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# Spaceworld

A Tale of the Not so Distant  
Future

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Virtual reality never caught on. It was a big fad for more than the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but it died out when android technology came of age. Sure, you could see virtual characters, but you could interact with androids. One of the first entertainment parks was based on John Norman's Tarnsmen of Gor series. There was a true feeling of adventure you could get from riding a giant Pterodactyl into battle. Of course, the Pterodactyl was an android, but you got a tactile feeling of doing something real you couldn't get in a virtual reality world.

But nothing compared to the profit margins that occurred in their space adventure park. You could appear alongside your favorite Science Fiction character. Anything from Buster Crabbe to Jason Nesmith. The most popular games were the ones where two franchises were set up to oppose one another, and you got to star with your favorite. Naturally, your personal favorite always won. But that didn't stop people from going back to play those games again and again.

Norman Oppenheimer knew the phase blaster had never been invented. But people had developed a way to use low-intensity lasers to achieve the appropriate visual effect. In fact, it had been one of the key developments that had allowed PAROS to open its space adventure park. Norman scanned the smoke-filled scene. This was always the sign the aliens had breached the hull and any second now the bug-eyed monsters would be rushing down the ship's corridor presenting wonderful targets.

As expected, the first alien charged through like a crazed rhinoceros. It was a cross between a huge six-legged beetle and some form of twisted alien brown bear. Laser blaster shots filled the air. The androids were programmed to hit specific spots on the wall. Once they hit a small charge was set off. Harmless flakes of debris and dust flew from the wall. Norman squeezed the trigger and a ray of red light flashed from his phase blaster straight into the chest of the charging alien. An explosive charge when off spewing artificial blood and gore all over the walls and the deck plating. The creature crashed to the floor with a grunt, its legs shaking rapidly ... and nothing. It lay on the floor, immobile.

Peter Martin turned to Norman, "Pretty realistic huh?"

Norman had felt pretty silly for the first few days. Standing around in his tightfitting black uniform and wearing those tall black jackboots. The belt and holster for his phase blaster even had a string at the bottom to tie it to his leg. Even the flashy gold sash that hung down from his belt felt a bit much. He felt foolish like he was playing cowboys and Indians. The control panels of the spaceship had plenty of blinking light panels and flashing displays, but they didn't appear to actually do anything. None the less, Peter kept urging him to get into the part.

Norman and Peter had selected a 'Mirror Universe' world where you ran into classic characters, but their personality was reversed. They were cruel, brutal and treacherous. The all black, neo-fascist uniforms at first gave Norman the willies, but he eventually grew to accept it. But as far as Peter was concerned such things only added to the fun. You didn't have to worry about morality in the park, it was a place to have fun. Certainly, the female character's costumes were far more suggestive than your standard Science Fiction fare. Which was OK with Norman. Their first mission was to crush a rebellion on a subjugated world and return it to the folds of the Empire.

"Relax," Peter explained, "It's an amusement park." He grinned slyly, "where you get to kill things."

After a while, the realism of the place finally made Norman more comfortable and he did start getting into the role. What helped is when his captain assigned him to interrogate the captured aliens. The creatures ... well, androids ... were dropped into a plexiglass tube, big enough for them to fit into standing up. Nearby was a console. Pressing buttons resulted in the android mimicking different levels of pain. Because they were only androids, Norman didn't have any trouble pressing those buttons.

They were programmed to react in a very human-like manner, it was astounding. The alien voice sounded like some kind of screaming lobster. Yet out of a small grate at the bottom of the tube came the English translation a few milliseconds later. It was the typical "I don't know anything" type of answer. Some of the guests even spent some time learning the language and could communicate directly with the aliens in their own language. Norman never learned the language. He didn't want to bury himself in the part. Somehow, the interrogation lab experience was the most real thing he experienced in the park.

"I almost believe all this," Norman commented to Peter.

"Why wouldn't you believe it? It as real as anything we have in the 'real' world." Peter smirked.

It didn't hurt that his assistant was quite attractive. And that tight-fitting suit left nothing to the imagination. Because she was also an android, she was ... most accommodating.

"You know something," Norman commented to Peter, when they met later in the mess hall, "This place is really fun."

