

**THERE IS THE NEED TO APPRECIATE** the thought that goes into deciding when and where to set a roleplaying game or its scenarios. Positioning an RPG in the 'wrong' period often results in players struggling to reconcile the events of the past or the possibilities of the future within their play, while finding just the right era does much to build and reinforce the necessary immersion that often makes specific roleplaying sessions so memorable.

For me, the need to set Conspiracy X in the 1990s is just as crucial to its core premise as are the concepts of AEGIS, the fact the Saurians will inevitably return to Earth, or the fact that Black Book is selling humanity out for some as-yet-to-be-fathomed gain.

## **OUT OF TIME: SETTING CONSPIRACY X IN THE 1990s**

In this short article, I will examine the reasons why I believe Con X should be set in the 90s, and why I urge Chroniclers and players to resist moving their missions to more modern times. Below, I'll outline some of the reasons the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the one and only setting for Conspiracy X while also recognising the risks and challenges that come with constraining the game during this period of our history.

### **WHY SET CONSPIRACY X IN THE 90S?**

The 1990s was a strange time for the world, a decade that began with such optimism but would soon see society's mood transform into one of pessimism and the need for seismic global change.

### **THE ZEITGEIST OF AMERICA**

Although I'm not an American, it almost goes without saying that Con X is a game firmly set in the United States of America. All its official sourcebooks and setting material focus on the States with few details of what is going on elsewhere across the globe provided (beyond which is required for background or setting

purposes). Therefore, I think it is accurate to say that Con X is a game that reflects the zeitgeist (i.e. the prevailing ideas, beliefs, and values) – even if these are slightly exaggerated and amplified - of America at the time of its creation.

In a very general sense, the 90s was a decade of stability and growth for the United States and represents a time when the nation became very sure of its place in the world. Having overcome some considerable challenges in the years leading up to and in the early 90s (including the financial crash of the late 80s, the collapse of the USSR as the only other world superpower, and a successful, if somewhat self-seeking, war in the Middle East) it is safe to say, that by as early as 1993, the US had grown to become the

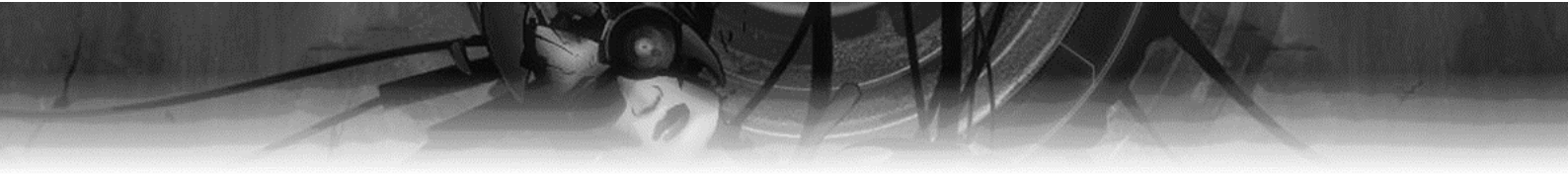
undisputed leader of world affairs.

But this newfound security, which allowed its citizens to no longer worry about what wolves lay at their borders, also permitted the

very same individuals to begin questioning those who had led them for so long. For some, this meant re-examination of what personal liberties had been traded in the pursuit of national security, while for others, it was the need to challenge for the future direction of the country and their own long-overlooked goals.

But while many of its people examined the need to maintain a regime of Cold War warriors as the heads of state, these very same scarred and grizzled soldiers and bureaucrats, men and women who had bled for decades to ensure the United States stood safe and unopposed, were not going to go easy into the night; too many secrets and too many skeletons remained hidden for such a transition.

These two clashing political energies, a Ying and Yang of sorts, created a new, strange aesthetic among many Americans, an energy that would mutate into many different forms. While most would be motivated by this renewed spirit, driven to benefit their country in new creative ways, for a few this upheaval morphed into paranoia, conspiracy, and even fear. It was this last emotion which would become the loudest, rising from a place of apprehension about what the



government had once done and worse, what it was still doing.

This new zeitgeist, a fear of the deep state would echo through the United States for the entirety of the decade, and into the earliest months of the 21<sup>st</sup> century... until the events of the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2001. In fact, it was only after that tragic day that the American people realised that they were not as safe as they once believed and just maybe the price paid for the lies, secrets, and pain of the Cold War age had been worth it after all.

This unique inwards suspicion of the government's actions can only occur in a society that feels safe from outside threats, and it is what makes the 90s perfect for Conspiracy X. Here, people expect to be led astray by their leaders, and even though they know it is coming, are still sucked into the lies. This atmosphere of healthy scepticism and even fear makes it an ideal environment in which aliens abduct civilians from the streets, men in black trade exotic technologies in the shadows and where ghosts and goblins can spring forth from even the most lighted corners.

## THE MEDIA OF THE DECADE

From the fear of the deep state and government overreach, through to the belief of Roswell and aliens in Area 51, and even rumours of FEMA 'death camps', conspiracy theories of all varieties began to gain in popularity throughout the 1990s. And, of course, if the American public was interested in sedition and secrets, then the nation's media was more than willing to feed into these desires.

