

The SFRPGs of 1983

A Pre-Origins Review

by William A. Barton

In many ways, 1983 could be considered a banner year for science fiction role-playing games: Several major new systems — and a number of minor ones — were released during the year, and a few existing systems saw their horizons expanded as well. Now we are well into 1984, and Origins is just around the corner. There, the Best Role-Playing Game of 1983 will be announced. It seems like a good time to take a look back at last year's SFRPG offerings.

Perhaps I should define what I mean by science fiction role-playing games, since my definition and yours may not exactly coincide. Within the field of SF, I include starships-and-alien games, and such obvious spin-offs as the after-the-holocaust genre. I also extend the term to include games involving superheroes, espionage, detectives, and mercenaries — in short, anything that is technologically oriented in some way and/or does not fall specifically into the category of fantasy. This would extend the definition to include games that mix science fiction and the supernatural, such as Tri-Tac's *Stalking the Night Fantastic* or Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*, even though



these are normally grouped with the fantasy RPGs. I'll leave in limbo that somewhat nebulous category, the "historical" RPG, of which the only notable new example released in 1983 was FGU's *Privateers and Gentlemen*.

Finally, I should include the disclaimer that I will not include *every* SFRPG published in 1983. It's simply impossible for one person to keep track of everything in a field that is so diverse and growing so rapidly. If I overlook or otherwise slight your favorite game, I apologize in advance. I might also point out that there's always the letters column available for those who might demand equal time.

Last year seemed to be *the* year for licensing coups, as two of the most popular TV/movie series of all time were translated into role-playing games. I'm referring, of course, to FASA's *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game* and Victory Games' *James Bond 007: Role Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service*. Both games were released with top-quality packaging, a lot of support material either initially or immediately following, and a lot of expectation in the gaming world at large. And both seem to have sold quite well (most copies of either game disappearing off the shelves of local gaming stores soon after their release). Both games, too, will soon be supported by magazines published by their parent or affiliated companies — FASA's *Stardate* and Avalon Hill's *Heroes* (which I assume will feature Bond material more or less regularly, considering Victory Games' ties with AH). Of the two, however, *Star Trek* seems to be the biggest winner, at least in my opinion — and not only because it was released so much earlier in the year than the Bond game.

While James Bond may be one of the most notable figures of modern popular culture, *Star Trek* is a phenomenon. That fact alone ensures that a game based on the *Star Trek* mythos will be a bestseller. The fact that the game is also well-designed and quite playable clinches it. In fact, according to Howard Barasch's *Insider* newsletter, *Star Trek* outsold *Traveller*, *Star Frontiers*, and *Space Opera* in Sears' 1983 Christmas catalog. And sales continue to be strong.

Faithful in the extreme to the established *Star Trek* universe of the TV series and movies, *ST:RPG* has fulfilled the dream I think most SFRPGers have had at one time or another — to beam aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise* or one of her sister ships; lock phasers onto a Klingon battlecruiser; employ the Vulcan nerve pinch on an opponent; or simply explore strange new worlds, discover new civilizations, and boldly go where no man has gone before. And it has done this in an extremely playable, yet relatively complete manner — hence its popularity. *ST:RPG* also has the distinction of featuring the first — and so far only — starship combat system designed specifically for role-playing, as opposed to the ship-to-ship boardgame modules previous SFRPGs such as *Traveller* or *Universe* offered. A definite step ahead.

FASA has produced a fair number of support materials for *ST:RPG*. Three adventures were released in 1983 — *The Vanished*, *Witness for the Defense*, and

Denial of Destiny, each offering different adventure possibilities for Federation crews. Two *Ship Recognition Manuals*, *The Federation* and *The Klingon Empire*, as well as a *Ship Construction Manual* for custom



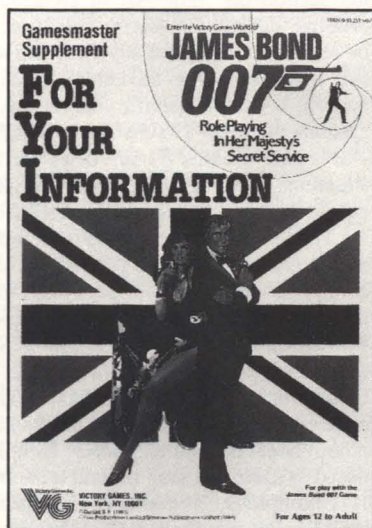
designing your own starships, further expanded the ship-to-ship combat possibilities of the game. And a GM Shield, which added a few previously mentioned but undescribed weapons and a new rule for wide-beam phaser stun, presented the major charts and tables of the game in a convenient, easy-to-use format.

