or was born on Venus (note: this one may be placed at any logical point in the order)
- Four from young adult, early professions, and advanced professions
- Six more "skill slots" to distribute as you see fit
- 5 points of Gear per lifestyle (30 total, in maximal units of 5)
- One significant NPC per lifestyle, at least two of which must be friends and at least two of which must be enemies

The character's ethnicity, goals, location, and general mode of life emerge as a matter of browsing the setting material as you go. The actual nature and goals of the player-characters' connection with one another will probably also come under discussion or even be initiated once a character or two is under way first.

Given the amount of system application and relevant setting information, it's probably better to do "once over lightly" for all the characters, then refine and finish them later, especially for gear.

System

All of play may be affected by a currency mechanic. The "lower" level is expressed by dice. The GM starts a session with the ability to roll "racks," a number of dice based on the number of lifepaths a player-character has. He or she also has a Budget of additional racks to add to rolls equal to the number of players, so that a session's genuine adversity follows a profile set by whether the GM uses the Budget racks earlier or later. The players' dice are always available to them based on what skills they're using.

The "higher" level of the currency is expressed by Points, called Player Points and Murphy Points. The latter are available to the GM mainly through the player-characters' owning problematic Gear; the former are gained by players by making Books through the resolution system, which provides a linking mechanic between the two levels.

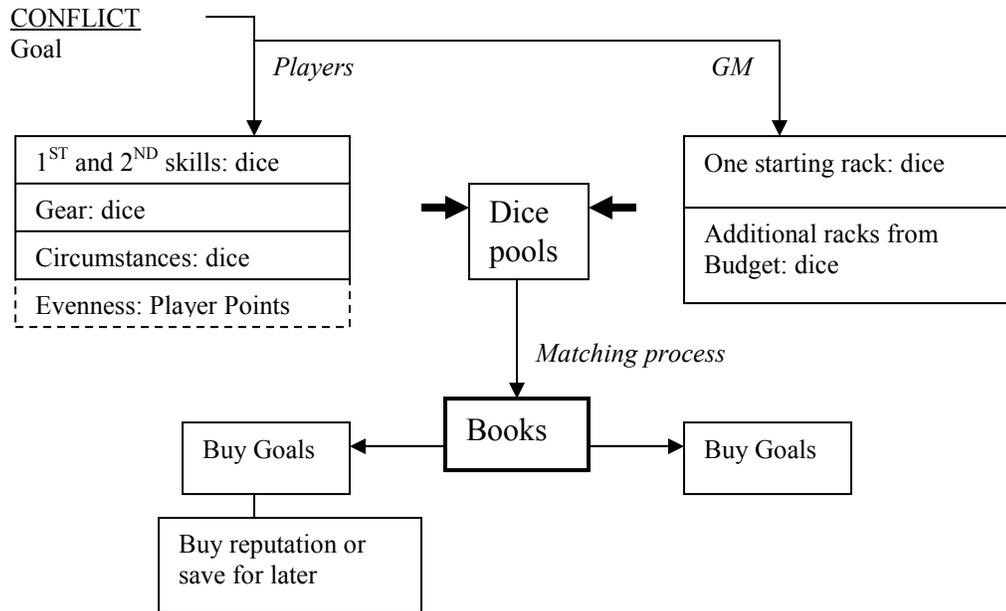
Player Points are used for serious Director Stance (scene framing, contents of scenes) and even for establishing successful goals without rolling dice. Murphy Points are typically used for negative versions of the Director Stance. So once play gets going, standard "free play" becomes rarer and higher level issues of when to spend points, and about what, play a bigger role in setting scenes, populating them, and modifying them with framing events.

Resolution

Conflict is arrived at during a scene in an opportunistic fashion, much like Sorcerer. It's resolved by stating actions and skills used, rolling and hiding dice pools, presenting and matching dice in

sub-sets, acquiring “books” based on beating and capturing the opponent’s dice in each match, and purchasing outcomes with books.

Every skill and piece of gear has a list of allowable outcomes, and the system also permits more open “negotiated” goals that arose during the role-playing of the conflict. Crucially, although you get into conflicts the usual way, when characters are interfering with one another, exactly what happens only gets chosen when the victor looks over his books and decides what to buy from the menu derived from the skills and gear he used during the process,. You may not end up focusing on whatever action the character initiated to begin the conflict, which is a lot more like Spione and different from most “state the conflict” games.



