

They are among us

Greys abroad

In the dark world of *Conspiracy X*, aliens are very real. In the 50 years since it's founding, Aegis has come to the conclusion that at least three distinct types of extraterrestrial are active on Earth. However, despite continued efforts by Aegis operatives, little is actually known of their capabilities, motivations and aims.

THE GREYS

The most commonly sighted alien race, Greys stand between four and five feet tall, with smooth grey skin, large heads and black eyes. Greys seem to possess strong psychic powers and their science is based on associated principles, although they appear fascinated by human technology. Their motivations remain unclear. Although they are apparently responsible for most reports of human and animal abductions, Greys are generally timid and never directly violent. The Greys have had wide contact with The Black Book, although the nature of their relationship is unknown.



THE ATLANTEANS

The Atlanteans are the most mysterious of all the alien races - their very existence continues to be a matter of dispute. First-hand encounters with the race remain extremely rare, and normally their presence can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence. In the few substantiated sightings there have been, Atlanteans appear to be normal, albeit attractive, humans. The strongest evidence of their extraterrestrial nature lies in their technology, which appears to be highly advanced and based on the principles of nanotechnology.

THE SAURIANS

Aegis uses the term 'Saurian' to refer to a race or group of races of reptilian appearance. The Saurians are very secretive and reluctant to interact with the general population. Aegis has uncovered a great deal of evidence that the Saurians have, however, forged extensive ties with The Black Book and are aiding them in technological research. Through the Black Book's connections with the military-industrial complex, many developments have been incorporated into mainstream US Military programs, such as the 'stealth' aircraft. The Saurians' aims, though, are a matter of conjecture.



WELCOME TO THE BATCAVE

Aegis is organised in a 'cell' structure similar to that reputedly used by the CIA and many terrorist organisations. Each cell is composed of a small group of operatives who work as an independent team. Because little or no contact occurs between cells, if an agent is captured he can only implicate the other members of his cell, and the security of the organisation as a whole remains intact. When a new cell is created, the members pool their resources and influence to create a secret base of operations. Chapter three, *Ops Centre*, details this process and the available options.

In many ways creating a base resembles character generation, but while each player creates his own character individually, the group as a whole must co-operate to build an effective base that will provide them with adequate resources. The majority of this chapter is taken up with a list of the possible resources, which are divided into Location, Facilities, Staff, Equipment and Special Resources. Each character has a

group, and the extensive list of options helps to give them a feel for the nature of the game. Of course, the referee could always speed things up by providing a 'ready-made' base, but the players would miss out on an interesting and challenging part of the game.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS

The fourth chapter of *Conspiracy X*, *Tradecraft*, explains the specifics of the rules. The system itself is very simple, and is based around a standard test. To resolve a task, the relevant skill or attribute is compared to a difficulty number (which varies from 1 to 6) set by the referee. If the character's ability is higher than the difficulty, he succeeds. If the numbers are equal, the player must roll seven or less on two six-sided dice - a Normal test - while if the difficulty is one higher than the ability, the player must roll four or less to succeed - a Hard test. Tasks with a difficulty of two or more higher than the character's ability cannot be performed by that character.

In most cases, such as using a skill, the target number for the test is modified by one of the character's attributes. For example, the Small Arms: Pistol skill is modified by Agility. If a character has an above average Agility of 4, tests are modified by +1 (so a Normal test requires eight or less, and a Hard test five or less).

"At once quick and elegant, while still allowing for an impressive range of options and level of detail."

certain number of points to spend, depending on his Influence attribute, and can only spend these points on certain items, depending on his career and contacts. For example, a character from a military background might be able to provide weapons and ammunition, but he would be unable, for instance, to contribute towards equipping a darkroom.

The concept of the 'ops centre' is one of the most original elements in *Conspiracy X* - very few systems offer anything similar. Although creating a centre adds to the time it takes for a new group to get playing, often taking a session all of its own, the system works very well in practice. It gives the players a chance to get together and work as a

group, and the extensive list of options helps to give them a feel for the nature of the game. Of course, the referee could always speed things up by providing a 'ready-made' base, but the players would miss out on an interesting and challenging part of the game.

UNCOVERING THE TRUTH

The next three chapters of *Conspiracy X* deal in turn with psychic powers, the supernatural and extraterrestrials. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the game is the way in which these areas are integrated with the background, forming a convincing and internally consistent game world. It would have been all too easy for *Conspiracy X* to end up as a mish-mash of ideas and images, the bane of many modern-day horror roleplaying systems.