Not only did we get foundational entertainment such as the X-Files, Twin Peaks and Millennium but within the world of tabletop gaming we saw the rise of conspiracy related games such as Delta Green, Dark Conspiracy and Wizards of the Coast's Dark Matter\*. These RPGs reflected the interest in the discovery and investigation of the strange and supernatural, and for a while even began to influence other genres of gaming.

There are also the Conspiracy X 1<sup>st</sup> Edition books themselves. These are ideal artifacts of their time and perfectly illustrate the organisational

structures of this period in our history. These supplements provide a unique insight into the world as it existed in the 90s, and, in some ways, it feels a shame not to utilise them in the manner for which they were created.

The existence of all these different – and still readily available – artifacts of the 1990s provides a goldmine of ideas, schemes and secrets for Chroniclers and players alike to explore. By taking elements of each of these – say a 90s conspiracy theory, a supernatural threat another RPG, and the spirit of Con X 1<sup>st</sup> edition – you can generate a myriad of adventure ideas and scenario seeds that probably create more mystery and excitement than you see in any game set our present era.

## TECHNOLOGY OF THE PERIOD

One of the most unalterable aspects of the 90s is its technology, and how these developed over the decade to change the way people not only communicated but how they also viewed the world. While it was only in the mid to late 90s that items like cell phones, internet access and GPS became ubiquitous, these wondrous pieces of technology soon became vital to our day-to-day lives.

The presence of this ever-expanding technology can be used to create a unique setting that only could exist in the 90s. Yes, there is the World Wide Web, but what the agents find on it is rarely of any real use. Of course, the agents can have cell phones, but their coverage is limited and – as is to be expected – will fail just as it is needed the most. And finally, while Close Circuit Television (CCTV) offers growing surveillance resources, its capabilities are so limited as to ensure it can never quite capture anything that might really help the agents on their mission.

Using the benefits and limitations of this technology creates a dynamic world that is impossible to replicate in our present social media-driven, electronic-eyes-on-every-street, modern age of the 2020s. What is more fun than a Chronicler luring the agents into a mystery using physical evidence and hard-won clues that require actual investigation and streetwise, rather than one done through the "skill" of web-fu?

---

\* not to forget games like Unknown Armies, Hunter: The Reckoning, Palladium Books' Beyond the Supernatural, and - of course - Conspiracy X itself!



## CHALLENGES OF LIVING IN THE 90S

While the benefits outlined above should give the reader a good reason to set their games in the 1990s, doing so is not without its difficulties.

### BEING A CHILD OF THE 90S

One of the benefits I have in writing this essay is that my formative years (from my mid-teens to early twenties) coincided with the 90s, and while recall many aspects of this decade, a lot of it is very much through the rose-tinted glasses of youth. While this gives me a distinct (if not entirely accurate) span vision of this ten-year, I am more than aware that I am not as young as I used to be and there will be some players who will only vaguely remember this time and likely many more who know it only through history books and the media.

Further, just as it can be difficult for me to authentically portray a period (like, say, the 1920s for a Cthulhu game, or the 1880s for a Western), so as the years pass it becomes more challenging to explain what the 90s was like without using assumptions and broad brushes. Ultimately the gap of time makes all of us forget some of the worst elements of a period in history and I'm just as guilty as most when falling into the all-too-common trap of 'anachronism'.

So, that all begs the question - if it is going to take time, energy and effort to 'replicate' the 1990s and then don't even do it correctly, why bother at all? Why not stick to our current time, I mean it too has more than enough reasoning for us to feel paranoid and afraid, right?

### LOSING THE SECOND EDITION BOOKS

In the early 2000s, as the popularity of Eden Studio's Unisystem mechanics grew, we were lucky enough to see a new second edition of Con X. Built from the bones of the wonderful 1<sup>st</sup> edition supplements and some unpublished materials, it brought the game into the post 9/11 world and created - in my opinion - a better mechanical experience to the game.

Therefore, one must ask why ignore or even degrade all the excellent information, updates and atmosphere of the quartet of books that

make up Con X 2<sup>nd</sup> edition just to accommodate a world that - while only a few years older - has changed so much?

### BEING CONTEMPORARY

One of the lessons often taught to authors of popular fiction is to always write the world you know, as the **now** is easier to explain on a page than any other setting, time, or universe. This is true in RPG writing as well, as if you set your game in the present day everything the players need to know is already at their fingertips. When you start to use other periods - especially historical ones - you immediately create the need to increase preparation time and compromise your ideas to make the setting.

This then, raises the question, why not just stick with what you know and make it the best you can?

### IN SUMMARY

While the arguments I have presented might ring true for some of you and be thought of as impractical claims by others, ultimately, the fact we get an opportunity to pick and choose how we bring to life games at our table is why tabletop roleplaying is such a wonderful, inclusive hobby. I will always contend that RPGs are the one real media where you get to do and be whatever your heart desires, and if this article has made you stop and think in any way, then it has achieved all it was ever intended to do!

Finally, thank you for taking the time to read through these thoughts and opinions and good luck in tuning your next Conspiracy X scenario no matter **when** it is set!