The first major expansion of the *ST* rules system appeared in mid-'83: *Trader Captains and Merchant Princes* (see capsule review on page 38). It allowed mercantile-minded players to create merchant characters, extended the world-generation system to cover trade and commerce ratings, provided the best interstellar trade rules of *any* game so far (including *Traveller*), and included guidelines on mapping out areas of space for play. More importantly, it squelched two of the main criticisms some players had of the main game in that *TC&MP* allowed for campaign play rather than the episodic play of *ST:RPG*, and it opened the game to characters who *didn't* have to follow the orders and dictates of Star Fleet Command. The supplement thus allowed players who like to portray the slightly larcenous, roguish character-types so typical of *Traveller* and other SFRPGs — the chance to be the Harry Mudds and Cyrano Joneses of the *Star Trek* universe.

For those who like to play characters who are *more* than slightly on the wrong side of the law, 1983 also saw the release of FASA's *The Klingons* character generation supplement and sourcebook. This addition to the *Trek* series gave players the opportunity to play real baddies by creating Klingon characters. It also further extended ship combat with GM control sheets for both the old and new *Enterprise* and

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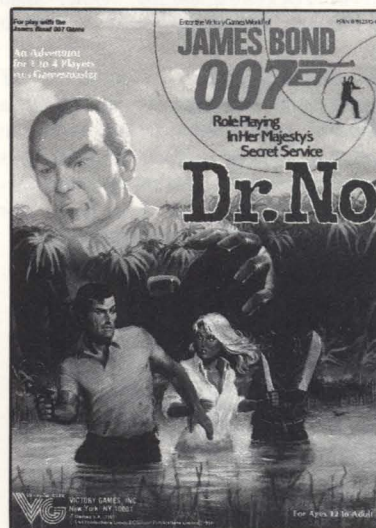
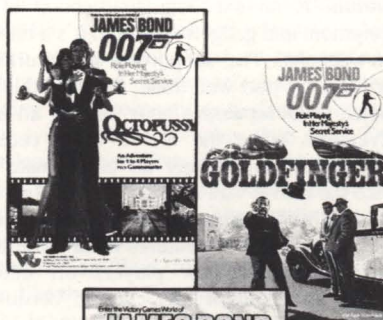
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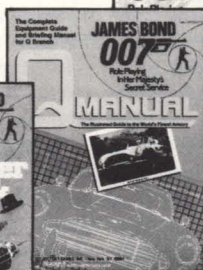
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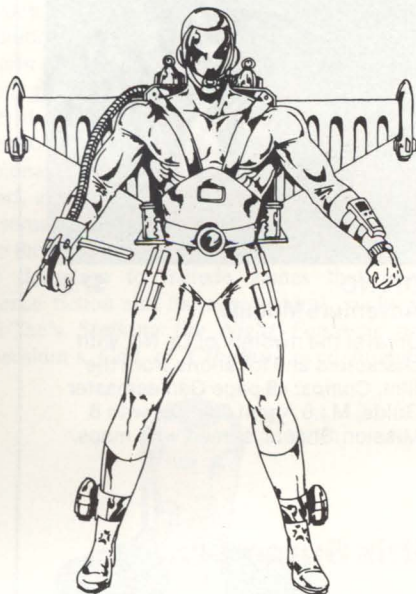
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the *Reliant*, and provided a wealth of background information on the Klingon Empire and its relations with the Federation, Romulans and others. Even if one never intended to play a Klingon, the extended information on Klingon politics, history, and culture made this supplement a worthwhile investment for *Trek* gamers and GMs. Personally, I didn't care a lot for the concept of the Klingon-human or Klingon-Romulan "fusions" as an explanation for the difference between the Klingons of the TV series and those of the first movie — ideas apparently derived from co-designer John Ford's Klingon novel from Pocket/Timescape. Other than that, I found the supplement excellent material.

