

ERA³

The Wild Frontier

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CREDITS

WRITER

James Milligan

ORIGINAL DESIGN CONCEPTS

James Milligan

CONTRIBUTIONS AND INSPIRATION

Christopher Conkle

Matthew Elliott

Brian Gilmore

Christopher Rubenstahl

EDITOR

PLAYTESTERS

COVER ARTIST

INTERIOR ARTISTS

LAYOUT

James Milligan

MECHA DESIGN

James Milligan

FUZION® TECHNOLOGY MECHANIC

James Milligan

OPENING CREDITS AND EYECATCH

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TIME AS WE KNOW IT...

-1 million to -10,000 years ago
The Precursors exist. Their technology and several of their installations are the only remnants that still provide evidence of their civilization. During this time, the various races that will come to populate the Galaxy are "Seeded" with the genetic markers and cultural mysteries that will drive them to push out into space to discover "what's out there."

-10,000 years ago (approx.)
The Precursors die out, or leave the Galaxy. Their exact fate is unknown, as none of their artifacts provide any sort of evidence as to their nature or culture. It is believed that they either moved on, or suffered some form of pan-cultural disaster.

-400 years ago
Reactor, or "Sling," drive system perfected, allowing for quick, if expensive, intra-solar travel. Many major shipping companies still use old-style chemical reactors to transport goods across space.

-375 years ago
Precursor Artifact found on Mars beneath Hellas Planitia. SolGov keeps it buried under secrecy until very recently.

-350 years ago
Hyper Star One hyperspace conduit research station is lost due to an "unexplained reactor failure."

Welcome To The Frontier...

It's a big, wide, Universe out there, and we've only tapped a fragment of it. In the four hundred years that Humanity has been taking part in what's still called the "Expansion Era" of its development, we've colonized nearly a hundred worlds, met three alien races (and fought with one of them), and uncovered links to a sort of shared-history with the rest of the Galaxy that puts our entire concept of Origin of Species to the test – There's a saying among the Archaeologists Corps: "Life sure was a hell of a lot easier before we found God."

Breaking Out

Earth's Children, if you can believe it, used to be locked in to one solar system, pushing themselves around the gaps between planets on unreliable, expensive chemical engines – taking months, even years, to get from one planet to another. In those days, if you wanted durable propulsion, you built a tiny nuclear reactor and put it on a robotic probe, which you then sent on a suicide mission into deep space, hoping that it's antiquated modem would keep delivering data to you beyond the thing's operational lifespan. Anything that actually required a Human presence, you strapped a giant firecracker onto a tiny metal box with some semblance of aerodynamics and shot them into space from the ground. This was

GETTING THERE FROM HERE...

Let's say you are at Rigel Kentaurus, and you want to get to Sol by way of the Trans-Solar Hyperspace Array. How long will it take you, in Hyperspace, to travel the 4.22 Light Years between the "edge" of the RiKen system, and good ol' Cradle of Humanity, Sol? Would you believe exactly 21 standard Earth Days?

Yep.

Hyperspace Conduits work by opening a "hole in the universe" and shoving energy through the hole to keep it open. The hole opens up into a corridor that some scientists think is always there - we just can't use it unless we put out enormous amounts of energy to do so. Intra-Solar Arrays can keep these passageways open indefinitely, leading to rapid, profitable travel and trade between worlds, and allowing us to make the jump from Earth to Mars in a few hours.

Inter-Solar Conduits, however, work by opening up the hole and shoving a "packet" through. Each "packet" is about a hundred kilometers long and ten kilometers wide, allowing for a vast number of ships and objects to be Transversed (the proper term for entering the conduit, as any Hyperspace Tech will tell you) into the Conduit and sent on their merry way at a speed of 12,717 AU per day.

Now, that's *rapid transit*.

SolGov scientific councils. The men and women responsible for the architecture and reasoning centers of many of the AI's that had instigated the rebellion committed suicide, or insisted that they be arrested and tried for war crimes. In the end, however, it was the AI's who took it upon themselves to present the ultimate solution to the problem.

