



***ttba:30.2***

March 2004

# Chairbeing's Address

Kate Stitt

2004 is with us, George Dubya the Second wants to go to Mars and put a colony on the Moon, and CUSFS has had an AGM and selected a new committee. So, after two great years as CUSFS Chairbeing it's time for me to bow out gracefully and hand the towel over to the next accidental traveller.

This year's committee has benefited enormously from the new faces who joined us, and we need to do the same again this year if CUSFS is going to remain a dynamic University society, responsive to the needs and interests of its members. Over the last couple of years we've been guided by what our members have been telling us, and have expanded our events into film and TV to compliment the literary fantasy and sci-fi that have always been our forte. I hope that this can continue over the next many years, and for that to happen, we need new volunteers for the committee. We've got a committee for the coming year, but if you've got something to contribute, and would like to be part of shaping CUSFS through the next year and into the future, we still want to hear from you. Please let us know on [soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk](mailto:soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk) if you're interested in helping the committee now or in taking a committee post in the future

I'd like to thank everyone who's contributed to CUSFS over the last few terms - for your ideas, and your participation and enthusiasm, and in particular all those who've organised and hosted the events we've enjoyed so much. Long may it continue!

Kate Stitt, CUSFS Chairbeing 2002-2004



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# Editorial

Owen Dunn

Many presents will have been sent and received at Christmas, but perhaps one of the more significant presents was given by the BBC to all fans of science fiction and fantasy. Its Big Read series ran from October to December last year and attempted to find Britain's favourite book. The winner is notable in itself - Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was one of the pioneers of the modern fantasy genre, and has enjoyed a renewed popularity with the film adaptations - but perhaps more revealing is the fact that of the top twenty-one books in the BBC's list, over a quarter are fantasy or science fiction.

Perhaps this isn't telling us anything we didn't already know. It's not a surprise to many *ttba* readers that *His Dark Materials* ranks up there with the best or that the comedy SF of *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* should be close to the top. Look again at the list, though. No other genre literature makes a significant appearance, and the SF and fantasy comes close to the top. Perhaps our genre isn't as niche an interest as many people thought.

"But wait!" I hear you cry, "most of those books are children's books!" Yes, they are, but most of the voters would not have been children. The programmes aired at 9pm on BBC Two and unashamedly highbrow channel BBC Four; those who voted would have been intelligent adults, and not just intelligent adults on a nostalgia trip either. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy is sufficiently recent to refute that. People are reading SF and fantasy literature because it is good and because it is intelligent, and that's something both children and adults can appreciate. Perhaps we have the Tolkiens, the Pullmans, and, yes, even the Rowlings of this world to thank for what may be the start of a very interesting shift indeed: we're going mainstream.

\* \* \*

As ever, I'd like to plead for material. It's always an effort putting together an issue of this magazine, but it's always a lot less of an effort when I have plenty of articles, stories, reviews, pictures and ideas to use. If you've read a book, seen a film, had an opinion, or even just doodled a wizard, I want to hear from you! Send your submissions to [soc-cusfs-ttba@lists.cam.ac.uk](mailto:soc-cusfs-ttba@lists.cam.ac.uk) and earn my eternal gratitude.

## The Committee

<[soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk](mailto:soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk)>

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Meadkeeper:	Sarah Amery
Runecaster:	Sally Clough

# The Gift

*David Stark*

The Farullopian ambassador stood on its three hind legs and waved its eyestalks back and forth. "Gift!", it crooned, and again, "Gift, gift!", almost falling over from its excited gesticulation.

It's happy, Miller realised, happier than I've ever seen one before. This made his stomach churn. He looked again at the strange thing on the table between them. The ambassador had brought it in this very morning, set in on the table, and announced that it was a "gift" for humanity. It was a small machine about the size of a football, a twisted shape decorated with alien swirls. There was a single blue button on the top and a small hole at what was probably the front. So far the alien had offered no explanation of its purpose, or indeed any explanation at all. This unexpected offering greatly puzzled everybody in the diplomatic corps to which Miller belonged, since so far, the Farullopians had shown no indication that the concept of giving gifts was known to them. Indeed they had shown no indication that they understood the concept of "generosity". And now, suddenly, this machine, with the ambassador more excited than Miller would have thought possible. Evidently, something was fishy here, but what? Still, he had no choice but to accept it, since the Farullopians certainly knew how to be insulted, something that he could not afford to let happen at this difficult stage of trade negotiations. If he did not accept the gift, then the aliens might use that as an excuse to withdraw hard fought-for concessions.

So he spoke into the microphone: "I am honoured to accept this gift in the name of the whole of humanity. We are very thankful. But please explain to me its purpose."

The ambassador dropped back on its forelegs and approached the table. One of its tentacles flicked out of its mouth and touched the big blue button on the top of the machine, which then hummed for a moment and spat out a small, blue gemstone. The alien took it and held it up to Miller, who was suddenly frightened. What if this is some kind of trick, he thought. What if it's trying to kill me? Poison me? I'll have to go through decontamination after this! Nevertheless he accepted the gem from the ambassador and held it towards the light. Looking into it he saw a complicated pattern of reflected light, shifting slowly but constantly. It was beautiful but totally puzzling. He put the gem away into his vest pocket and bowed to the ambassador, who held up its tentacles in return.