FASA has plans for a lot more *ST* supplements and expansions, including a revised Basic edition of the rules with an option to attend college to gain increased skills in science and medicine, and an extended starship combat simulator. I see *Star Trek: The*



Role Playing Game as the front runner for Best Role Playing Game at Origins — or, at the very least, a serious contender.

James Bond 007 was, on the other hand, a serious disappointment to me. I had high expectations, based on the subject matter and the reputations and past credits of its design team. Unfortunately, while the game remains true to its sources in most instances, the game system itself is a disappointing mishmash of overly simple and overly complex rules. For example, damage is figured simply as "light wounds" or "heavy wounds," rather than as specific numbers of points removed from an individual's Hit Points, Constitution or other attribute. This has the effect of making all characters pretty much the same as far as damage-taking ability goes. In contrast, the game sports a bewildering number of charts to which the GM must refer in order to determine success in almost anything, making play much slower and more cumbersome than necessary. A simpler system for determining success in a

task, such as rolling dice directly against a character's skill level or attribute score, might have been preferable to the chart system used by the designers of *007*.

Another sore point in *007* was the omission of SPECTRE and the substitution of the colorless TAROT. Obviously this was due to contractual problems over *Thunderball* (the first Bond story in which SPECTRE appeared) and the remake, *Never Say Never Again*. Still, what is Bond without the spectre of SPECTRE hanging over him? TAROT just doesn't make it. Since SPECTRE appeared in other Bond novels and movies, I'd think *something* could have been worked out. If not, I, for one, could have done without a wimpy substitute.

While not what it could have been, the Bond game does have its good points. It does recreate the feel of the movies (if not the novels), and has some nice bits such as the "hero points" that can be used by players to snatch their characters from certain death, just like in the movies. The game's skill list is certainly adequate, and the accompanying *Q Manual* is an excellent sourcebook of spy equipment and gadgetry, though it's a bit weak on weapons. The supporting adventures are for the most part well done, though I think the choice of *Octopussy* a poor one for an initial adventure, since the movie is so recent a release, and *Goldfinger* an unfortunate one, since the movie was recently aired on network TV for the first time in years. Changes in the plot lines of both adventures from those of the movies should throw players off enough, though some might feel cheated because of this. The half-boxes they come in, held in only by the shrinkwrap, represent the worst packaging idea I've seen in years.

In spite of its flaws, the Bond game seems to be selling well locally (though I have yet to see a single game played by anyone in my gaming community). It will probably continue to do well and may very well receive at least a nomination for Best Role Playing Game on the strength of its subject alone. Because of its problems, however, I can't see it winning (though I have been wrong about such predictions in the past). Because of the nature of the Bond movie/novel adventures, I think Victory Games would be advised to stress the game's solo or small group potential with a series of solo adventures similar in nature to the *Dr. No* module in the basic rule book. The game's problems would be less noticeable in such a format. And they should definitely branch out from adaptations of the movies into original adventure plots. Otherwise, the game might end up as one of those that sells but is rarely played — an ignominious fate, indeed, for Britain's premier secret agent.

Two other entries in the espionage RPG category were released early in 1983 — Hero Games' *Espionage* and Blade/Flying Buffalo's *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes*. Both were based on already popular game systems — Hero's *Champions* and FB's *Tunnels & Trolls*. Of the two, *MSPE* is the more versatile, extending its scope to mercenary and detective/mystery scenarios. I don't find *Espionage* overly attractive for the same reasons I prefer other superhero RPGs to

Champions — the system is overly complex in many respects, particularly character generation. I'm not a big fan of character generation systems based on building your own characteristics with a pre-set number of points. (After all, how many of you out there had any say in how strong, intelligent or dextrous you are, aside from what body-building or eating "brain food" could contribute?) So of these two, *MSPE*, with its elegantly simple, yet complete, game system was the more appealing to me. For gun lovers, the game provided quite an adequate list of firearms (with a few curious omissions). And the section on "The Art of Detection," for crafting detective/mystery scenarios, should be required reading for any GM who wishes to run a mystery-type adventure in *any* game system. While specific mercenary game systems such as FGU's *Merc* outshine the "M" part of *MSPE*, for detective and spy situations, the game should at least be considered a contender for Best RPG of 1983.