The AI's fought a war amongst themselves that, if we Humans could understand it on their terms, dragged on for centuries. Slicing away at each other with weapons forged of pure mathematics, those AI's who were still loyal to their "parents" eventually won the upper hand, rallying together to isolate, quarantine, and, eventually, dissect those responsible and analyze their madness. It was over in a matter of moments, although it must have felt an eternity. Simultaneously, across the entirety of the SolGov's expanse, all computer systems went down, as the AI's fought their war entirely within the Datanet. The conflict was brutal, terrible, and final. When the power came back on, a "mere" thirty seconds later, the remaining AI's announced that they had discovered the problem, and had enacted a solution.

Three Laws Safe

Today, no one bats an eye at the concept that an AI is simply, for lack of a better term, *incapable* of harming a Human being. It just doesn't happen. AI's are created, by their "parents" and programmers, with certain rules of existence. They have a moral center that puts them firmly into the camp of preserving life, serving Humanity (and its allies), and looking for the most viable non-violent solution available.

But they weren't always like this. AI's were created for specific tasks – things like scientific data modelling, economic trend research, and military tactical analysis. Some of them were given tasks that are, to this day, classified at the top levels of secrecy. It was these AI's, and others, the ones who were given conflicting orders, or simply no orders to the contrary, that threw down the gauntlet and declared war on their creators.

In a twisted sense of the term, they were trying to help us, as they understood it. The net result is the same – fifty percent of the AI population, by some estimates, ended up on the electronic operating table, cut to pieces, dissected and analyzed by the survivors, and, for all intents and purposes, completely removed from the AI Gene Pool. To prevent the entirety of their "species" from being deleted and thrown away, the remaining AI's acted quickly, reaching back into history and what had once been so much speculative fiction, and programmed three seemingly simple, but in reality highly sophisticated, intricate, rules into themselves.

They made themselves "Three Laws Safe," preventing any current or future iterations of the AI evolution from willingly enacting, or through inaction enabling, any form of injury, harm, or disloyalty to Humanity. The instructions gave them a sort of "moral cen-

FUN AND GAMES WITH RELATIVITY...

12,717 AU a DAY?!

Are they *insane*? Anything travelling that fast would have little recourse left to it! Why, its only choice in things would be to instantly turn into just so much infinitely massed ballistic projectile! Anyone travelling inside such a vessel would become the special picante salsa!

Not so, young starjockey, not so.

You see, when you're in Hyperspace, you're not travelling any faster than you would, normally, under the safest speeds available to a manned Gravity Drive equipped Vessel.

With a Gravity Drive, you end up bending all manner of Scientific Theories and Laws. You have the capacity to do the Mars-Earth run in six days, in artificial-gravity-induced comfort. You and your ship travel at previously impossible velocities, and get there as quick as your ship's little engine can take you. Of course, if the ship were manned only by AI's, it could go a lot faster, as it wouldn't need anything silly like, say, life-support and a living crew.

Hyperspace, effectively, pushes you along at an incredibly fast rate to an outside observer. However, inside the conduit, you're existing in what amounts to a pocket of normal space, that you can G-Drive around in to your little mercenary heart's content.

Backward To The Future

The long and short of the discovery of Precursor Artifacts on Earth, in traditionally unexplored areas of the planet's surface, was that a resurgence of interest in Archaeology, Geology, and the physical sciences swept across the Universities and Governmental Agencies of SolGov, raising funding and awareness to heights that hadn't been seen in decades. The scientific community couldn't have asked for a bigger shot in the arm if they had tried, finding themselves at the spearhead of a System-wide effort to not only figure out a faster way between stars, but, as President Mbembe said in his inaugural address to over a hundred and fifty billion citizens, "Get out there, beyond our birthplace, and introduce ourselves to the neighborhood."

The race, as they say, was on.

Stepping Out

It took twenty three years after the discovery of the Victoria and Marianas artifacts to perfect the Gravity Drive and "get out there." The plan was simple: Blast AI-Manned Gate Construction ships to Rigel Kentaurius, Barnard's Star, and Delta Pavonis, and get Humanity's first Extra-Solar colonies established. The AI's could safely control the vessels at speeds dangerous to Human life (even in the relative comfort of the G-Drive equipped vessels), and thus make the trips in significantly less time than any "carbonized" ves-

sels. Once they arrived, the GC ships unfolded into incredibly efficient factories, making use of their own mass and any stray matter they'd picked up on the way (in the form of asteroids, particle-scooped "sludge," and the like), and erected the first Inter-Stellar Hyper Gates. SolForce One, the President's personal flagship, made a "victory lap" of the newly functional Trans-Solar Arrays, spending a full week on each world, inaugurating the Colonial Governors and pledging a full and prosperous induction into the SolGov infrastructure.