Thankfully it left after that and so Miller was able to get himself, the gem, and the machine into decontamination quickly. The device was screened for poisons, biologicals, explosives and radioactives, but nothing was found - it was totally inert and apparently harmless. Nevertheless it was sealed away in a hermetic container along with the gem. Miller did not believe in taking any chances, not with the Farullopians. He had himself checked through thoroughly by the doctors, who did not find anything wrong with him either. Miller was relieved, but still puzzled. He sent the container to the analysis department and then went home for the evening to lie in his bed and stare at the ceiling.

The next morning there was a preliminary report about the gift on his desk. He barely had time to leaf through it since the ambassador had arrived early. He did learn that the gems were

neither poisonous nor radioactive, but of a structure unlike any ever seen before. He also quickly scanned the various theories as to their actual purpose. The most popular one was that they were espionage devices, intended to give the aliens information about the diplomatic corps' inner workings. Another rather simple theory was that they were little bombs, though such a crude and direct attack did not make much sense; if the corps headquarters were blown up, humanity would know exactly at whose six feet to lay the blame. The inner workings of the machine were as much of a mystery as the gems themselves. It simply dispensed gem after gem when the button was pressed, and if it served any other purpose, it was not apparent. But, the report stated, perhaps this apparent function as gem-dispenser was only a distraction from some more sinister but yet unknown ability.

The Farullopian ambassador was behaving most strangely today. Until now the negotiations had proceeded at a glacial pace, with every tiny facet of the treaty examined with absurd care by the ambassador, carefully avoiding the big issues of the treaty. But now it seemed to ignore the minor points while it headed straight for the central questions. It simply went through the list of proposed articles and approved of them without even reading them through, or so it seemed. Discussions Miller had feared would take days were concluded within minutes, with the alien giving in to the human position on almost all issues. Distracted by the strange gift he could not shake from his mind, infected by the strange hurry and carelessness of his counterpart, Miller accidentally approved of a whole section of the trade compact which he had not yet properly studied. And in the middle of a discussion about tariffs the alien suddenly asked him about the gift. It wanted to know whether he liked it, and whether he found the gems it produced to his taste. Miller was utterly at a loss as to what to respond to this strange question. To my taste? Am I supposed to eat them?

"Yes, they are very... nice. Thank you." he answered haltingly. Fortunately this seemed to satisfy the alien, who then switched back to trade negotiations to the silent relief of Miller. However, the alien's proposals were becoming ever more confusing. Lost in thoughts about the gift he was unable to pay attention to the ambassador. He even had to ask it to repeat itself several times. He remembered what his instructor had said about the Farullopians: Never, ever, show them any sign of weakness on your part. Once they catch you, they will not let you go until they've sucked you dry. But what was he to do? He couldn't very well break off negotiations at this point just because he couldn't think straight anymore. That would be the greatest concession of weakness possible.

As the alien launched into another rambling proposal, his thoughts wandered to the last lines of the report he had scanned, the ones that suggested that the gems were only a distraction from the true purpose of the gift. And suddenly he knew exactly what that purpose was.

David Stark admits to being Swiss and likes complaining. He enjoys reading David Brin, Neal Stephenson, Ken MacLeod, Iain M. Banks, and Lois McMaster Bujold. Although his tastes in music are quite catholic, yodelling is right out.

*On the web:*

<http://www.zarkonnen.com/>

# Uru Live: The Once and Future Game

Vicky Clarke

Hands up anyone out there who remembers *Myst*? Good. *Riven*, anyone? *Myst III: Exile*? Yes, one or two of you, I see.. now, can anyone tell me about *Uru*?

Ah.

*Myst*, for those of you who weren't bouncing in your seats shouting 'Pick me, pick me!' was the first in an impressively successful series of PC adventure games. They stood out as games for their complete faith in the power of a truly immersive gameworld, using a totally uncluttered first-person viewpoint and puzzles relying not just on on-screen information but also on the player's memory, hearing and occasionally ability to take accurate notes. But by far the most striking feature of the series was the depth and scope of the universe they gradually uncovered. The world of *Myst* was a surrealistic set of island Ages linked by semi-magical books, sitting somewhere between steampunk and high fantasy; in *Riven* and *Exile* new, larger worlds, tantalising hints at an overarching story and a steadily increasing ability to interact with the environment immersed fans ever deeper in *Myst*'s unique blend of logic and splendour. Between games books appeared which told some of the stories behind the enigmatic people who shaped your in-game quests, and the seamless continuity, the real sense of an expanding understanding of this world and these individuals, impressed many a cynical mind and won both the games and their creators a devoted following. But even *Riven* and *Exile* were still games in a slideshow format, with static screens and limited movement. A hint of what was to come followed in the form of *RealMyst*, a 3D re-release of the original game (with an added twist in the tail, I'm told). What did follow it exceeded even the most avid fans' expectations.

In late 2003, Cyan Worlds and Ubisoft released *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, the long-awaited fourth game in the *Myst* family. (You'll note I don't say it's *Myst IV* - it isn't, and that game is yet to come). *Uru* was (is) a new kind of game, a fully 3D adventure involving physical puzzles as well as mental challenges; the player clambers and scrambles around an astonishingly beautiful, fully 3D environment, which still lacks nothing of *Myst*'s endlessly innovative and complex puzzles, full of silently waiting machinery and idiosyncratic animal life.

