

Yep, we've seen a lot of this before. Disadvantages have been around since the *GURPS** game at least, and I think cave men came up with the idea of skill points. And yep, some of the abilities, like Animal Animosity and Supernatural Focus, could've used more explanation. Still, the system generates winning characters; a typical PC combines the resourcefulness of James Bond with the hardness of Arnold Schwarzenegger. And if playing a guy from the Center for Disease Control sounds like a snooze inducer, obviously you've never seen *Outbreak* or read *The Hot Zone*.

The task resolution system also mines familiar territory, using rules similar to those in *Don't Look Back*, the *Masterbook** game, and about a zillion other RPGs. The gamemaster assigns a difficulty rating to a task, then determines the relevant skill or attribute; if a character wants to break down a door, for example, the difficulty level might be 5, with Strength the relevant attribute. The player rolls 2d6; if the roll is less than or equal to the difficulty level, the character executes the task. It works pretty well, providing the gamemaster can come up with equitable and accurate difficulty ratings. And he has to come up with them fast, unless he wants his players to fall asleep while he ponders the rating for riding a bicycle or baking a cake. Experienced gamemasters shouldn't have any trouble. But novices may find themselves struggling, as the rulebook skimps on examples and advice.

Combat also incorporates difficulty levels and attribute rolls, complicated by a long list of modifiers, including those for range, armor, and called shots. Lacking the patience to decide if the light was too dim to fire my dart gun (a -2 penalty), I ignored most of the modifiers, which didn't seem to make a whole lot of difference since the system relies on educated guesses anyway. Besides, *Conspiracy X* discourages combat, so why fuss with all the numbers? I got a kick, so to speak, out of the martial arts rules, which mix traditional fare like jump kicks and nerve punches with wacky options like Gun Fu.

Overall, we'd be talking an acceptable but undistinguished set of mechanics, were it not for a pair of pretty cool concepts that earn *Conspiracy X* a standing ovation. Cool Concept Number One is the Cell, the base of operations created by the players at the outset of the game. Each player begins with a fixed number of Resource Points to invest in the Cell,

purchasing the real estate, inventories, and personnel which the group as a whole will exploit throughout the campaign. Properties of the Cell include Location (military base, warehouse, office building), Facilities (barracks, laboratories, storage vaults), Staff (technicians, soldiers, pilots), and Equipment (weapons, software, medicines). All properties must be chosen communally, by vote, bargaining, or even intimidation. Is it fun? Well, my group spent an entire afternoon and a good chunk of the evening fiddling with their Cell, and got testy when I suggested it might be time to move on.

Cool Concept Number Two is the Rhine Test, the mechanism used to resolve psychic abilities. The test employs a set of five Zener Cards that come with the game. (Before you can use them, the cards must be photocopied and pasted over regular playing cards.) You've seen these before, probably in conjunction with ESP experiments; each card has its own symbol: a square, star, wave, circle, or cross. When a player wants his character to use a psychic ability, like foretelling the future, he names one of the cards. The gamemaster then draws the number of cards corresponding to that particular ability. If the card that the player picked is one of the cards drawn by the gamemaster, the ability succeeds. Thus, the character's success depends on the player's real-life "psychic" powers. Neat, eh?

A series of sharp, engaging essays brings the campaign world into focus, providing enough information to acclimate newcomers but not so much as to bury them in trivia. A solid chapter of gamemastering tips introduces an intriguing gallery of adversaries, including cannibals, shapeshifters, and voodoo priests. But apparently aliens abducted all the adventure hooks, as there's not a single ready-to-go scenario to be found.

Evaluation: Since I've only lived with it for a few weeks, I'm hesitant to give *Conspiracy X* an unqualified thumbs up. In a game this meaty, there's always the possibility that a long campaign might turn up a glitch that pushes the whole thing over a cliff. But our introductory scenario — which I adapted from an old TOP SECRET/S.I.™ game supplement — revealed no serious flaws. More importantly, it generated a table-full of satisfied customers, hungry for more. (Memo to New Millennium: bring on the official adventures — now.) *Conspiracy X* plops

you smack in the middle of a world gone nuts, where paranormal psychopaths are as common as cab drivers, and the man next door just might be a dispatcher for a fleet of UFOs. In other words, it's like *The X-Files* come to life. Or it that just an eerie coincidence?

Information: New Millennium Entertainment, Dept. X, 15 Ledgewood Drive, Albany, NY 12205.



Lost Worlds* game

32-page softcover book, one character sheet, four playing cards

Chessex \$6

Design: Alfred Leonardi

Character creation: Adamo Leoni

Development: Dennis Greci

Illustrations: Doug Shuler

For Christmas in 1986, my wife gave me a bundle of *Lost Worlds* books, at that time published by Nova Games. It turned out to be one of the best presents I ever got, for two reasons. First, more than 10 years later, I'm still playing with them, making *Lost Worlds* a gift with serious legs. Second, at six bucks a pop, the books weren't exactly cheap, and as a chronic tightwad, I never would've spent the money to buy them myself.

So now it's 1996, and hallelujah, a new publisher has brought *Lost Worlds* back from the dead. It's as terrific as ever, meeting all the criteria that elevates a product from the merely enter-