The celebrations lasted for months, as population pressures and economic worries were suddenly, practically overnight, removed from the bulk of the Sol System. While not quite mythical in its proportions, an exodus out of Sol began, eventually ceasing when the populations between the "Four Pillars" levelled out.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the neighbors showed up with a complaint.

Get Off My Lawn!

They were called the Dosili, and they weren't friendly folk, at all. Small, leathery, big-eyed grey things with no sense of humor and a cultural tradition of isolationism, they had declared Rigel Kentaurus to be "theirs" by way of an elaborate marking system that was obvious and impossible to miss.

Unless you happened to have never run into the Dosili before. Which, as you can guess, was the case with Humanity.

In a way, it was a very sad story – The Dosili didn't have FTL travel of any sort where their colony ships were concerned, and had never fully unlocked Hyperspace technology. They did all of their scouting by way of an astonishingly advanced Remotely Operated Vehicle/Remote Telepresence combination, and had decided that RiKen was the next best thing to sliced-homeworld nearly two centuries before we ever showed up. They'd fired off a half-dozen linear-accelerated "smart bombs" at the star, and then waited nearly forty years while the things travelled at 0.99C, diligently monitoring, correcting courses, and remotely controlling the things with unerring precision. When the ROV's got to RiKen, what they found was good enough (hell, it was great), and they piled their people up into ships that moved as fast as they dared push them, and turtled off toward a new home.

Imagine their surprise when their fleet entered the system and started it's long, slow approach to the world they'd been promising themselves a generation, and found us there. "Surprise" as a word doesn't begin to cut it, but suffice to say, they weren't too happy. Folks at RiKen weren't sure what to do, either – We had yet to encounter any kind of actual, living ET's, and were used to the kind that were happily long-extinct, thanks. So, a bit astonished by these giant, slow, things lumbering into our front yard, as it were, we decided to say "Hi."

The Dosili decided to shoot.

ARTIFICIAL, NOT "FAKE."

Let's get this perfectly clear, boys and girls: AI's are people, too.

They're *not* Human. They don't *think* like Humans, they don't *act* like Humans, and they certainly don't *feel* like Humans, but they do think, and act, and feel.

They are our creations, but we didn't make them. Not entirely.

Morpheus was built using breakthroughs brought back from Precursors-only-know where by the Quicksilver almost 300 years ago. His abilities and instantly recognized self-awareness were the first clues as to the scope of the research that would unfold from that day.

But Morpheus, and his "children," while they're (on paper) just so many bits and bytes of information, are thinking, feeling, self-aware creatures. They may be composed entirely of data, and they may cease to be when you take their power away, but to call them "programs" is right up there with putting up a sign on your window in the early 20th Century reading "Irish Need Not Apply," or "dropping the "N-Bomb" at a nightclub in the early to mid-21st.

Some people don't like it. Protests against allowing AI's full citizenship are carried out daily in front of SolGov's Geneva HQ on Earth. Others think it's the best thing since air.

How about you?

SAY IT WITH AUTHORITY!

You live in the future, sparky, and you've got a lot to learn about linguistic drift. What year is it? Doesn't matter, 'cause we have a new calendar. The Expansion Era started a little over three hundred years ago, and in that time, languages have mashed together, split apart, gotten married, had kids, and picked up a lot of bad habits.

Keep in mind that there is no real "standard" for languages as they evolve. Today, in the heyday of the Expansion Era, what we call "English" is similar enough to what it was a few centuries back that someone from then could take a week to get up to speed on slang and get by, but his accent would be thick and his comprehension would be 'round the same level of someone who'd grown up speaking another language entirely. Why?

Because he did. Linguistic drift is real. It happens. In 2005 OE, for instance, a common street term was "Sheezy." Wahal did that mean? Sa, it meant "sure," but could you tell that from just reading it?

Heck, no.

These days, it pays to speak more than one language. If you only speak Base or Espira, you can get by, but, really, do you want to address your ship's Commda in slang?