Not so different, I hear you say? Quite so. More freedom, but the same fundamental gameplay. That, however, was by no means all. *Uru*'s standalone game also promised *Uru Live*: a massively multiplayer online version of *Uru* that would allow adventure gamers to join forces for the first time, solving problems together in the same astonishingly realistic and beautiful 3D environment. Better yet than that was the promise of a steady stream of new content - new Ages to explore and new facets of the underlying D'ni culture to absorb, on a monthly rather than several-yearly basis. The fan community welcomed *Live* with open arms and many hailed it as a truly new idea on adventure gaming. *Live* opened in the autumn of 2003 and was instantly overwhelmed with requests to subscribe, so much so that players had to wait weeks for the then-beta servers to be expanded enough to cope with the influx. Surely the beginning of a bright

future for the ever-growing world of *Myst*.

On the ninth of February 2004, the *Uru Live* servers were shut down indefinitely. Cyan's advance announcement to the fan community stated that subscriptions to the online game simply weren't high enough to make it pay for itself, let alone keep a relatively small company afloat. Instead, the new content that would have been released to players through *Live* was to be sold in expansion packs, the first of which would be available as a free download. Reactions among hardcore fans and those who had been involved in the pilot version of *Live* were intense - some railed at Cyan, some campaigned to get *Live* reinstated or kept under consideration, others (like myself) spent every spare moment in the *Uru Live* world, exploring the cavern city we had waited years to see.

This is a review of *Uru Live* from a fan's point of view. I am one of the relative few who was there: I've explored D'ni in the company of other adventurers and watched both the game and the fan community through the last hours of *Live* as an active project, and now I want to tell you about what I saw.

## The game itself

Many new games are touted as 'a revolution in gaming'. *Uru* really was one even before considering *Uru Live*, and like any revolution it changed things in ways people weren't necessarily comfortable with straight away. When I first started the single-player game I found myself tweaking the appearance of a blandly pretty 3D avatar in the hope of getting her to at least partially resemble myself. Ho hum, I thought, at least we'll dress her in black and give her red hair. And, well, I guess I could make her nose look a bit more like mine too, and sort out that pinker-than-a-Pride-float skintone.. Some time and a hand-mirror later the patiently blinking creature on the screen actually did resemble me, if you squinted a bit. The true import of that was something I wouldn't understand until some time later.

Move on to playing *Uru* a little, and suddenly my black-clad alter-ego was standing in a sunlit New Mexico desert, looking around in some perplexity for the source of the slide guitar that drifted over the landscape. Time to learn to get around. Speaking personally I find the control mechanism in *Uru* relatively well designed; simple arrow-key movement, mouse actions to look around and two extra keys to jump and run. In next to no time I was tearing across the wasteland towards some Interesting Objects on the horizon; what I found there was a cryptic gentleman by the name of Zandi who pointed me in the direction of "the cleft". And here was the familiar ground - the first new Age. Complete with puzzles to solve, machines to fix and items to hunt around the rooms and levels. The discomfort factor lies in the fact that, console-free zone that I am, I had to quit the game and hit the hints site in order to work out that you can actually climb up and down between different levels in this game. Hey - it's an adjustment to a gamer like me, OK? You didn't do that kind of stuff in *Riven*.

This far I'd been playing *Uru Prime*, the single-player game. *Live* is something very different again. It wasn't long before I gave in to the temptation to at least register for the prologue - people on the Web forums were saying it took a while for your invitation to arrive, and I didn't want to miss out on my free month once it went paid-for. And, though I have no wish to sound melodramatic, this was where the true experience began.

## Into Live

When I registered for *Live* I was told by the software that it was "in the Prologue". A little reading around on the forums had helped me work out that the Prologue was an extended beta-test, a preliminary version of *Live* designed to allow fans to help Cyan with troubleshooting and scaling up the servers; access was still controlled at this stage and you registered yourself at [ubi.com](http://ubi.com) and waited for that all-important email to arrive. Registering was straightforward enough, and I was pleased to get my invitation within a week of signing up.

Ignoring for the moment the real world - the inevitable technical issues involved in setting up a new game are easy enough to forgive in a beta version - I found my way to Relto, my home Age, with remarkably little trouble, and had soon discovered a book which linked me to something called "the Neighbourhood". Linking into this Age, I found myself in a beautifully paved square with a flowing fountain, facing a helpful signboard (along with a surreal crop of orange traffic cones) which pointed me to more information about getting something called a KI. Yes, I thought; this is *Myst*; this is what I was expecting. Rather more information than I'd learnt to expect from a *Myst* puzzle, in fact. I followed the signs and was soon far more normally confused, wandering aimlessly around another gorgeous marble-floored courtyard and trying doors as the trail of signs dried up.

This, you see, was home. Like the awe-inspiring ages of *Myst* and *Riven*, this beautiful place was majestic, silent and still. All the infinite worlds of *Myst* were and always had been populated only by you; your companions were the clacks and hisses of steampunk mechanical devices you yourself had set in motion, and the only signs of life distant and fleeting views of grainy game characters in set patterns of motion. When you got stuck you got stuck, and either waited for inspiration or quit the game entirely. Even *Myst III's* new direction was only a new set of computer characters with limited sets of responses.

