

CONSPIRACY X

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"What is the government really paying for when it shells out 75 bucks for a screwdriver?" This is one of the questions asked by the new RPG system *Conspiracy X* by New Millennium Entertainment. The answer is (in part at least) your own cell's investigation into the phenomena of psychic power, alien presence and the supernatural. Combining the best of *Illuminati* and *Over The Edge* with its own brand of twisted goings on, *Conspiracy X* provides a richly detailed world for the gamemaster to understand and the players to guess about.

About the only thing the players will understand at the beginning is that their special skills and knowledge have caused them to be recruited into Aegis, a government agency dedicated to protecting National Security (and of course, by extension, the whole human race), by completing the various tasks assigned to them by their superiors within the organization while not getting killed or going insane. If they survive, they may meet or team up with members of the CIA's secret mind-control project, MKULTRA, psychics who can see the future, or even humans with access to extraterrestrial technology. However, given the nature of RPG players and GMs, it's more likely that they will stumble across, and fight with, Aegis' arch-nemesis organization The Black Book, psychics who can set people on fire with a thought, or the Alien visitors themselves. It may be better for all concerned if the players never uncover some of Aegis' history, including the location of Hitler's occult artifacts collection, what really happened at Roswell, why Kennedy was assassinated, and who was behind the Challenger disaster.

Technically, the game is well put together. Its character creation system uses the now-standard advantages/disadvantages purchase system, with a few twists. One of the new traits is that of luck. A player may ask to make a luck roll to complete a difficult task, just to see if the character succeeds by chance. If the roll is successful, then the task succeeds. If the roll fails, there is some disastrous result, similar to a botch in the *Storyteller* system. Players can buy up their good luck or trade bad luck for character points during the creation process. This sets up the possibility of playing a character who is a "butterfingers" but too valuable to leave behind, or the reverse. It can be great fun to play a character who's not much good in a firefight, but always seems to "happen upon" the secret formula lying on the Evil Scientist's lab bench.

Like the luck system, other skills and talents available to players encourage good roleplaying. The psychic system, for example, is simple but flexible, allowing a psychic character to be very powerful within the game, but not be an unbalancing force. There is a lot of opportunity for GM sleight of hand here. For example, a precognitive character might ask the question, "will I be attacked if we enter the

warehouse?" and get a negative response. The GM is bound by this answer. But, other characters could be attacked. Likewise, a falling crate may not really be an "attack." And woe to the character who tempts the GM with the question, "will I survive this mission?"

The Alien presence is also very well detailed, at least for GMs. There are three Alien races, each with its own advantages and agenda. The Greys, the stereotypical big-eyed ETs, are psychics who have come to Earth for reasons unknown. The Saurians, who resemble large lizards, have immensely powerful weapons and other technology. They are working with The Black Book, and are feeding them technology (such as Stealth and SDI) for their own private ends. The classic "Ancient Astronauts," the Atlanteans, have perfected nanotechnology. Some of these machines are usable by humans, such as the "Blood Surgeons," tiny machines which aid in healing and can almost instantly stabilize a host who has been shot or otherwise injured.

The real jewel of the game from a roleplaying standpoint, though, is the system for creating a cell. One of the biggest problems facing a GM is convincing the players that they're a team that is together for a better reason than they were the only magic-users in the bar when the dragon attacked. Some games have tried to do this with various schemes, such as *Ars Magica's* covenant creation system in which all players participate. *Conspiracy X* has done it right. Not only must all players participate, but the amount and type of equipment that the cell as a whole can have is not set not by the game rules but by the power and kind of characters that make up the cell, just like in real life. If you want to have access to military aircraft in *Conspiracy X*, you'd better recruit an Air Force pilot.

Conspiracy X will be enjoyed by any gaming group who can't start their Friday night game until *The X-Files* ends. Some experienced roleplayers are a real plus, and a good GM is a must. Give it a try, but as the book's cover text says, "Pray it's only a game."

—Micah Jackson