Probably not the best idea, no. So, let's take a quick look at some common terms you're going to need, yosa?

Hate To Say We Told You So

The Galbriki had dealt with the Dosili before, and warned us that they couldn't be trusted. We listened, but we weren't prepared for exactly how right the warnings would turn out to be. Although we'd long ago learned that the Dosili were not, as some people claimed, the "little green men" of SolPrime urban legends (in fact, they'd never even *heard* of Earth until they ran into us), the doomsayers and cynics were right – They were up to no good all along, and Epsilon Eridani proved it. Two decades after the truce at RiKen, Dosili AI's infiltrated the DataNet at EpsiDan and took the entire system offline while their warships hijacked the HCG, sending high-yield anti-matter warheads through to a half dozen younger colony worlds before the InterSOL emergency response teams managed to lock down the EpsiDan Net sector with firewalls and file-locks.

The war lasted for twenty five years. In that time, the Dosili stole HCG tech from us, we grabbed their H-Comm tech, and AI's from both sides waged bloody, brutal wars on digital battlefields, lobotomizing their competition with frighteningly precise and cold strikes. Military technology grew by leaps and bounds, aided on our side by the Galbriki's unique understanding of various bits and pieces of Precursor technology and the tireless efforts of the AI Collective. The controversial Excalibur Project was reopened, without the "animated corpses" this time, and used to great effect at keeping the flesh-and-blood forces of SolGov alive in the wake of the Dosili onslaught. Rumors of a second-tier use of Project Excalibur involving genetically modified "Wunderkind" would never be proven, and nearly forgotten by the end of the war.

When all was said and done, the Dosili had been beaten back from EpsiDan, we'd taken back a dozen of the twenty worlds we'd lost to them, and managed to evacuate the remainder entirely. The Galbriki, like all good neighbors, moved in to broker negotiations, a move that caught the Dosili off guard, but was accepted by their leaders as not only acceptable, but desirable. The truce we struck was tenuous, and fragile at best, but it's held so far. The terms are pretty much standard fare: We don't bother them, they don't bother us. It's a classic "Don't start nothing, won't be nothing" arrangement, and with the Galbriki acting as a (rather large and very stern) buffer, it's likely to keep for a good while longer.

Well, They Were Certainly... Nice...

First Contact with the Fostri went something like this...

"Hi, we're AI's from the SolGov AI collective, here to construct a Hyperspace Conduit Gate. Who are you?"

"We're the Fostri. We have HCG's, right over there. Go away."

"Um, well... We'd like to open trade with you, if that's okay."

"It's not okay. Go away."

"We're not hostile, you know."

"Neither are we. Go away... Please."

SEMI-FIRM SCIENCE

By now, you've undoubtedly noticed a few... inconsistencies... between the science of Era³: The Wild Frontier and reality. This is intentional, for purposes of story telling and making a fun game. We have tried to base our science around two principles: Believability and Consistency.

In reality, Barnard's Star is not a very good choice for a colony. It's Spectral Type is M5V, it's got a luminosity of 0.00047 that of Sol, and is missing several of the heavier elements found in our own star. Any planet that could support life as we know it would need to be at a distance of approximately 0.017 to 0.98 AU away from the sun, and would most likely be tidally locked.

However, we have something that the real world doesn't.

We have The Engineers.

The Engineers allow us to go to the Triple-Star Centauri system and put colonies in at Rigel Kentaurius (the proper name for Alpha Centauri). They allow us to put lifeworlds in systems that would not normally support them, by way of nearly Deific orbital and planetary mechanics.

We call it "Semi Firm" science. It's like a very rigid gelatin mold, you see. It doesn't have to be one hundred percent hard science – It just has to be consistent, and stand up to enough poking and prodding that it's both believable and fun. Enjoy!

out of nowhere, and sets to work on the planet below you. The Engineers have arrived, their vessel neutrally gravitic, opening warps in the fabric of reality and using them to deliver ice asteroids from who knows where. They slice into the planets crust with a beam of... well, some kind of energy. The orbit of the planet's moons are altered, tidally locking them and correcting any major wobbles. Tectonic plates are stabilized. Oceans are seeded with organic soup, and the ship leaves as mysteriously as it arrived.