Lost in concentration, I barely noticed it when a couple of minutes later, a girl in shorts, T-shirt and baseball cap came up to me and asked me for directions to the same place I was trying to get to. I explained that I was new here myself and we wondered for a few minutes where exactly this mysterious classroom might be, before I wandered over to a linking book on a nearby pedestal to investigate where it might take me. In the distance I noticed a man running along a bridge - and a few seconds later he was in the room with us, dancing about to get our attention.

And suddenly it dawned on me; I'm not alone any more. That was the true beauty of *Uru Live*: it connected you to the entire community of your fellow players. Link in to your home neighbourhood and meet people wearing everything from loud Hawaiian shirts to alien-looking suits, tie-dye to button-down, in all shapes, colours and sizes imaginable. Friends and acquaintances greeted you with a wave, punched the air when something finally went right, or sat down with you to talk. Some would hold out to you a Linking Book and invite you to their own home Age. Conversations held through the KI communicator floated across vast distances and even between Ages, rambling through everything from personal chat to team games and puzzle-solving in the Ages themselves. Elaborately curse your frustration and other explorers laughed with you; ask for hints and someone would help out while at least three others kibitzed from the sidelines. The game which finally showed

*Myst* fans the fallen cavern city of D'ni brought the citizens with it.

And the content - the city itself - was nothing short of our fannish expectations either. We knew of Kerath's Arch, dominating the city harbour, from books that had first appeared years ago. My first sight of it on linking in to the city itself was awe-inspiring, and I joined a small army of dumbstruck players in admiring it from the long steps leading up into the island behind. Starting to explore, I was soon following a helpful soul as he gave me directions, and not long after that having the surreal Marker Game, a hunt around the city for dozens of floating locator dots, explained to me by someone who I believe may have been French. This was my first experience of online gaming, and already I saw just how absorbing and immersing it could be. Watching other players explore, chat and exploit quirks of the game (such as a tight-rope walk up a tent rope, leaving them floating in mid-air like circus magicians) adds an immense depth and sense of companionship to a world which had been richly detailed from the start.

*Live* genuinely did unite an immense group of like-minded people, and the achievements of that nascent community were impressive. The game was online for only a few short months; but by the time the servers finally shut down, player-organised bodies had already emerged and begun to flourish. The D'ni Linguistic Fellowship dedicated itself to researching the D'ni language, whose flowing script had first fascinated us in *Riven*; D'ni inscriptions decorated walls, objects and monuments everywhere in the cavern. The D'ni League of Activities (D'LA) organised events from ballroom dancing (with avatars!) to contests in herding the ubiquitous orange cones and tournaments in Ahyoheek and the impressive Wall Game, games built into the Ages themselves. The Echo, a cavern newspaper, provided news of "building work" and plot-related events. A Guild of Greeters crystallised remarkably quickly, helping to welcome new players and ease their passage into the game, and a Guild of Cartographers made some stunning progress at mapping the cavern. And that's without even thinking about the innumerable forums and fansites - following in the footsteps of former *Riven* resources site [Rivenguild.com](http://Rivenguild.com), sites like [UruObsession.com](http://UruObsession.com) and the D'niPedia Writers' Ring filled the Web with help and resources for players.

The need for those resources steadily grew. Even in the prologue stage, puzzling and fascinating events had the whole community agog. Vanished explorer Phil Henderson reappeared in one of the strangest and most eerie places in the game, talking incoherently but urgently about a mysterious experience and a need to understand, and left again as abruptly as he appeared. Zardo, the player alerted to this "strange signal" by the DRC, recounted on Ubi's discussion boards his incredible sense of involvement; for the time he was talking to this confused prodigal he was truly immersed in the game, considering his political alliances and choosing his words carefully, trying to tease out hints as to just where Mr Henderson had been and wondering what, if anything, to tell the rigid bureaucrats of the DRC itself. This, surely, was the true immersive experience Cyan had worked to bring to us all these years; this was the first tantalising hint of what was yet to come.

### What went wrong? Why was *Live* postponed?

To me, *Live's* greatest problem was that it never got out of 'the prologue', the beta test version. There were many, many

technical and accessibility issues with the beta, from lag and crashes to a severely limited subset of the City itself being available for exploration: the whole Age was peppered with barriers and blinking yellow safety lights, delimiting areas which were off-limits to even the most ingenious leaps and scrambles. Bugs manifested themselves in bizarre and hilarious ways; it was possible to levitate your avatar in Yoda-like meditation with judicious use of the controls, and linking into your home Age would occasionally cause you to skydive in belly-down from a point some fifty feet above the ground; on landing your avatar would faceplant through the top of the island itself, leaving you staring in confusion into blank grey mist. Server problems meant a maximum of 35 users at a time could be admitted to the city Age on any one shard (server cluster). With this many glitches and restrictions, even the most diehard fan couldn't honestly have said it was an unalloyed delight to play. Grassroots advertising - 'hey, try this great game I've got, you'll love it' - is one of the most powerful ways any game gains players, and with *Live* in beta there just wasn't anything good enough to advertise caveat-free. Quite personally, a fully working and playable *Live* would have been something I proselytised to anyone who'd listen and quite a few who wouldn't.

