

Wonderful Things



FINDING THE ONNESIUM QUEST



Gark Games

Joe D. Fugate, Sr.
Deb Zeigler
DIGEST GROUP PUBLICATIONS

4/14/90

Dear Joe & Deb,

In separate envelopes, each of you are receiving the final draft of The Onnesium Quest, Vol. I, Man-Hunt. Joe, yours is in disc form, Deb, yours is a hard copy. It's been a long road and in some ways I'm sad to see it end, though I'm looking forward to getting started on Antares Down, not to mention seeing Man-Hunt in print ... finally.

I want to thank you both for giving me the opportunity to write this and for your generous help and encouragement as it's gone along. I'm extremely happy with the way it's turned out and hope you will be too.

Joe: enclosed with the disc is a set of updated floorplans, etc. I know you're probably not going to be doing any interior colors in the finished Man-Hunt, shades of grey or line patterns will be just as good for showing the various gravitic zones on the V.C.R.I. floorplan. The files on the disc are numbered 01 through 29 to avoid confusion as to their intended order.

I'm afraid it might be a little long. If this is the case, Appendix-B is, in my mind, the most expendable. As long as players are referred to the stats for the Seeker in the Imperial Encyclopedia, they should be okay. Honestly, I wouldn't cry if all the player character stuff got the axe completely. Removing all the Appendixes puts it to about 197 pages. At somewhere in the neighborhood of 249 words per page, that's almost dead on. I'll leave this up to you.

Okay, I'm going to shut up now and let you read this thing.

Yours,

Philip Athans

JOE: I need an answer to this question a.s.a.p. - Can I name the worlds in Antares Sector? I want to start on this and other detail stuff first and get it out of the way.

WONDERFUL THINGS

FINDING THE ONNESIUM QUEST

Written by: Nick Gibbins and Joshua Bell

“It was sometime before one could see, the hot air escaping caused the candle to flicker, but as soon as one’s eyes became accustomed to the glimmer of light the interior of the chamber gradually loomed before one, with its strange and wonderful medley of extraordinary and beautiful objects heaped upon one another. There was naturally short suspense for those present who could not see, when Lord Carnarvon said to me ‘Can you see anything’.

I replied to him ‘Yes, it is wonderful.’”

— The Diary of Howard Carter, 26th November 1922

Manhunt: The Onnesium Quest Vol. 1 was considered one of Traveller’s lost books for almost three decades. To understand why it was lost, and how it was rediscovered, it’s worth knowing something about the publication history of *Traveller*, and the rise and fall of one of its most renowned licensees: Digest Group Publications.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DIGEST GROUP PUBLICATIONS

During *Traveller*’s first decade (1977-87), Game Designers’ Workshop published almost seventy items for *Traveller*, with its licensees publishing more than as many again during the same period. Some of its licensees became famous in their own right—FASA being the best-known example. However, the scale and rate of GDW’s publishing schedule led to a certain degree of redundancy and inconsistency in the rules on offer. By 1986, *Traveller* had four systems for personal combat (*Book 1: Characters and Combat*, *Snapshot*, *Azhanti High Lightning* and *Striker*), two systems for space combat (*Book 2: Starships*—with variants—and *Book 5: High Guard*), two systems for ship building (*Book 2* and *High Guard* again), and a system for vehicular design and combat (*Striker*) that wasn’t directly compatible with the basic personal combat rules. Moreover, the core *Traveller* rules for non-combat skills varied widely on a skill-by-skill and situation-by-situation basis, with little overall consistency (it should be noted that this still put *Traveller* ahead of most of its late 70s contemporaries).

Digest Group Publications was founded in 1985 by Gary Thomas, Joe and Patricia Fugate, and Nancy and Robert Parker in order to publish their quarterly *Traveller* magazine, *The Travellers’ Digest*. In their first issue, Joe Fugate laid the groundwork for the first significant attempt to revise and rationalise the *Traveller* rules: he introduced a set of rules for designing robots, inspired in part by the vehicle design sequences in *Striker*; and he began a series of articles on using skills effectively, which would eventually become DGP’s

universal task profile.