The final chapter is aimed squarely at the referee, and is the only one to contain information that players really shouldn't be aware of. As well as carrying a discussion of how to run *Conspiracy X* games, and suggestions for the type of missions that a cell might face, it also offers advice about using The Black Book, aliens, and the supernatural in the game, including some information that Aegis, and therefore the players, do not know. If anything, this just goes to reinforce the strength of the background, and how much work has obviously gone into developing this side of the game.

ON THE DARK SIDE

Conspiracy X isn't perfect, however. In addition to the problems with the rules already mentioned, there's no index (although the contents page is very thorough), and the book has more than its

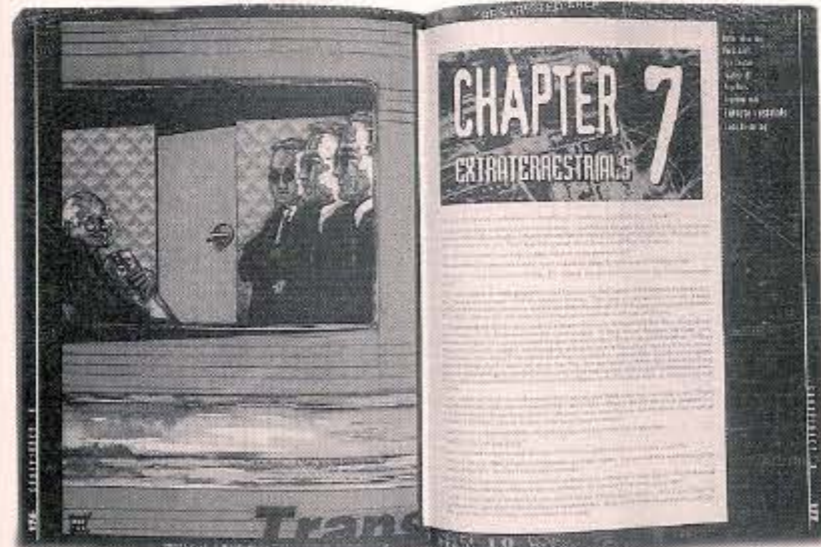
fair share of typos and missing words. Although the game comes with an errata sheet (which, interestingly, is the only place that tells you that six-sided dice should be used - you can work it out, but the rules never actually tell you), it's far from being comprehensive. Still, none of this is unforgivable, especially considering that this is NME's first roleplaying game.

What is slightly more concerning, and could cause significant problems for less experienced referees, is the lack of detail about Aegis itself. In a game with such a strong, well-designed background, this deficiency is even more noticeable. For example, the rules inform you that Aegis is organised into cells without ever clearly



explaining how such a structure works, and unless you've read a lot of espionage novels you're not likely to have any idea.

Again, this is far from a fatal flaw, and the relevant information will almost certainly be included in the forthcoming *Aegis Handbook* supplement, but you can't help feeling that it really should be part of the



One of the best things about *Conspiracy X* is the sheer amount of inspiration referees can find lying about. Almost any newspaper headline or TV documentary can be worked into a plot, and that's not including the wealth of stuff floating around on the Internet (just take a look at the alt.conspiracy.newsgroup).

The more extreme uses to which certain characters can put their Influence attribute include calling orbital strikes from secret Star Wars satellites or requesting the use of an Aurora, a prototype aircraft developed by Aegis that combines cutting edge technology with systems derived from alien designs...

And the players said...

STEVE: "Succeeds convincingly in areas where so many roleplaying systems fail."

MARYANNE: "The influence of *The X-Files* is obvious, but *Conspiracy X* takes things several steps further."

PAUL: "I must have a satellite weapons system. Can't wait for the supplements..."

JAMES: "Brilliant atmosphere, great rules, and the best background I've come across in ages."

main rules.

Still, *Conspiracy X* is the most impressive first roleplaying release in a long time, and it's a great game. It combines a setting and style that will be familiar enough for players and referees to easily understand with an incredibly detailed and atmospheric background, clear, simple rules and an impressive range of original and clever ideas. On the strength of this, New Millennium Entertainment seems set to become a force to be reckoned with. Highly recommended.

Andy Butcher



Score 9/10