There was also a rather alienating element of "not-quite-roleplay" implied in the official game information websites and communications (see [www.drcsite.org](http://www.drcsite.org) for some sterling examples). My invitation to the Prologue beta test, when it did arrive, came in the form of a message from in-game hintmaster Zandi - a message so cryptic that it took a call to the technical support line before I could work out the correct way to register my game with the *Live* servers. To give the lie to that, in my day job I'm a professional systems administrator. Information about the status and progress of the beta was frustratingly sparse, and presented when it did arrive in doubletalk announcements from members of "the DRC", a bureaucratic body allegedly in charge of the restoration of the city of D'ni within the game itself. They did not improve the flow of information - since the shutdown I've spoken to at least one person who hadn't realised the Prologue was free and couldn't make head or tail of the website in any case.

Now I'll freely admit that I'm not a roleplayer, and in fact roleplaying games tend to irritate me in the main. But this isn't just a matter of rolling my eyes at ham acting and creaking plots. As far as I'm concerned, the problem with the roleplay element lies in the fact that a *Myst* game isn't fun because I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. The fun of *Myst* is in immersing my own ordinary self in a fantastical world of puzzling and thinking, a world that rewards the things I do with the clatter of hidden machinery and the opening up of lush and beautiful new avenues of exploration. In the previous *Myst* games there's no barrier to the player inserting himself into the gameworld; roleplaying by definition introduces a divide between character and player. Make it a challenge to get myself into that rewarding gameworld, and I start to lose my enthusiasm for the job. As a long-term *Myst* fan, I wanted *Live* to be just like playing *Myst*, but online; the quasi-roleplay element took that certainty of what my role in the game was away. To feel that I'm supposed to have 'a character' in order to interact with other people in an online game destroys the sense that I'm connecting with other people who love *Myst* the same way I do.

Accessibility issues didn't stop there either. There were the punishing minimum system requirements that forced me to

upgrade my PC to play the single-player game, and the need for a broadband Internet connection to play *Live*. Then there's the human factor; the *Myst* series has an immense appeal to a huge range of ages, from teens to late sixties on at least one forums site. That's a very diverse group to be making assumptions about in terms of technical ability and interests. One middle-aged woman remarked that when she first started playing *Live* she had no idea that one used the chat function simply by starting to type and then pressing Enter. Add to that the DRC's cryptic pronouncements and you've got one hell of a learning curve there.

Outside of reasons individual players might have been put off signing up, industry commentators have cited many potential problems with *Uru Live* since the closedown. The most convincing of their points is the suggestion that neither makers Cyan nor publishers Ubi had realised exactly how long and slow the ramp up to profitability would be for a MMOG and just how much effort would be involved in maintaining it; the spectacular failure of *The Sims Online* was much cited as a similar issue. Common sense suggests that there must be a few strange, misguided souls in the world who actually don't see devoting hours a week to an online computer game as a particularly appealing hobby; and of those of us normal people who do like the idea, how many already have a world we're deeply immersed in, and no time to take on another?

### Conclusions, and the future

According to Cyan's final announcement, *Uru Live* has not been definitively cancelled; simply "postponed indefinitely". That in itself speaks of the kernel of the issue: *Uru* was a game before its time. As a wise member of the Lyst mailing list pointed out, gamers in general are still in their vast majority teenagers and twentysomethings - those who have the money, the time and the inclination to get deeply involved. And game stores are aimed at and associated with the market their products sell best in. Sell a game like *Uru* in a high-street games store and it's unlikely to catch the eye of the type of people who'd enjoy it; your parents would love *Uru*, but how often do they visit Electronics Boutique on a Saturday afternoon? Only weeks after Christmas I bought my copy of *Uru* in a sale, after scouring the whole town for the one game shop that stocked the game at all. The advent and increasing success of *Myst*-like games speaks of a broadening market for computer games in general; but the market hasn't yet broadened enough that high-street games stores and online gaming concepts have reached the older (and, dare I say it, less geeky) sectors of the *Myst*-playing demographic.

Second to questions of reaching the right people, *Uru Live* as it was presented assumed a player who liked role-play and was much more familiar with Internet chat and gaming than the typical *Myst*-series player really is. I personally have no doubt that those alienating elements combined with the technical woes of the only playable version of *Live* to greatly reduce the number of people intrigued enough to sign up. Personally I'd be interested to find out whether Cyan simply misjudged their demographic and their timing (too fannish about their own game perhaps), or whether they bowed to pressure from financial backers Ubisoft and widened their aim to include a known market for MMORPGs.

Comments from Cyan content manager Bill Slease emphasise the undeniable value of the alternative expansion pack model

for *Uru* in opening up the world while keeping the game accessible to players without broadband Internet. A Mac version is also now in development, and expansion packs certainly offer near-infinite flexibility - "*Uru: the LAN Party*" could be in the pipeline as we speak. However, in spite of all this there is no question that both Cyan and game fans consider the demise of *Uru Live* a great loss, and would dearly have liked to see it otherwise. Fans are already wondering how to keep the community together and alive now that the cavern is no longer a central point of contact.

My take on *Live*? I was there, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I saw D'ni and I wondered aloud at it to my fellow explorers and friends. I spent the last hours of *Uru Live* with the friends I'd met only a short time before. At ten in the evening I was sitting by the fountain in my home neighbourhood, quietly chatting with the assembled company amid a mood of gentle melancholy. Two hours later I was climbing trees and jumping waterfalls with a gang of girlfriends, shouting to one another as we ran across grassy valleys and took endless photographs of our little group in the bright afternoon sun of a different world. As the night wore on into early morning and the shutdown started to loom, I found myself sitting on a rocky island in the middle of an endless sea of cloud, talking to a forty-year-old woman from Oregon about chocolate brownies and redwood trees; we laughed and bonded as a pink and purple sky shifted and blended above us, the colours like oil on swirling water. At 5am UK time when the shutdown finally came, I felt the loss of the game as if I'd seen off an old friend leaving for another country; a surprising sense of warmth, nostalgia and loss.

