



Worldbuilding With Extra Pulp

"Had I been present at the Creation, I should have given some useful hints for better ordering of the universe."

-- Alfonso X, called the Wise, King of Leon and Castile

Here's another run at worldbuilding, this time an annotated example of a world designed to support a specific genre of stories: pulp aerospace adventure. For this column, I'm reprinting a portion of an actual player handout from an old dimension-hopping campaign I ran -- the timeline to an alternate-history science-fantasy world I nicknamed "High Red" for reasons that seem peculiar even to me, now. (At one point, I and my co-conspirators had alternate histories written for each of the 128 colors in a large box of Crayolas. Just be glad I'm not doing that any more.) Interspersed with that timeline, I'm inserting notes explaining why I made the decisions I did, and how I intended them to affect game play and player decision-making. Although the initial scenario was a one-shot "rescue Amelia Earhart" action story, my players had shown a tendency to revisit worlds they liked, and I wanted Reality Tunguska (nee High Red) to be one of them. In the event, they never went back, which I blame on the scenario, not the world -- and on the fact that I had a bunch of other great ideas to throw at them.

"He had no idea what comprised her usual diet, but he bought a can of New York roast beef and one of Venusian frog-broth and a dozen fresh canal-apples and two pounds of that Earth lettuce that grows so vigorously in the fertile canal-soil of Mars. He felt that she must surely find something to her liking in this broad variety of edibles, and -- for his day had been very satisfactory -- he hummed 'The Green Hills of Earth' to himself in a surprisingly good baritone as he climbed the stairs."

-- C.L. Moore, "Shambleau" (1933)

The flavor I wanted to capture for this scenario, and for this world, was very much like the wonderful indeterminate-future, mixed-technology world of C.L. Moore's Northwest Smith stories. In two hundred years or so, with a stardrive, maybe some discreet biotech, and an alien invasion or two (or possibly a Buck Rogers-style Global War), this setting and Moore's might be almost indistinguishable. But for right now, it's time to look to the skies.

1908: Unknown object obliterates St. Petersburg, Russia, at noon on June 30, leaving behind chunks of radioactive metal, including uranium and unknown transuranic elements such as astronium and petrinium.

For details of the Tunguska Object, and for an earlier summary of this very world, see [my previous column](#) on the subject. The reason I picked Tunguska, rather than some other breakpoint, is that I wanted a recognizably Belle Epoque politics with recognizably 1930s Indiana Jones geopolitics -- Germany, France, Britain, Italy, America, Japan.

1909: German Army moves into Poland, the Baltics, and White Russia; Japan occupies Manchuria, Korea, and Vladivostok; Britain establishes protectorates over Central Asia.

Had I wanted to tell slightly different, more Earth-driven and ideological, stories, I could have decided that the chaos in Russia did, in fact, lead to a socialist revolution. But for the purposes of this world, I wanted to keep the Great Powers focused on space colonialization -- retelling the stories of European imperialism, which faced little or no ideological challenge. So I just removed Russia.

1910: Team of scientists at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut split the atomic nucleus of astronium; the Curies, and Rutherford and Moseley, replicate the feat by the end of the year.

1911: Henri Coanda invents the jet-reaction engine.

1914: Kaiser Wilhelm Institut team under Einstein develops self-sustaining astronium fission.

1916: France and Italy back Arab revolt against German-backed Ottoman Turkey; Britain attempts neutrality while remaining in Egypt.

1918: Germany, France, and Britain all develop astronium-fission bombs.

Thus preventing, via nuclear blackmail, any overly-distracting war on Earth. Which would support tales of spies, mercenaries, and other "deniable" PC types, in case the characters returned here.

1919: Willy Ley designs the atomic torch ship; Baron Manfred von Richthofen becomes the first man in orbit. Berlin-Baghdad railway completed.

Using the Red Baron here sends an important signal to the players -- this is a world about airmen, and the more superheroic the better. Had I wanted to tell a different story, the first man in space could have been Vladimir Orlok, Clark Savage Jr., or even Reed Richards.

1921: Von Richthofen placed in command of the Imperial Raumwaffe; Winston Churchill becomes Minister for Aerospace and First Aerospace Lord of the Admiralty. Hermann Goering becomes the first man on the moon. British expedition under Alcock and Brown follows later that year.

1922: Frank Whittle invents the turbojet. Arabian Revolt settles into status quo with German satellite state in Turkey, British in Kurdistan, French in Syria and Mesopotamia.

All this distracting detail about the Middle East was to set up any *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* action for the putative sequel. It also had the nice effect of splitting up all the Middle Eastern oil so that nobody got left out.

1923: British begin construction of Entebbe Spaceport; construct a permanent moonbase in Copernicus, begin testing "lunar gun." Moonbase race begins. General Billy Mitchell placed in charge of the U.S. Space Command as a way of getting him out of the Army.

The sidetracking of Billy Mitchell into a career that he's uniquely suited for is a little poetic justice from me, the author -- and it helps remind us that we're in a pulp world where bucking your superiors and being larger-than-life is actually a success strategy. The "lunar gun" is a little reverse-homage to Verne and Heinlein, and a warning to the players that the science in this reality plays by the rules of drama, and not the other way around.