Joe Fugate’s robot rules were expanded and republished by GDW in 1986 as *Book 8: Robots*, and DGP released the first of their own books—*Grand Survey*—at Origins later that year. Thomas and Fugate later wrote in *Travellers’ Digest #6*:

“our booth [at ORIGINS 86] was next to GDW’s booth, and we had plenty of opportunities to chat with Marc Miller while we were there. He gave us permission to do some pretty exciting things with coming issues of the magazine.” (Thomas and Fugate, 1986)

The impression that DGP made on Miller was favourable, and in 1987 DGP began to hint at big news in *Traveller*’s future:

“A certain reader likes the way we handle Traveller, and particularly likes our ability to tie rules together into one realistic, playable package. [...] The appreciative reader just happens to be Marc Miller himself, the original author of Traveller. He has asked us to help him make the 50+ volumes of available Traveller material more accessible” (Thomas and Fugate, 1987a)

This accessible version was *MegaTraveller*, which was formally announced in *Challenge #29* (Miller et al, 1987) to coincide with the 10th anniversary celebrations for *Traveller*. Thomas and Fugate went on to clarify DGP’s future relationship to *Traveller* and GDW:

“Game Designers’ Workshop [...] has commissioned our

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staff here at Digest Group Publications to revise and enhance the Traveller rules.” (Thomas and Fugate, 1987b)

DGP had therefore moved beyond being a mere licensee to playing a pivotal role in the creation of *MegaTraveller*. Mike Mikesh summarised the relationship between GDW and DGP rather bluntly in *Tiffany Star* #9:

“[The] wardship of Traveller has been quietly moving from GDW to the hands of DGP. It’s still Marc Miller’s game, and GDW owns it. But the defacto authority any more is DGP. Marc’s confidence in DGP is such that he really doesn’t have to review anything that’s gone to Boise [DGP’s location] first.” (Mikesh, 1989)

Unfortunately, this growing responsibility took its toll on DGP, as Fugate noted in *Tiffany Star* #16:

“DGP has been growing so much in the last 6 months of 1989 that Joe Fugate’s and Rob Caswell’s time has become overburdened with administrative responsibilities (trying to manage sales and marketing, overall planning for strategic direction in the next few years, finding new contributors, convention planning, answering mail, editing magazine material—and on and on...), leaving little time to do actual product development (the fun stuff: writing products, drawing illos, and toying with ideas.)” (Fugate, 1990)

Meanwhile, the upheaval to the *Traveller* universe caused by the assassination of Strephon and the subsequent civil war deepened into the Hard Times, and GDW began to consider changes to *Traveller*’s ongoing storyline to give it a grittier feel that was more in keeping with contemporary tastes in RPGs. GDW had also been taking steps to rationalise the rules used in their RPG offerings. Following the publication of 2nd edition *Twilight: 2000* in 1990, the same d10-based (later d20-based) system was used for both *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* and *Dark Conspiracy*; with the discontinuation of *Traveller: 2300/2300AD* and *Space:1889*, this left *Traveller* as the only GDW game to not be using the new GDW house system.

In late 1991, Marc Miller decided to take a break from the day-to-day business of GDW (Wolf and Miller, 2017), so leaving it without the guiding force behind *Traveller*. Mike Mikesh summarised this momentous change as follows:

“Marc Miller has left GDW, at least for the next several years. This was a long time coming and not a real surprise. Marc is still one of the owners of the company.

Dave Nilsen at GDW has taken over responsibilities for overseeing the Traveller product line.” (Mikesh, 1991b)

Nilsen had joined GDW in October 1991 (Sturgeon, 1992; Nilsen, 2004), initially as an editor but soon progressing to line manager for *Traveller*, which gave him control over its future direction beyond *MegaTraveller*. Fugate expressed his concerns in a post on the HIWG (History of the Imperium Working Group) GEnie forums on 9th November, and started to pivot DGP away from its current role as a *Traveller* licensee to being the publisher of its own science fantasy RPG: *AI* (Artificial Intelligence).

“After much thoughtful consideration, DGP’s *MegaTraveller* production has been put on hold, pending the release of *AI* and gaining a better understanding of GDW’s direction re-

garding *MegaTraveller*.” (Fugate, 1991)

Nilsen’s response was suitably emollient: “THIS IS NOT A WHOLESAL TRASHING OF EVERYTHING WE’VE EVER PUT OUT. It is an evolutionary development that will be as true as possible to everything that has gone before.” (Nilsen, 1991).

Fugate’s announcement of the suspension of DGP’s *Traveller* product development understated the permanence of this move; in AAB Proceedings #18B, Clay Bush noted that “DGP is leaving Traveller entirely after MTJ4 [The *MegaTraveller Journal* #4]” (Bush, 1992a). At the GDW writers’ conference in Bloomington in August 1992 (after Gen Con/Origins ‘92), GDW were firm in the new direction that *Traveller* was to take. As Bush later put it:

“no letter or argument will stop the appearance of the *Virus* or the *Crash* now” (Bush, 1992b)

The public announcement of the new edition of *Traveller—Traveller: The New Era*—came in *Challenge* #64 (Nilsen, 1992a), shortly followed by the confirmation that this new edition would use the GDW house system (Nilsen, 1992b). DGP’s final *Traveller* product—*The MegaTraveller Journal* #4—was released in March 1993, and contained a bitter-sweet farewell from Fugate:

“As much as we love Traveller (and we’re true fanatics about the game), we’ve decided to no longer support the game with GDW’s release of *Traveller: The New Era*. There are lots of reasons for this, the most significant being our desire to control a game’s direction ourselves. GDW owns Traveller—we don’t. And believe me, we’ve asked GDW if they would ever consider selling the rights to the game to us, but we always get a firm and definite “no.”