The brightest star in the superhero role-playing category was the revised and expanded edition of Chaosium's *Superworld*, originally part of that company's now-out-of-print *Worlds of Wonder* package. The new edition expands the list of powers to rival that of *Champions*. The game mechanics have been expanded to allow more action than was available under the initial *Basic Role-Playing*-based system, yet they remain quite playable. If *Champions*, *Villains & Vigilantes*, and other earlier superhero RPGs don't completely satisfy you, you should give *SW* a try. *Superworld* seems to me to be another contender for 1983's Best RPG at Origins this year. (Of course, my comments about *Superworld* should be taken with a grain of salt: I had the opportunity to look over the manuscript, and a few of my suggestions were taken, giving me a contributor's credit for the game.)

Conspicuous by its absence from Chaosium's list of 1983 releases was the RPG version of Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, originally announced for publication last year. Design problems resulting in the reassignment of the design to an in-house team have postponed *Ringworld* to sometime this year. In one sense the delay could be seen as unfortunate, since the popularity of Niven's Known Space universe could have made *Ringworld* a serious rival to *Star Trek*'s popularity as a new SF game and as best RPG of the year; but in another way the delay could prove a stroke of good fortune, since now *Ringworld* won't have to face *ST* in its projected release year of 1984. Maybe we'll see it take some honors at Origins '85.

Another straight SFRPG that saw release late in 1983 was Fantasy Games Unlimited's *Other Suns*. Though little publicized, *Other Suns* is not a bad little game, despite some problems. The game system itself is somewhat simpler than those of most FGU games; its character generation, for instance, bears more similarities to, say, Chaosium's *Runequest*-based games than to FGU's *Space Opera*. (Rumor has it that *Other Suns* was originally submitted to Chaosium, but withdrawn due to

disagreements over creative control.) The game's main flaws, to my way of thinking, are in its background: Earth is a conquered world, subservient to another, larger empire rather than the hub of a bright, outbound Federation, as in *Star Trek* or *Space Opera*. All right, so maybe I'm a Terran chauvinist, but this *bothers* me. I'm an earthman and I don't like to see my planet under anyone's heel, even relatively benevolent ursinoids as in this case, especially in a game I'm playing. And too many of the "alien" races in *Other Suns* are simply anthropomorphized versions of ordinary animals — squirrels, bears, cats, etc. — something we've seen too much of in past RPGs (*Traveller*'s doglike Vargr and leonine Aslan, *Space Opera*'s feline Mekk-purrs, etc.). While it does have its good points, *Other Suns*, I'm afraid, is one of those games destined to remain on game store shelves, played only by small groups of dedicated aficionados.

Two other new SFRPG releases in 1983 will probably share the fate of *Other Suns* — Alliance Publication's *Mach: The First Colony* (see *Mach* review on page 37) and Ragnarok Enterprises' *To Challenge Tomorrow*. The former concerns the descendants of Terran and alien colonists (brought to a new world to escape their planets' destruction) and how they interact in a medieval/technological environment. Ragnarok's entry is an admirable attempt at a "generic" SF/historical role-playing system covering gaming possibilities from the distant past through the far future. Its main problem is that it is *too* ambitious (though thanks to tiny type, the game *does* manage to cover a lot of ground, even if its descriptions of various historic and future eras are, of necessity, somewhat sketchy). Despite its relative obscurity (compared to some of the other new RPGs mentioned), it's just possible *To Challenge Tomorrow* might prove to be a dark horse Origins contender, just as Ragnarok's *Ysgarth* fantasy RPG was last year.

Other small, somewhat interesting systems, like Valhalla Simulations' *Outtime* RPG of alternate timelines, will probably remain obscure. With any luck, obscurity will also be the fate of Yaquinto's *Timeship*, which, in spite of its time-travel subject matter, falls more into the category of mystic-based fantasy than SF.