1924: Cpt. Edward Rickenbacker, USSC, becomes the first man on Mars. Germans and British orbit wireless-transmission satellites.

1925: Georges Gunemeyer disappears on French expedition to Venus. Chinese Republic in turmoil after Sun-Yat Sen's death; Japanese begin backing local warlords. Willy Ley invents the atomic-ion engine, making interplanetary travel practical.

But the bogus science had to be sufficiently late that the first bloom of exploration doesn't simply recapitulate *Space: 1889*, especially since I was already ripping off chunks of its planetology and themes wholesale. This also helped drive the 1908 Tunguska breakpoint; too late for "luminiferous aether," too early for "flying saucers." Tesla, normally my go-to guy for improbable technology, I dismissed as opening up too big a can of worms -- the man was just too prolific. By simply presenting a "reaction-lite thruster" I got the effect I wanted -- easy zipping around the solar system, and proper pulp-era dogfighting tactics.

1926: British found Marsport, the first permanent Martian colony, on the slopes of Olympus Mons. German expedition under Oswald Boelcke plants Charlottenburg colony on Venus. Italo Balbo leads Italian expedition to Mercury. Germans begin construction of Kilimanjaro Spaceport, Italians begin Mogadisco Spaceport in Somaliland.

I added a bunch of details on the various planets to the handout; suffice it to say that they parallel the ones in *GURPS Steampunk* and in all properly antiquated planetary-romance SF. Mars has canals and a dying race, Venus has soda-water oceans, the Moon has fungi-filled hollow caves. The continuing mentions of the Great Powers' colonial Spaceports not only let us know that their rivalry has driven a hyperbolic Space Race, but they reinforce the "imperialism" theme of the alternate history -- I've been very heavily influenced by Moorcock's *Warlord of the Air*.

1927: René Leduc invents the ramjet.

1928: Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected President of the United States. Japanese move into North China. French begin construction of Kourou Spaceport in French Guiana.

1929: U.S. begins construction of Jefferson Station in LEO; Goddard develops the orbital ferry. Italian Ferrarin-del Prete expedition explores the Jovian system, constructs shipyard on Io when del Prete's craft nearly destroyed in Jovian atmosphere. U.S. begins supplying arms and advisers to Chinese government.

Okay, the Jovian system was going to be another "frontier dogfighting" zone, should things come to that. And the war in China lets me keep at least half the Axis active, since I've left Germany Kaiserine and prevented Hitler.

1930: Admiral Nagano placed in charge of Japanese Imperial Planetary Navy, Japanese begin construction of Hainan Spaceport. Panic of '30 causes major dislocations in European, North American economies; planetary colonization and exploitation speeded up as psychological "safety valve," full-employment program, and subsidy to big businesses.

This is a bogus justification for all that stuff in space, just barely a decade after Ley invents the torch ship. Admittedly, with a much smaller industrial base, the Portuguese had conquered the whole Indian Ocean basin within a decade after going there -- but they didn't have to bring their own oxygen. Hopefully, by now, the players are on my side, and willing to buy the premise to get the pulp.

1931: Sir Charles E. Kingsford-Smith founds Ceres Station for the Royal Navy. Construction begun on Victrix (British) and Valhalla (German) LEO stations.

1933: Kingsford-Smith establishes forward British base on Europa. Jefferson and Valhalla Stations completed. Baron von Huenefeld leads German expedition to Ganymede, establishes Raumwaffe base there.

Boo, hiss! Germans on Ganymede! Baron Ehrenfreid Gunther von Huenefeld, the "Crazy Baron," headed the first transatlantic flight from East to West, on a Junkers W33, the *Bremen*, in 1928. Looking up cool aviation history basically wrote all my historical NPCs for me.

1934: Victrix Station completed; Japanese begin construction of Yamato Station. American presence in China increased.

1935: Britain begins construction of Singapore Spaceport; Germans begin building Madang Spaceport in New Guinea. Hughes Aircraft, Marland Oil, and Brazil begin joint commercial spaceport, refinery complexes at Belem.

I had an idea that I might need a commercial presence in space, either as boldhearted Heinleinian entrepreneurs, or as evil manipulating alien-egg coveting weasels, or both.

1936: General Mitchell dies, Admiral Richard E. Byrd appointed chief of USSC, USSC headquarters moved to Tampa Spaceport; construction begun on Pearl Harbor Spaceport.

Although Billy Mitchell was a happier, and probably a healthier, guy in this reality, I still killed him on schedule to get Richard Byrd onto the timeline. I remain conflicted about the USSC's rank and grade terminology, as you can tell.

1937: Amelia Earhart vanishes in the Saturnian System.

1938: Yamato Station completed.

Also in the handout, I mentioned "odd lights and electromagnetic bursts" emanating from Titan, also in the Saturnian System. If that doesn't set up a scenario, nothing will. And just to be sure, I railroaded the PCs onto the *USS Stephen Decatur*, with Cmdr. Robert A. Heinlein, USSC, commanding.

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