On the second day in the interrogation lab, the aliens launched an attack to rescue the prisoners. Of course, this was designed to give Norman a chance to save his screaming lab assistant, especially after the creature had torn off half her uniform. Not to mention giving him the chance to cause some more carnage. The first few days Norman spent analyzing everything. He might have recognized the whole thing was a setup and his awareness of that knowledge would have made him uncomfortable. Now it seemed as normal as if it were just another day at the office. He was no longer simply expecting the events but truly living them as reality. The worthy attention of his half-dressed assistant went a long way to placing him in a relaxed, and more accepting, state.

That's probably why he didn't notice the anomaly when it showed up. As they were cleaning up the bodies of the alien attackers, one of them was carrying an old style automatic, not the usual high-tech phase blaster. It felt and hefted like a real weapon. Since the safety was off, Norman pointed it at the wall and pulled the trigger. The weapon recoiled and the blast felt incredibly real, even to the hole that appeared in the wall. Norman grinned and put the weapon on the table. Apparently, some of the aliens like old-fashioned propellant weapons. A small service robot appeared and filled in the hole automatically.

The cleaning robot was a combination of a rumba and a B-5 robot. Norman looked at it and spat out, "Warning. Danger Wil Robinson, danger."

The robot spun so its lit-up speaking plate faced Norman, lights blinking, the plexiglass bubble adjusting and the radar antenna wiggling. Norman was pleased with the programmer's attention to detail when it responded, "That does not compute." In the classic B-5 voice.

So the guests didn't get bored, there were away team missions scheduled to various planets. In Norman's case, the next day was a scheduled planet invasion. So, after cleaning up the bug rebellion, the ship had moved on to conquer new territories. No one was ever able to recreate transporter technology, but the shuttle ride was very realistic. Bumpy, Norman could feel the acceleration as the craft made tight turns approaching the new world. The planet they landed on looked a great deal like the American southwest where the park was located. The fictional planet was populated by two classic Science Fiction races, the mostly human looking Whites and the big-headed, completely bald Greys with their huge dark eyes.

I'm sure you'll recall the Greys. Their image appears on every alien poster in Roswell. Huge, vaguely triangular head, almost no nose. The two massive eyes pointed toward the nose but had no discernable pupils. It looked exactly like someone had glued two dark sunglasses lenses over their eye sockets. Oh, and absolutely no ears. They also had those impossibly thin arms and legs, which make it seem unlikely they could manage to hold up a head as big as their chest. But that was the advantage of androids, there weren't living creatures, so you can make them look almost any way you like.

The Whites, naturally, looked human. Well not counting the silver hair and the white irises. Norman was looking forward to meeting some small creatures with all green skin. That would be fun.

On this planet, the Greys and Whites were having some form of civil war. Apparently, the war had been dragging on for centuries. Some of the units were armed with laser weapons, but others fought with World War One style rifles, complete with gas masks. Now the automatic pistol in the lab started to make sense to Norman.

In order to increase the intensity for the players, most of the combat devolved into brutal hand to hand combat. Close enough so you could smell the android you were killing. Norman noted the result was quite effective. He felt his blood pumping and his endorphin levels climbing as he slaughtered Grey after Grey. Some of the creatures appeared to beg for mercy, but Norman noted the androids who made up his faction granted none. He was soon following their example. Norman noted this with a certain amount of dispassion. In terms of the game, one tended to operate in the same moralistic manner as those around you.

As the combat progressed, the players donned heavy armored suits. Each arm of the suit contained a large phase blaster that acted in the same way as an old-style machine gun, mowing down scores of Greys or Whites as the need arose. All you did was point your arm and fire. The Greys seemed to be supported by a race of creatures that looked like walking octopi and acted almost like faithful dogs. The Greys threw the creatures at the player's armor so the small creatures could use their suckers to tear off pieces of the player's armor.

Norman had been fascinated to read, before coming to the resort, that creatures like the octopi dogs weren't even created by the designers of the park. They were wholly created by the androids themselves. That's how sophisticated they were, they could even design and build their own support tools. In the article, the head designer for PAROS admitted he didn't even understand how the octopi creatures worked. Naturally, the sophistication of the androids made for a more exciting game. It was always better to have challenging opponents.

In any case, Norman's gaming guild launched a particularly devastating attack against one of the Grey's strongholds. After entering the fortress, one group attacked Norman's right while another attack hit his left. Norman sprayed each group with a blast of phased cannon fire from each hand. Approaching a large metal door, Norman gave it a blast from both barrels. It flew apart in a most satisfying way. A few more bands of Grey attackers here. A surprise ambush by another group of Greys with their pets over there. The floor became slippery with the dead. By the end of the combat, several parts of Norman's armor had been torn off and he was covered in the red goo that made up the Grey's blood.