I'm with Zardo, the same player who first saw Phil Henderson return, describing *Live* on the Lyst a few days after the shutdown: "*Uru Live*, that bug-infested, lag-o-matic, BSOD-inducer, can-I-even-log-on monstrosity - boy, did I have some great times."

As for its future? I very much hope it has one.

*On the web:*

<http://www.thelysts.com/>

The Lyst, for discussion of all *Myst* games

<http://uru.ubi.com/us/>

*Uru* main site

<http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/ucgi/~vclarke/gallery?dir=photos/urulive>

The author's own experience of *Live* in screenshots

## Reviews

### **Monstrous Regiment** **Terry Pratchett**

This is the story of a young girl who cuts her hair short in order to join her small country's army so she can find her missing brother. There's one slight problem; the country's prevailing religion is fanatically opposed to the idea of cross-dressing (not to mention a vast catalogue of other things).

Despite the Discworld pedigree, it is not necessary to have read

any of the others in order to follow what's going on; the characters and settings are all new, save for a couple of cameo appearances by the Ankh-Morpork City Watch. It's a fine tale, exploring gender equality in Pterry's unique style; it kept me laughing. Recommended.

*Ross Younger*

### **Fool's Fate** **Robin Hobb**

Well, I've finally finished it after one 2am session and a lot of sneak reading at work. And on average I have to say it's a fantastic end to the series. Gripping enough to keep me up, unpredictable enough to keep me fascinated, it has both the culmination of the things that have been slowly building throughout the nine books and a warmly detailed tying-up of the loose ends of the characters' lives.

Well, most of them, at any rate; one of Hobb's strengths is that the ending is never implausibly perfect and complete, despite the fact that her worlds are steeped in a sense of the overwhelming importance of the bonds and balances between living creatures. In *Fool's Fate* there is a sense of acceptance, both of the last task ahead and, once the task is done, of peace and the future. Fate features large throughout the book, shaking the plot time and time again out of its rut just as you thought you had it sussed; it acts in the guise of everything from ancient wisdom suddenly rediscovered to wilful matriarchs, old secrets, human foibles and vengeful prophetesses. Hobb finally explores in this last of the trilogy the culture of the Outislander raiders, enemies of the feudalistic Six Duchies since the start of the entire series; she renders it with a striking depth despite a certain heavy-handedness with the exposition, and I found myself hungry for a more detailed exploration of the world behind these raw, honourable people.

Characterisation is another of Hobb's strengths, and our familiar cast of grouchy linchpin Fitz, spymaster Chade, the enigmatic Fool and Queen Kettricken is supplemented by both the return of old friends and the addition of new. Thick, the talented halfwit, adds an immense richness to the tale; he is entirely enough of a loose cannon to prevent boredom and yet manages to escape becoming a caricature. The developing monarch within Queen Kettricken's son changes the reader's perception with every chapter too; most of all, however, as has been the case throughout the series, the refraction and refinement of Fitz's stubborn and pessimistic nature through the events of the book is central both to the main plot and to the widening changes in the book's world. Without wanting to give spoilers, I will say that in this book Fitz's development is a joy to those who took an instantaneous liking to the bewildered, loyal boy of *Assassin's Apprentice*. The network of connections and interactions between characters both human and non-human (no, there are no bloody elves) is what gives life to this book; set as it is in long journeys and cramped quarters, there is little else for the characters to do but intrigue, fight and change each other in the doing of it. The Fool of the title is never stripped of the mystique he has held since the first trilogy; he only becomes still more confusing until the final third of the book, where we finally begin to see him in his true context and to glimpse the person at the confluence of his ever-shifting roles.

Fundamentally this is fantasy in the grand tradition of a hero's journey; the difference between Hobb and the hack lies in the fact that the learning process itself is what drives the book

forward. Our heroes are many and their lessons come hard, even though they are vital to ultimate success; nothing is perfect or moral, and dramatic changes in their world occur more as a side-effect of the human tensions and turmoil than by their joint attempt to win out. The eleventh hour is everything and nothing is certain until it has already taken place. This book is both the brilliant culmination of the Assassin, Liveships and Tawny Man series and a classic of Hobb's style; I for one will be greatly looking forward to whatever may come next.

Vicky Clarke

### **The Elder Gods David and Leigh Eddings**

*The Elder Gods* is the latest of the books written by David and Leigh Eddings. With this work they return both to fantasy and to the series - another three books are due to follow this one, each one presumably dealing with a different quadrant of the Land of Dhrall.

Dhrall is ruled by eight Gods in rotation, four sleeping and four awake at any time. At the time of the book the four younger Gods are due to sleep soon, and the four elder to awake. Unfortunately the Gods are most vulnerable at this point, so the Lord of the Wasteland has chosen this time to attempt to take control of the Land of Dhrall.