But what of the older, established SF-RPGs? How did they fare in 1983? In many cases, I fear, not so well. SF games like Gamescience's *Star Patrol*, for which no supporting material at all was published in 1983, remain in a sort of gaming limbo, selling and being played occasionally, but generally existing out of sight, and out of mind. Other "old favorites" continued to plug away, releasing new supplements and adventures for their select group of fans. FGU's *Space Opera* pretty much went this route, releasing a couple of *Star Sector Atlases* and several adventures during the year. Ironically, while the general themes and ideas explored in most of the *SO* adventures — espionage, interstellar crime, etc. — are far more interesting and innovative than those presented in the average *Traveller* adventure, *SO* scenarios don't seem to sell

very well, sitting on game store shelves for months on end. The only big seller I've noted locally was a recent *Galactic Casino* adventure. This is too bad. GMs of other SFRPGs would find a lot of ideas ripe for conversion to their own systems in the *Space Opera* adventures. *Traveller* refs who tire of fighting mega-corporations or the like would be advised to check some of these out. Even *Star Trek* GMs, especially those who run Merchant campaigns (for which no published adventures have yet been released) could pick up some tips from the similar Federation-based gaming situations of *Space Opera*.

TSR, which entered the SFRPG field in 1982 with *Star Frontiers*, answered criticisms of that game's extremely limited star travel and nonexistent starship combat systems with its *Knight Hawks* game expansion. *Knight Hawks* provided a starship travel/combustion system with a vengeance, being nearly as extensive in itself as the original game. And like all TSR products, it was excellently packaged and contained a fair amount of "extras" — maps, deck plans, scenario book, counters, etc. It contained adequate rules for cargo consignment; brief — but among the most extensive so far released — rules on mining and prospecting; a starship construction system more complex than *Star Trek*'s but less so than *Traveller*'s *High Guard* and about equal to its basic ship construction rules; and a starship combat boardgame for actual ship-to-ship situations. This last is *Knight Hawks*' main flaw, for its ship-to-ship actions are, like those of *Traveller* and other SFRPGs, boardgame-based rather than designed specifically for role playing, as is the case in *Star Trek*'s console-based system. This probably won't deter those who have embraced *Star Frontiers* as their main SF game — and it has apparently picked up a fair following among the younger set — or bother those who like boardgames. I doubt, however, that *Knight Hawks* will entice any devotees of other SFRPGs to switch any more than *Star Frontiers* itself did, especially with *Star Trek* in the running.

In the after-the-holocaust category, TSR finally released its long-promised revised *Gamma World* science fantasy RPG of mutants stalking the radioactive wastes of 25th-century America. And Timeline offered a role-playing supplement for its *Morrow Project* game system, adding character skills to the game, along with some interesting adventures. Each *MP* adventure serves to expand the game with new weapons, armor, and hit tables for the various vehicles, etc. Though lacking in support material (*nothing* appeared for the game from Origins '83 on) *Morrow Project* continues to be the classiest after-the-holocaust RPG yet released in what is still a limited field.

At this point, it is worth mentioning Firebird Ltd.'s *The Armory*, by one of *Morrow Project*'s original designers, Kevin Dockery. *The Armory* is a book of weapons that can be converted into *MP* — or other — game terms. As it stands, it is *not* designed for use with any specific system; future editions will be specifically designed for use with *Espionage*,

since a tie-in with *some* game system seemed desirable. The wealth of modern firearms in Dockery's book makes it a must for players of any system who wish to expand their firearms lists and need weapon specifications to make the conversions.

Missing from the roster of 1983 releases were any expansions or supporting materials for Tri-Tac's *FTL:2448* SF system or *Fringe-worthy* interdimensional travel RPG. However, new editions of both games are in the works, and Tri-Tac's supernatural/technological *Stalking the Night Fantastic* RPG, which uses the same basic game system and mechanics as the other two, introduced a number of improvements and updates to the system.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment to SF gamers was the state of *Traveller* in 1983. The year kicked off with *Starter Traveller*, which received accolades from various quarters (including, incredibly, an award for *originality* at



the Hobby Industry of America show early last year), yet was essentially a simplified rehash of *The Traveller Book* released the summer before. And *The Traveller Book* itself was a minor revision/expansion of the second-edition *Traveller* rules that appeared in *Deluxe Traveller* the year before that! Although *Starter Traveller* was thus the *third* revision of the system in a two-year span, the only significant change was in the starship rules, which greatly simplified the original miniatures-based rules with their vector-movement system (a system I never once saw used in actual play).