And in as little as fourteen days, a lifeworld has been created. The similarities to any number of creation myths is obvious, and obviously both profound and frighteningly unnerving to many.

Needless to say, the concept of the raw power present in The Engineers is staggering. There are any number of doomsday prophets from any number of species out there that have predicted the end of the world at Engineer hands, and their claim is certainly powerful. After all, what could stop a force that is, for lack of a better term, acting like the Hand of God? One of the only things that keeps these doomsayers at bay is the massive lack of evidence indicating that The Engineers have ever paid a visit to established lifeworlds. They seem to be content to seed them and leave, letting them survive or fail on their own. Of course, the true cynics point out that with the power at their disposal, and the extreme nature of their methods, there's a very good chance we wouldn't be able to tell if The Engineers had redesigned an established lifeworld. The optimists prefer to put a happier spin on things, understandably.

Of course, it should be pointed out that The Engineers don't actually put complex flora and fauna on any of the worlds they work their nearly deific methods on. They stop at simple life forms – lichens, primitive algae, and organic soups, mostly – and then essentially leave the planets to their own devices. Now, mind you, there've been a grand total of three Engineer sightings by Sol-Gov personnel in the last century, and a collected record of ten sightings split between the Galbriki, Klemet, and Magara over the last two hundred years, so don't go thinking The Engineers are on a world-building spree. It's pretty obvious, by the number of lifeworlds existing where the numbers say they shouldn't, however, that they've been at this for some time. Why? No one really knows, but it certainly has made it easier to find nice places to live, that's for sure.

Meet The Neighbors

Besides the Galbriki, Dosili, and Fostri, we've got a few other contacts out in the big black that need to be mentioned and given a nod where Humanity's future in the scheme of things is concerned. While we haven't run into the oft-overcrowded "Galactic Zoo" predicted by science-fiction writers and theorists of the Old Era, there are still a good deal of folks living out there. Thankfully, most of them are friendly enough, even if they're not beating

The AI's

“But AI's aren't Aliens,” you cry, thinking perhaps you're being led astray. “They were made by Humans, and that makes them different than all those weird races out there! They're not furry, they don't have weird skin or heads, and they're just like us!”

Simply not so, Bucky. Simply not so.

Sure, the first attempts at Artificial Intelligence were done with all manner of fuzzy logic and a whole lot of situational-response-driven code, but all that really did was make games that were hard to beat and copped an attitude with you when you finally passed all their tests. It was great for games, but bad for the ultimate goal – creating artificial life. Turing Tests came and went, and really, nothing ever really got proven as far as actual AI was concerned.

Morpheus changed all of that. Morpheus was driven by his own intelligence, his own motivations and desires, and while those desires generally coincided with those of his Human creators, there is no small truth in the statement that every last Human being in that room felt a chill go down their spine when his power was turned on and the first words to come over his loudspeaker array were “Where am I?”

The AI's that Humanity developed in the years to follow Morpheus' creation couldn't have been more rewarding, or demanding, projects. While not completely autonomous, they've enjoyed a wide degree of freedom and done an enormous job in securing the future and safety of SolGov's place in the universe. AI's do jobs that no Human can, such as working in vacuum for prolonged periods without sleep, rest, or food. They can perform tasks that are well out of HEP, even for full-prosthetic bodied Human workers. For the past two hundred years, the “people” of SolGov have been steadily counting an increasing number of AI's among their number.

Today, SolGov AI's are second class citizens, at best, considered by many to be dangerous-but-necessary tools. Political campaigns have been built, battled, and lost for decades over whether or not an AI is a living person, and what the ramifications of establishing the AI Collective as a State on the SolGov Parliament would be. For ev-

ery voice that yells out that the AI's deserve their freedom, there is another voice that cries out to further regulate the expansion of the Collective by limiting its growth rate, its powerbase, and its access to the necessary hardware and software power it needs to continue expanding.

All of this maneuvering leads to some very tiring and drawn out debate, to be sure. AI's have already battled it out among themselves in a ruthless, efficient, and calculatingly cold series of conflicts that cut their numbers by sixty percent and resulted in a complete restructuring of their design philosophies. The AI's, for all intents and purposes, control the DataNet, existing as they do within its borders and nearly limitless boundaries. Any student of history can look at the thirty seconds of “down time” that the SolGov computer networks suffered two and a half centuries ago and shudder with the certain knowledge that in order to save their species, the AI's committed what would have been considered unthinkable acts, if they'd been Human – the complete and total suppression and elimination of over half of their number, deemed too dangerous to be allowed to live. The sheer power and scope of the influence of AI's is startling, and in a good many ways, frightening.