This book is a refreshing change after *The Redemption of Althalus*. While it will never be nominated for any prizes, *The Elder Gods* displays the Eddings' command of dry humour and dialogue in much the same way as their earlier works did. While many of the characters are similar to those in their earlier works, there are others who are quite different, and the plot is quite dissimilar to the Belgariad/Malloreon or Elenium/Tamuli cycles -- no Blue Plot Devices here!

Disappointingly, though, there are places where I can see the Eddings setting up plot items for the future books; something which I would hope would slip past me unseen, and one of the major characters is an almost direct copy of Flute from the Elenium, where I could have hoped for something more original. In conclusion, if you like the Eddings' style, give this one a try, but it probably isn't worth buying in hardback. I'm not eagerly awaiting the next one, but will certainly pick a copy up when it comes out.

Jonathan Amery

### **Permutation City, Axiomatic, Quarantine Greg Egan**

Your brain, digitised? I was introduced to *Permutation City* as the Unix "fork" operation, but for consciousness: one of you before, two of you after, one of whom is a program, able to run on a supercomputer. Egan explores future technologies and infrastructure which make this possible in fascinating detail, reminding us en route that there are "haves" and "have nots", and that not everyone wants to live forever.

*Axiomatic* is a collection of short stories, some quite dark, exploring many of Egan's ideas; they hint at concepts explored more fully in his novels. It is a good read and equally good to dip into. It made me laugh a couple of times, but disturbed me much more.

A tale of security and its implications, *Quarantine* begins with a

kidnapping and ends up a world away. Egan leads us down a very thought-provoking road, with echoes of probability and quantum physics though no degree is required to follow what's going on - and a near-future where neural modifications are commonplace, even desirable.

Ross Younger

### **A Fire Upon the Deep Vernor Vinge**

"Drop everything," exclaimed the committee members I was chatting with, "and read this book." I think they were right. This is a fascinating space epic. For me, it was not so much about suspending disbelief, as embracing the worlds Vinge has created. We hear about beings and technology so powerful we'd think of them as gods, strange aliens on a medieval world, treasure that's not what it seems and, caught up in the middle of it all, humans. It's all tied together with galactic USENET, and a whole new meaning to the phrase "hearing oneself think".

Ross Younger

### **Quicksilver Neil Stephenson Heinemann hardback, £16.99 ISBN: 0434008176**

*Quicksilver*, the latest weighty tome from Stephenson, is marketed as a prequel to *Cryptonomicon*. In some ways it is a prequel; cryptography and the value of information run through both works, and some of the characters involved appear to be the ancestors of those in *Cryptonomicon*; but there appears to be no connection between the plots of the two books and *Quicksilver* might as well stand alone. It is also described as "Volume One of the Baroque Cycle", which suggests that there are more yet to come.

*Quicksilver* is set after the Restoration, and spans most of the life of Daniel Waterhouse, one of the first Natural Philosophers. Waterhouse associates with, and is overshadowed by, such luminaries as Hooke, Newton and Leibniz. The big debates of early natural philosophy form a natural backdrop to the plot, notably the development of the calculus and subsequent precedence question.

The main thread of the plot follows the English succession, and the politics between William of Orange and Louis of France, with a second lead character -- a woman known as Eliza -- being used to detail most of the events on the continent.

I can't decide if I like this book or not. In a lot of ways it's better written than *Cryptonomicon*, his technique seems to have generally improved, and plot-segments feel less implausible than many of parts of *Cryptonomicon*, and the digressions are more often "shown" than "told".

On the other hand he appears to have lost a lot of the fun from his writing. One of the best bits about *Cryptonomicon* was that you could open it up anywhere and be close to an interesting fact, or a fun (if implausible) piece of plot, whereas finding something of similar quality in *Quicksilver* takes some effort. A conclusion here might be that Stephenson has improved his average quality, but decreased the variability in the process.

The other problem is the pacing. Most of Stephenson's books have a pacing problem -- it's too fast in one place and too slow in another -- and a nice thing about *Cryptonomicon* is that the

scene keeps changing between the war and the present day, so that if you're going slow in one section then the next is likely to be quite different. For most of the way through *Quicksilver*, on the other hand, we follow a single character's perspective for a long period, so that the slow sections get a chance to overwhelm you and significantly reduce your interest in continuing with the book.

I enjoyed large sections of the book, all the way through to the end, which was disappointingly lacking in a conclusion, although this may be explained by it being a "Volume One". When I put the book down, though, I was left with a general feeling of dissatisfaction about it.

I think Stephenson fans will want to read it, but I would recommend that they don't purchase the hardback edition until they have read a significant portion of it. The paperback is due to be published on the 7th October this year (Arrow, ISBN 0099410680).

Jonathan Amery

## Twenty-Three Billion Ångstroms

Jonathan Amery

The presses stood quiet, the only sound the bubbling of the large vat of molten lead. The great rolls of paper stood ready, and an ifrit was idly sharpening the giant blade that divided the print into sheets.

Three imps and a djinn sat at a makeshift table, playing cards and watching their prince pace up and down the shop floor.

The editor, for such was he, was panicked --- deadline due, but no title. But then, an inspiration! The editor sketched out a design for the artist who produced a cover.

"Roll the Presses! *Twenty-Three Billion Ångstroms* is ready!"