Books are the currency exchange of play

If you accumulate them in a conflict, you can use them for goals right there in that conflict or convert them into Player Points. As Player Points, you can use them for later scene framing and for bringing in useful events during scenes ... and even convert them back into Books and therefore goals before, during, and at the end of resolving new conflicts.

As far as I can tell, play doesn’t really begin to hum until after the players have a few Player Points available and the GM has cycled through a couple of sets of Murphy Points. That should establish a kind of “new medium” of how events are proceeding in the setup of scenes and the easy accomplishment of certain things, turning the dice into a specific subroutine of truly uncertain circumstances and setting up the Point numbers for the scenes to come afterwards.

Improvement

Characters acquire whole new lifestyles through play, which is actually a big deal because that means four whole “slots” for the skill tree. The process is very informal and seems to me to be a strong feature of group-based standards for how play goes: whenever a story seems concluded, whenever they do a bunch of stuff that seems consistent with that lifestyle for a while, or even “just because.”

Once you've acquired a "twig" skill, you can't make that specific thing better in raw dice terms, so improvement is mainly a matter of breadth. But that does lead into raw power in a lot of ways, because the more skills and gear you have, the more extended your conflicts become, the more wide-ranging your achievements can be (in terms of allowable goals based on what you roll into the conflict), and the bigger your dice pools can be.

The resolution rules refer to "buying Reputation" with Books, but there doesn't seem to be anything else about this in the book. It may be legacy text from earlier versions.

Gear matters!

Everyone gets 30 points for gear to start, but after that, you don't need points – you can seek to make stuff and even invent new stuff any time. The various things gear can do are expressed as Goals, and various Goals require Quality points. That's also important because you add half the gear's Quality to your dice pool when using it, too. But if you roll to make the gear, and you don't get enough successes, you get the gear just fine – but the difference is made up in Murphy Points for the GM.

This is neat in that the very retro RPG concept of adventures centered around making "items" is preserved, while also including a mechanic for altering the high-level currency in play at the time. The implications for play, with attention to other features of the system, are significant:

- Ambitious gear = plot, or rather, adversity. At the personal, character level, Murphy Points are pretty much like "another nail in the coffin" in Metal Opera anyway, so where's the harm, right? Right?
- Player Points garnered from conflicts can always be donated to others' characters – so banking them for gear construction, and also helping with auxiliary actions, can be a whole-group interactive activity.
- Since the in-fiction technology is evolving rapidly in the setting itself, the gear-making rules are not about what you can and cannot do, but about what happens next.
- It is permitted to *invent* Goals associated with your gear, specifically highly story-outcome oriented stuff, at the time of making the gear. If anything smashes the snow globe, this would be it!

Character creation example

I choose six lifestyles and put them in an order which makes most sense to me, resulting in 24 “picks.”

- Army Brat (childhood): Coordination, Physique, Discernment, Intuition
- Nihilist (teen): Personability, Authority, Intuition, Discernment
- Wanderer: Personability, Discernment, Intuition, Cognition (req. Conversation)
- Novitiate: Cognition, Cognition, Personability, Discernment (req. Religion)
- Posted: Personability, Organization, Discernment, Physique
- Priest: Personability, Authority, Cognition, Intuition (req. Religion)

The best way to read “required” is “make sure that’s in there somewhere when you’re done.”

So taking it to the sheet, I see I have Coordination 1, Physique 2, Discernment 5, Intuition 4, Personability 5, Organization 1, Authority 2, Cognition 4. Adding my 6 freebies (in italics), I get:

Authority, [Leadership, [*Coordinate*]]
Cognition, [Society, Religion], [Chemistry, [*Explosives*]]
Coordination, [*Projectiles*]
~~Design~~
Discernment, [Spy], [Research, [Risk], [People]]
Intuition, [Reflexes], [Psychology, [Memetics]]
~~Natural~~
Organization, [*Crime*]
Personability, [*Bullshit*], [Conversation], [Performance, [Oration], [Tough Crowd]]
Physique, [*Unarmed Combat*]

Having two whole un-bought categories makes a very specialized character, particularly since he’s hopeless at anything biotechnological. I decided along the way that he’s deeply engaged in blowing things up, which ties back to the Nihilist stage but also helps round out this whole “priest” business and perhaps the posting. I chose to beef him up a bit toward combat out of a sense of wariness, and out of the idea that an army brat who’d wandered a bit might know more about taking care of himself than the average priest. Don’t forget that gear is still to come too, 30 points worth.