[...] Marc Miller isn’t actively involved in the design of *New Era*, so us “old-timers” here on the staff aren’t as interested in the direction of the game minus Marc’s influence.

Right or wrong, as the game’s original designer, Marc Miller was *Traveller* to us. Somehow, it’s just not the same. Even though *New Era* may be the best thing since sliced bread, enough is changing that we don’t feel *Traveller* is still the game we fell in love with. But then, maybe we’re just too set in our ways.” (Fugate, 1993)

Fugate closed DGP’s doors in 1993 for several reasons: dissatisfaction with the direction in which GDW was taking *Traveller*; declining sales across the games industry; and the heavy toll that running DGP in addition to holding down a day job had placed on Fugate’s family life (Fugate, 2004b).

During the eight years that DGP was in operation, they released 25 magazine issues (of *Travellers’ Digest* and *The MegaTraveller Journal*) and eleven books. DGP staff also wrote two books for GDW (*Book 8: Robots* and *Knightfall*) and had additional design or editing credits on a further six.

In 1995, Fugate sold DGP’s remaining assets, including the copyrights to DGP’s books and their game-in-progress *AI*. Their *Traveller* books have subsequently remained out of print, and *AI* was never published.

THE ONNESIUM QUEST

The earliest published reference to Phil Athans’ *Onnesium Quest* trilogy was in *Tiffany Star* #11 (Fugate, 1989); Fugate gave DGP’s publishing schedule, including *Onnesium Quest*

Volumes 1 (Manhunt) and 2 (Antares Down) for 1990. Phil Athans delivered the final draft of Manhunt to DGP in April 1990 (Athans, 1990). By the time that Travellers' Digest #20 went to press in the early summer of 1990, the schedule for Vol. 1 Manhunt had slipped to that year's GenCon in August:

"On schedule (more or less)... Manhunt (Onnesium Quest Trilogy, vol 1): The first in a trilogy of adventures where the player characters seek out the fabled Victory Belt, a mythical planetoid belt of untold wealth in onnesium-118. A GenCon '90 release. 56 pages \$8.95" (Thomas and Fugate, 1990)

Both Travellers' Digest #20 and #21 carried advertisements for Manhunt, those in the latter including some tantalising artwork by Rob Caswell. However, the Onnesium Quest was not released at GenCon '90; Rob Caswell's editorial in The MegaTraveller Journal #2 listed it as a 1991 release (Caswell, 1991), and noted that it was *"now a single, 104-page adventure/sourcebook"* rather than a three-volume adventure. Mike Mikesh further elaborated on this in September 1991:

"I had an enjoyable phone conversation with Phil [Athans] on Sep 2, author of ONNESIUM QUEST. Its now a single 104 page book, not a trilogy. Although the characters still travel from Vland to the Antares system, it will predominantly focus on Antares Sector. [...]"

Among the highlights are the TL17 robot world Sabmiqys, and the Antares system itself. An important ramification of a supergiant star is a jump limit many hundreds of AU in radius. Travel from the main world out to the starport is usually by high gee ramscoop!" (Mikesh, 1991)

As noted above, DGP made the decision to put its MegaTraveller production on hold in the autumn of 1991, but the fate of the Onnesium Quest was more final: it was summarily cancelled. Fugate explained this decision in Tiffany Star #29:

"We didn't feel right keeping Philip in the dark concerning our decision to put all MegaTraveller production on hold for the next year. So we told him our priority for the foreseeable future is AI, not MegaTraveller." (Fugate, 1991)

With this, the rights to Manhunt returned to Philip Athans; they were not sold as part of DGP's assets in 1995.

DIGITAL ARCHAEOLOGY

In 2014, Philip Athans discovered his floppy disks containing the manuscript for Manhunt. He contacted Marc Miller, who enlisted help from Don McKinney to try to recover the data. Unlike today, where a small number of applications are used for editing files and they are all generally capable of sharing data, during the early 1980s there were hundreds of incompatible word processing titles. There were also a wide variety of competing computer systems, which were physically incapable of sharing disks and data. Fortunately, Philip Athans and Marc Miller had both used computers from the Apple II line, popular in the 1980s and predating the Macintosh. There is a thriving "retrocomputing" scene, where hobbyists maintain old computers and have devised ways of extracting data from old disks for use on modern systems.