Unfortunately, the major inanities in the *Traveller* combat system — armor protecting you *from being* hit instead of *after* you're hit, etc. — remained intact in this latest incarnation. While I'd purchased the earlier revisions, I drew the line here.

The second major note of discord in the *Traveller* corner came when FASA announced it was dropping its *Traveller* line. The decision

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was apparently due to problems with GDW in getting several adventures and supplements approved, coupled with the prospect of greater financial returns on the newly-released *Star Trek* RPG than on any further *Traveller* products.

The list of GDW's own *Traveller* products for 1983 is not illustrious. The only full-length adventure (other than the boxed *Tarsus*, which was billed as being for use with the *Starter* set) was the Keith brothers' *Nomad of the World Ocean*. While the water world and its denizens featured in the adventure were fascinating, the plot was somewhat weak — not the best I've seen from the talented brothers Keith (though still better than several other *Traveller* offerings). The two supplements released in 1983, *Forms and Charts* and *Veterans*, were next to useless unless (a) you'd never seen any of the reprints from other GDW publications or you actually felt you needed a *chart* to write up such things as animal encounter tables or how much equipment you carried; or (b) you'd rather pick mercenary NPCs or player-characters from a book than create your own. Neither supplement was anywhere near spectacular.

Toward the end of 1983, GDW made what was probably its wisest move by releasing Book 6, *Scouts* — the long-awaited expansion for the scout service. The character-generation system was all right, for the most part, but made college undesirable by denying college grads the option of joining the branch of the scouts that actually flew the ships, sticking them with administrative duties. The new skills, too, were of limited use (Naval Architecture for one — how many *scouts* are going to be designing ships?) All in all, one would be just as well off — better, in some instances — sticking with Paranoia Press' *Scouts and Assassins*. The expanded stellar and planetary system generation rules in Book 6 were a nightmare of complexity — more so than even *Space Opera*'s. To reach simple information of potential use or interest to gaming parties, one must first generate such obscure items as a star's bolometric magnitude (How many people *know* what bolometric magnitude is — how many *care*?) — not something that's going to mean a lot in play to most gamers. At least *Scouts* did finally see the light of day, though I think GDW would have been better advised letting the Keiths handle this one. Other promised items, such as the highly touted *Traveller Adventure*, which had to go through several rewrites by Andy Keith and others before it was publishable, never did make it out in 1983.

One bright spot on the *Traveller* horizon came with a new series of licensed supplements and adventures from Gamelords (why is it the best *Traveller* items are *still* coming from licensees?). Gamelords' *Lee's Guide to Interstellar Space*, a book of short adventure situations a referee could build into complete scenarios, was not overly inventive, but still beat GDW offerings in a similar vein, such as *76 Patrons*, hands down. Andy Keith's *The Undersea Environment* supplement for adventuring underwater was probably the most innovative, useful *Traveller* item released all

year, especially in the light of supplements such as *Forms and Charts* and *Veterans*. Adventures released by Gamelords also outshone recent GDW offerings, making Gamelords the company to watch in the future for *Traveller* items. (I can only hope they don't meet a fate similar to Paranoia and FASA; with Andy Keith their main contributor, perhaps they will be spared, since he is also GDW's most creative outside designer. One can only hope so, for the sake of those who remain loyal to the *Traveller* system in spite of newer, better systems now available.)

Those were some of the high — and low — points of science fiction role-playing in 1983, from the bright new contender, *Star Trek*:

The Role-Playing Game, to the ailing but still-hanging-in-there champ, *Traveller*. When it comes to the awards at this year's Origins, I predict *Star Trek* will be the winner. Competition may come from *Superworld*, *MSPE*, or any of several dark horse SF or FRPGs released last year — perhaps even *James Bond 007* if enough voters ignore its flaws. Still, I will personally be very surprised if the obvious choice — *Star Trek* — is passed by for top honors. Of course, I've been surprised in the past by some award choices, and anything can happen in the final analysis. Whatever happens at Origins, I'm certain 1983 will be remembered as a "fascinating" year for science fiction role-playing games. **SG**

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