I get one associated NPC for each lifestyle, with a minimum of two friends and two enemies. H’mmm ... putting enemies in italics: family member (much older brother, total gearhead marine type), *rich girlfriend* (every teen nihilist needs one), very normal establishment friend (stayed with him for a while while wandering), religious recruiter (probably really idealistic), contact for posting (really scary scuzzy guy, maybe a Martian smuggler), *recent lover* (whacked bio-altered chick, lives in a tank) – kind of having fun by making both of the girlfriends enemies.

That step also requires some simultaneous thought about ethnicity and naming. The implication of putting Posting second-to-last in his history implies that he’s relatively recently arrived on Venus, meaning that it might have to do with the recent unexpected wave of immigrants from Earth’s northern hemisphere.

Gear! From the listed apps, I see that Sleepless, Entertainment Surrogate (which he’d use totally up-front as a public speaker), and Fully-Replenishable Chemical Reserves all seem neat. This guy isn’t the armor-skin, acid-spitting, four-armed, leaping superhero type, so a lot of the listed ones aren’t too inspiring in this case. I’ve spent 14 and already accumulated 3 Permanent Murphy Points (uh oh). This is a good point to think about what I want this character to be like in action, and to decide his technological identity. One thing he needs is to be a good social organizer of targeted bombings – that means communication, especially. I’m presuming that some other player-character is going to be the bomb manufacturer or acquirer, so our guy here is pretty much the “face” and public organizer. So relevant gear means serious personal identity protection, too.

All right, he gets a BLU for free, like all characters unless there’s some reason not to, and a GRABber (Group Response Analyzer) is worth 4 points. That’s two more 5-point slots to go, and 2 out of one of them

goes for a standard Ditchgun – the most basic, practically disposable gun you can get, leaving 3 more from that slot if I want. The only gear I want to design from the ground up is some kind of BLU and brain-scan security, so that any means of assessing his mind will only turn up bland priest-work, probably some kind of module altering the BLU, or perhaps a specialized version of the dual-brain processor App. I save this idea for the 5-point slot, and the 3, 1, and 1 retained points for further discussion.

Whoa. I just had an amazing idea. Maybe this is my turning point for this game ... all right, so who makes the bombs in this little cell of direct-action religious dissidents? How about a woman whose ... *womb is a Womb?* She freaking *births the bombs?*

To my amazement, she's instantly easy to make up: Childhood Farmer, Prefab Refugee, Agronomist, Technician, Bioengineer, Rogue Farmer – all right, a techie Earth Mother, right there, also radicalized from an early age via the refugee situation. The final call for skills is:

Authority

Coordination

Design, [Engineer [Wombs, Factories]], [Clothing], [Software]

Natural, [Farming [Aquaculture]], [Tending [Wombs, Biosphere, Crops]], [Medicine]

Organization, [Manufacture [Wombs]], [Business [Supplies]]

Physique, [Endurance]

Cognition, [Biology], [Chemistry [Explosives]]

Personability, [Style]

Discernment, [Sense]

Oh my God – a beaded-curtained, hippie rutabaga bootlegger who births bombs. I'm starting to get the idea about this group – you have the religious front right there in the Hive, probably all Deep Ecology, this bomb-maker in her all-natural Farmers' Market rogue Raft, and certainly some kind of fixer or smuggler type connected to the Martian resistance ... and there has to be a way to get the bombs placed correctly, as well as some sort of butt-kicker side of their activity, maybe the person who provides fallback cover in an emergency. Also, one motif that's emerging is that the characters don't look threatening or Shadowrun-y at all, and probably don't think of themselves as such. The Martian guy could be a mousy little nervous type rather than a scarred veteran, and I'm getting an idea of the butt-kicker as absolutely Joe Average in persona, with simple needs and emotions.

Fuck. I just re-invented the Pump House Gang.