B	A	G	G	A	G	E		P	E	P
R		U		O		P		K	I	P
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	M		T		H		R		C	R
C	A	R	O	L	I	N	E		H	P
A		A			C	O	N	V	E	N
D		N				T		S		I
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A			I		R		E			L
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## Consternation: A Plug

David Damerell

Consternation will be a convention run under the auspices of the British Roleplaying Society on August 12th-14th, 2005 in New Hall college; I should mention that this not the weekend of the Worldcon.

Like previous BRS conventions we have an SF-style programme stream rather than the competitive gaming that characterises other roleplaying conventions; our Guests of Honour in 2005 will be David Pulver (whose works include *Transhuman Space* and a number of GURPS supplements) and Marcus Rowland (most notable for *Forgotten Futures* and *Diana: Warrior Princess*), and the con is normally attended by a number of other industry figures.

Naturally there will be at least one bar (and, we hope, a second bar serving beer from Cambridge's Milton Brewery); and of course New Hall is convenient for Cambridge residents, although accomodation should be modestly priced for those further afield. Presently membership is priced at 20 pounds, although there may be an increase after July 2004.

More details can be found at <http://www.consternation.org.uk/>

# Hall of Fame 2003-2004

Clare Boothby

There were 24 votes. The results include only things which were voted for by at least three people, except for the short stories where this would cut the results down to one story!

## Best SF author:

195	Iain M Banks		
148	Greg Egan		
123	Arthur C Clarke		
98	Philip K Dick	58	Lois McMaster Bujold
94	Neal Stephenson	58	Ursula le Guin
93	Isaac Asimov	53	Michael Marshall Smith
87	Vernor Vinge	50	Peter F Hamilton
70	Douglas Adams	50	Robert Heinlein
68	Ken MacLeod	49	Ray Bradbury
62	Alasdair Reynolds	47	Orson Scott Card
58	Clifford Simak	44	David Weber
58	Cordwainer Smith	41	Larry Niven

## Best fantasy author:

173	Terry Pratchett		
167	JRR Tolkien		
129	Ursula K le Guin		
123	JK Rowling	54	Terry Goodkind
107	Neil Gaiman	50	Stephen Donaldson
90	Robin Hobb	48	Raymond E Feist
78	Diana Wynne Jones	47	Mary Gentle
64	David Gemmell	47	Susan Cooper
58	China Mieville		

## Best SF book:

90	A Fire Upon The Deep (Vernor Vinge)
59	Ender's Game (Orson Scott Card)
55	Use of Weapons (Iain M Banks)
50	The Left Hand of Darkness (Ursula le Guin)
48	Neuromancer (William Gibson)
47	Dune (Frank Herbert)

## Best fantasy book:

97	Lord of the Rings (JRR Tolkien)
72	Perdido Street Station (China Mieville)
57	Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
57	Magician (Raymond E Feist)
56	Ash (Mary Gentle)

## Best Short Story:

56	Flowers for Algernon, Daniel Keyes
40	The Nine Billion Names of God, Arthur C Clarke
39	I have no mouth and I must scream, Harlan Ellison
37	Snow, Glass, Apples, Neil Gaiman
33	The Infinite Assassin, Greg Egan

## Best Comic/Graphic Novel:

152	Sandman
72	Watchmen
54	Preacher

## Best TV/radio series:

234	The Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy (radio)		
152	Babylon 5		
152	Red Dwarf		
131	The Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy (TV)	61	Star Trek
		53	Star Trek: TNG
119	Dr Who	49	Buffy the Vampire Slayer
101	Blake's Seven		
86	Star Trek: DS9	48	Farscape
73	The Clangers	45	Stargate: SG-1

## Best Film:

167	Lord of the Rings		
109	Bladerunner		
104	The Empire Strikes Back		
71	Brazil	50	Minority Report
70	The Matrix	47	Terminator 2
70	Star Wars	47	Return of the Jedi
68	Spirited Away	47	Aliens
68	2001	46	Princess Mononoke
55	Galaxy Quest	45	Dark Star
53	Gattaca	44	Labyrinth
51	Dune	44	Alien
51	Dark City		

## Best Series:

164	Discworld (Terry Pratchett)		
84	Foundation (Isaac Asimov)		
76	The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy (Adams)		
75	Farseer (Robin Hobb)	55	Chronicles of Narnia (CS Lewis)
72	Harry Potter (JK Rowling)	54	Amber (Roger Zelazny)
71	Inhibitor series (Alasdair Reynolds)	54	Sword of Truth (Terry Goodkind)
69	Earthsea Trilogy (Ursula le Guin)	51	His Dark Materials (Phillip Pullman)
58	Engines of Light Trilogy (Ken Macleod)	51	The Dark is Rising (Susan Cooper)

## Worst (Best?) Trash:

98	The Eye of Argon
74	assorted works by Robert Heinlein
74	Discworld
71	assorted works by David Eddings

## Best Spaceship:

94	GSV Sleeper Service (Excession)
90	The TARDIS (Dr Who)
78	Enterprise D (Star Trek)
73	Liberator (Blake's 7)
68	Heart of Gold (Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy)
55	Nostalgia for Infinity (Reynolds, Revelation Space)

## Best Wizard:

136	Gandalf (Lord of the Rings)
110	Rincewind (Discworld)
71	Ged (Earthsea)
71	Dumbledore (Harry Potter)
55	Zeddicus Zul Zorander (Sword of Truth)

## Most fanciable: no consensus!