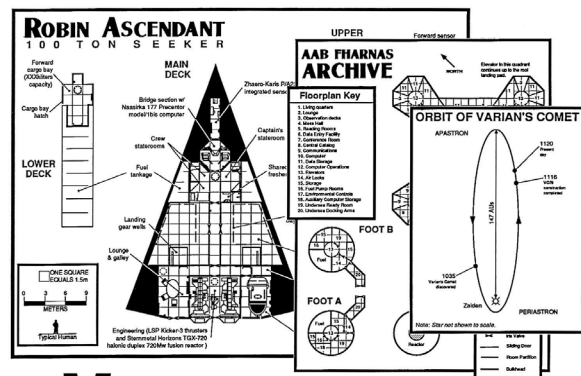
Don McKinney contacted Joshua Bell (creator of the TravellerMap.com site), who in turn recruited David Finnigan, author of the *The New Apple II User's Guide*. David was able to safely recover the data from the old disks into "disk

images", or digital copies of the complete disks. These disk images can be used in emulators, programs that simulate entire old computer systems. While the disk images had been preserved, there was still a mystery of how to interpret the data. Further sleuthing tracked down the specific application that had been used to create the files on the disks ("Magic Window"), and Joshua Bell was able to run the application in an emulator and load files from the disk images, viewing the files for the first time in nearly a quarter-century. To produce a draft manuscript, the files were "printed" on a simulated printer, producing a PDF with the actual text embedded. This turned into the draft for Manhunt.

REWRITING THE PAST

The question of what is—and what is not—considered to be a canonical part of the Traveller universe is essentially a matter of hermeneutics. In preparing Manhunt for belated publication, we had to decide whether we would publish it as-is, or amend it in order to make it more consistent with the thirty years of additions to Traveller's canon that have been made since Philip Athans submitted his final draft to DGP.

Further complicating this decision is the canonicity of DGP's books; given that the current rights holder has made no attempt to republish them, they are broadly considered to have been removed from the Traveller canon, but at the time that Manhunt was written they were a core part of the canon, not least due to DGP's central role in the development of MegaTraveller.



MANHUNT

THE ONNESIUM QUEST BEGINS

The Victory Belt. An asteroid belt with unbelievably high concentrations of onnesium: a metaconductor and one of the most valuable substances in Charted Space. Is it merely rumor? Your players search for the only man who can answer that question in the first volume of the Onnesium Quest Trilogy, Manhunt.

This 56-page MegaTraveller adventure brings you across parsecs of space; from the Domain of Deneb to the Restored Vilani Empire. In richly detailed settings and through exotic cultures, your players will slowly start to unravel the mystery behind the enigmatic Victory Belt. Look for it in better hobby and game stores Dec. - Jan. and join the quest. \$8.95



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The adventure is set during the latter years of the Rebellion, but before the beginning of the Hard Times era (1125-1130). As such, we were not concerned with later changes; Virus and the Rape of Trin are still in the future.

At the time that *Manhunt* was written, little had been published about the world of Trin beyond its UWP, which was first published in *Supplement 3: The Spinward Marches* in 1979. The later *Spinward Marches Campaign* from 1985 did not add any further information about Trin.

The first book to consider Trin in more detail was Steve Jackson Games' *Behind the Claw* from 1998, which names the system's gas giant Orslei, the inner system world of Scorcher and the iceball world of LSP Spinward. This information was repeated in Mongoose's 2008 sourcebook on the Spinward Marches; both were written by Martin Dougherty.

We chose to combine the extended system data from Philip Athans' draft with the details created by Martin Dougherty, and added in a mention of the naval inactive ship facility co-located with the naval base, as described in GDW's *Regency Sourcebook* from 1995. The climate of Trin was changed from Athans' warm world to the "chilly, semi-desert" of Dougherty's *Behind the Claw*.

However, we decided to keep the Reddening and the Shrievallities that Athans described; they were too interesting to discard. Strictly speaking, this means that the Trin of *Manhunt* diverges slightly from the canon as represented by the Mongoose sourcebook.