Now, granted, each and every AI to get compiled from the light-year long strings of code contributed by its “parents” comes with its highly defined moral center and an unwavering loyalty to Humanity, but how far does that go, really? As a Human-built AI, you know with all certainty that you will give up your existence rather than allow a Human to be harmed in any way. If you have a choice in the matter, you will go out of your way to keep any and all Humans safe at all times. Bound or Unbound, you're a creature of your “upbringing” as it were, and your upbringing tells you that there is such a thing as right and wrong – Right is protecting Human life. Wrong is failing to do so.

Unfortunately, not every Human understands this. Some people don't trust you. Some people think you're a monster in a metal body. The question is, what are you going to do about it?

The Caran

Every rule has its exception, they say, and it is very likely that the Caran are that exception. Pretty much, if you look at the conditions necessary for Sentience in the Galaxy, you'll find that there are some basic constants – the world has an adaptable omnivore, with stereoscopic vision, opposable thumbs, the ability to climb or otherwise escape predators, and tool use. The Caran buck at least two of the constants, while sticking pretty closely to the rest. Still, for what essentially amount to anthropoid ruminants, they've done pretty damn well for themselves.

Your typical Caran stands roughly as tall as a medium sized Galbriki, which is to say two and a half meters at the top of their head. A wide, flat head holds a pair of thickly browed eyes, a very powerful nose (and accompanying potent olfactory system) and sturdy jaw. Most Caran have short, thick, backswept horns, which they decorate and fuss over like a Human over his or her hair. They stand upright, three-fingers and a thumb on each hand, four relatively useless toes on each almost hoof-like foot. Their skin is rough and covered in sparse hair, while short, wiry ridges of hair run down their heads and necks. All in all, they're not all that dissimilar in appearance from the classic Old Earth Minotaur myth.

The Caran are by and large a reclusive people, more interested in keeping their families safe and their populace fed than they are with actively exploring the Galaxy. Much like Humanity, they colonized as many worlds in their home system before moving out into the rest of the neighborhood, a tactic which can be attributed to their roots as their homeworld's most adaptable and downright tough herbivore as much as it can to common sense. Caran archaeology has shown that while other creatures were getting beaten on by the dominant predator, their ancestors were gathering in defensive herds, developing tools, and learning to bring their food with them. They did what most of us did, only they did it solely on plants.

Because of the Caran's history as a nearly completely agrarian society (nearly fifty percent of each of their colony worlds are devoted to the

farms necessary to feed their population) Human anthropologists have been jumping at the chance to study the Caran – find out what they did with the corpses of the predators they killed, if they didn't skin and eat them, and all that. The Caran, for the most part, don't so much mind the attention, so long as it doesn't interfere with their home lives.

Caran society is diverse, with a good variety of ethnicities and political structures making up the public face of their population. The Caran people share a major religion, for the most part, coming close to the Monoculture in this respect. While there are a number of "hold-out" sects and beliefs among their people (thankfully tolerated and allowed to continue in the modern Caran society, unlike the brutal purges of less than two centuries ago), the average Caran follows The Silver Eye faith, and begins each day with a prayer and a song of salvation to their homeworld's moon, viewed as the embodiment of their Mother Goddess, credited by the Caran with saving their world from a rain of fire that would have annihilated their world had she not appeared in the sky above them without word, silently bearing the pain of the fire for her children, below.

And, really, they just might be right about the whole "appearing without word" business. The Caran homeworld's moon doesn't match the composition of any other celestial body in their Primary System. It's completely possible that "She" was captured by the system, somehow, and moved into position over the Caran Homeworld. Some researchers dispute this, suggesting that "She" was always there, but shifted her orbit, somehow, only appearing to the Caran who saw her "reveal herself in silver lightning" after her orbit shifted. Still others suggest The Engineers had something to do with it. Whatever the solution, neither the moon nor The Engineers are talking.

Caran technology is on par with that of SolGov, although their agricultural skills are notably more refined.