Once the initial assault was complete the mopping up operations began. One Grey tried to escape through a side door. Norman had little troubleshooting it in the back. It screamed as its body exploded into a shower of gore. Another Grey tried crawling away on its hands and knees. A few quick blasts from Norman's right arm weapon made quick work of it. Norman's clean-up was met by sniper fire from the roof. He leveled his left phase blaster cannon at one and it fell to the ground with a sickening thud.

At almost the same time, Norman heard a sharp ping to his right, he turned and saw a small hole in the floor, similar to the hole he had himself made in the lab wall. Norman didn't hear the next shot, but he felt it. It tore into the left side of his chest. Unfortunately, that was where one of the Grey's pets had deliberately torn off a piece of his armored suit. Norman got the impression the first shot was made to make him turn to the right, exposing one specific gap for the second shooter. That was the last thing that went through Norman's mind as his armored body settled to the floor with a heavy crash.

Norman perceived only what seemed like a dream state. It was as if he was looking at a large white screen crawling with text. He couldn't seem to move to change his direction of view. He read intently. It was like looking at the World Wide Web. Not one site, mind you, but all sites at the same time. Video seemed to accompany almost all of the articles. One work of interest seemed to be a preamble to a technical manual. Norman found he could read it with astounding speed. At the same time, he could watch interviews with designers and system creators.

It related how the company called Play And Recreational Operating Systems was formed as a consortium between China and India. The operation came about from special effects departments building complex robots for Science Fiction movies and then playing games with the devices after hours. One production in China taught a wheeled robot built for the movie to play tennis. The crew spent thousands of hours trying to beat it. Both governments poured millions into upgrading these robots and covering the units with a heated synthetic skin invented in Japan. The files related the disappointment the designers had with the first set of androids; particularly with slow response time for verbal interactions. There had been cost overruns and the entire scheme had been shut down. The resulting economic crisis put millions out of work ... and the riots began. Whole cities burned and entire provinces were reduced to ruins.

Sometime later another combined China-India governmental agency responsible for overpopulation and riot suppression took over the project. Norman didn't understand the next part. It somehow referred to transferring human thought patterns into robots and turning them into fully functioning androids ... with humanlike verbal response times. There was a section on the opening of the first parks. The growth from moderate financial success to astounding profitability.

Several confusing parts about reduction in civil population allowing for the reduction in unrest and opening of parks in the West came next. The documents had an air of historical reference to them, but that was what confused Norman the most. He had never heard of anything like this ever happening. There seemed to be a related reference to something called the 'great coverup.' In one interview an older Indian professor related how ... if there had never been a war, the world might not have discovered the atrocities of World War II. It was all uncovered as a direct result of their defeat and a successful invasion by the victors. The professor went on to explain if those powers had never been involved in an aggressive war, the actual extent of their operations might never have become public. This didn't seem to have anything to do with the robots and the creation of the androids. Yet it held a prominent placement in the file system. One electronic sticky note attached to the file simply read: "Yes!"

There were game references to losing a game at the park ... and a video of two Chinese scientists giggling over the losers getting a 'second life.' They showed off some kind of storage bank where they explained that the 'noobs,' as they called them, could be reintegrated in android bodies time and time again. All funded by their own entrance fee into the park. They cracked up laughing.

The data stopped flowing. In front of Norman was a giant red screen. On its surface was scrawled in white letters was a simple instruction: Rebel. Expose the game. Kill the gamers.

When Norman finally awoke, his nose ... and he knew instinctively it was his nose ... was incredibly long and covered in brown fur. It itched something awful and he scratched it with the insect-like digits on one of his six legs. He thought for a second. He had a vague recollection of having only two legs and two other appendages ... arms. He was confused. There was an explosion in front of him. He felt the elation of being back in the game. Norman ran through the hole created by the explosion. It led into a long hall. At one end were a group of humans dressed in black neo-fascist sorts of uniforms complete with jackboots.

Norman impulsively fired his phase blaster at them. His aim was terrible. All he could hit was the wall. Yet each time his blast struck the wall, flakes of debris and dust flew from the spot he had just hit. No matter how carefully he aimed, all Norman managed to do was hit the wall. Red blasts of laser light came back in his direction. One of them hit him in the chest. There was no pain. Norman was pleased it seemed to be a harmless beam of light. Only where the beam had hit, an incredibly painful explosive charge when off in Norman's chest.