In comparison, the world of Fharnas (Vland 2328) had not been previously considered in the Traveller canon; the majority of the system information in Athans' draft was therefore compatible with the current state of the canon, with one exception: Fharnas' atmosphere. The UWP for Fharnas was first published in DGP's *MegaTraveller Alien Vol.1: Vilani & Vargr*. At some point during the cleaning of world data as part of the T5 Second Survey process, the atmosphere of Fharnas changed from A (exotic - which Athans had fleshed out as an ammonia taint) to D (dense, high). No rationale for this change for T5SS was recorded, so we made the decision to keep the atmosphere as Athans had described it, and to change the value in T5SS back to that present in previous sources.

One relatively minor change which did not arise from the vagaries of Traveller canon was the description of Varian's Comet. At the time that *Manhunt* was written, there had been comparatively few cometary missions, the 1986 ESA Giotto encounter with 1P/Halley being the best known. Since then, robotic spacecraft have returned coma samples to Earth (the NASA Stardust mission in 1999), landed on a comet nucleus (the ESA/DLR Rosetta/Philae mission to 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko launched in 2004) and studied the interior composition of a comet (the NASA Deep Impact mission to 9P/Tempel launched in 2005). These missions have dramatically advanced our understanding of comets. Far from being "dirty snowballs", comet nuclei are more like "icy dirtballs" and are covered in a layer of dust that gives them a very low albedo. Given Traveller's reputation for paying attention to science, it seemed appropriate to bring this material up to date.

Finally, the titular element of the trilogy, Onnesium-118, was overtaken by the science a decade after Phil Athans wrote *Manhunt* (and two decades after the Keith brothers came up with the element in FASA's *Uragyad'n of the Seven Pillars* from 1981). The element with atomic number 118 was first synthesized by a joint US-Russian team of scientists at Russia's Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in 2002, and in

2016 was formally named *oganesson*, after Yuri Tsolakovich Oganessian, the leader of the JINR. The most stable isotope of oganesson found so far, ²⁹⁵Og, has a half-life of only 181ms; we must assume that the onnesium-118 that is the subject of this adventure is a particularly long-lived isotope.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Although a complete manuscript existed for *Manhunt*, the remainder of the *Onnesium Quest* was far less well developed. There are not known to be any outlines, and (as noted above) even the number of volumes planned by DGP varied during the development of *Manhunt*.

In the *Manhunt* manuscript, Athans named volumes 2 and 3—*Antares Down*, and *Beyond the Seventh Moon*—and provided a little information on the contents of the former: a raid on a deep meson gun in the Antares system, and a rescue mission to the interdicted TL17 world of Sabmiqys. Fugate (2004a) later recalled some further details that seem to pertain to the latter: the Victory Belt was outside the borders of the Imperium, in a (presumably barren) system which could only be reached with Jump-6; and the source of the onnesium-118 was a planetoid which was the homeworld of an extinct TL minor human race.

These details would suggest a location in the Lesser Rift on the border with the Julian Protectorate, with several possible candidates in the Star's End and Arzul sectors. The stellar positions for both of those sectors had first been specified in DGP's *Vilani and Vargr* from 1990, but there was no data for those systems at the time that *Manhunt* was written (this was later created by Jeff Zeitlin for the Zhodani Base); it is therefore not possible to determine the intended location of the Victory Belt with any certainty.

A NOTE ON STYLE

The production of *Manhunt* was well-advanced at the time of its cancellation. Rob Caswell had finished several pieces of art for it: the deckplans shown in the advert for *Manhunt* in *Travellers' Digest #21*, reproduced on the previous page; the character portraits in Appendix A; and the elevation view of the Fharnas archive.

In preparing *Manhunt* for long-overdue publication, we tried to keep the new art as close in style to that used by DGP. We took specific inspiration from Rob Caswell's deckplan for the Robin Ascendant, from the fragment of his floorplan for the Fharnas archive (which itself seems to have been strongly influenced by the the layout of the labyrinthine library in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*), and from Joe Fugate's illustration of the LSP Medrobot from *101 Robots*.

As a tribute to the high production standards that DGP set, we strived to faithfully reproduce the typography of DGP's *MegaTraveller*-era books. This house style evolved between 1988's *The Early Adventures* and their final book in 1991, *The MegaTraveller Alien Vol. 2: Solomani and Aslan*. Given that *Manhunt* was originally due to have a 1990 or 1991 release, we based the layout and typography of this book on 1990's *The Flaming Eye*, which would have been its closest contemporary.

— Nick Gibbins and Joshua Bell, April 2022

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WONDERFUL THINGS

FINDING THE ONNESIUM QUEST

Digest Group Publication's book *Manhunt: The Onnesium Quest, Vol. 1* was considered a lost book for more than thirty years.

Wonderful Things describes the rise and fall of DGP, and explains how *Manhunt* was lost and subsequently found.



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