

G U R P S[®]

TIME TRAVEL

Adventures Across Time and Dimension



BY STEVE JACKSON AND JOHN M. FORD

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN!

GURPS Time Travel is the complete guide to dimension-hopping adventure. Now *GURPS* players can tie *all* their campaigns together . . . adventuring across time, or in parallel universes, to visit every *GURPS* worldbook ever published.

Winner of the 1991 Origins Award for Best Roleplaying Supplement, this book is a collaboration between two previous winners – Steve Jackson (*Illuminati*, *Car Wars*, *GURPS*) and John M. Ford (*Yellow Clearance Black Box Blues*).

GURPS Time Travel includes:

∞ A survey of time and dimension travel as presented in fiction – and current scientific thought. Travel by time machine, by dimension-gate, even by the powers of the mind!

∞ Six complete campaign backgrounds (and several mini-backgrounds) for travel through time or parallel worlds, or both! Each has its own rules for characters, travel, and paradoxes.

∞ A detailed discussion of the paradoxes you should consider in creating your own time-travel campaign. Is meddling with history easy? Impossible? Or just a Very Bad Idea?

∞ Parallel worlds . . . “what if” dimensions where something, or *everything*, is different.

∞ A timeline of interesting dates in our own world’s history . . . as places for time travelers to visit, or as “branch points” for a parallel-world campaign.

With this book, the *GURPS* system reaches its full potential for *universal* adventure. Any time, any place, any world, any genre. *Anything can happen!*



Written by Steve Jackson
and John M. Ford
Edited by Loyd Blankenship
Cover by John Zeleznik
Illustrated by Ben Anglin, Guy Burwell
and Dan Smith



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GURPS®

TIME TRAVEL

Adventures Across Time and Dimension

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The authors would like to thumb their noses at the Stopwatch agents who, for over three years of our personal time, have frustrated our attempts to finish this book. It's finally done. So there.

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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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INTRODUCTION

About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. We can be reached by email: info@sjgames.com. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Resources include:

New supplements and adventures. *GURPS* continues to grow – see what’s new at gurps.sjgames.com.

Warehouse 23. Our online store offers *GURPS* print items, plus PDFs of our books, supplements, adventures, play aids, and support . . . including exclusive material available only on Warehouse 23! Just head over to warehouse23.com.

Internet. To discuss *GURPS* with our staff and your fellow gamers, visit our forums at forums.sjgames.com. You can also join us at facebook.com/sjgames or twitter.com/sjgames. Share your brief campaign teasers with #GURPSHook on Twitter. Or explore that hashtag for ideas to add to your own game! The *GURPS Time Travel* web page is gurps.sjgames.com/books/timetravel.

Store Finder (storefinder.sjgames.com): Discover nearby places to buy *GURPS* items and other Steve Jackson Games products. Local shops are great places to play our games and meet fellow gamers!

Bibliographies. Bibliographies are a great resource for finding more of what you love! We’ve added them to many *GURPS* book web pages, with links to help you find the next perfect element for your game.

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Errata pages for *GURPS* releases are at sjgames.com/errata/gurps.

Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set*, Third Edition. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set* — e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *GURPS Basic Set*, Third Edition. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at gurps.sjgames.com/abbrevs.html.

*The moving finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy piety or wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.*

—Omar Khayyam

Everybody Talks About The Past, But Nobody Does Anything About It

Time travel is an intellectual game with overtones of wish-fulfillment, and tying it too closely to the mechanics of the real world is neither productive nor very useful. This is not a criticism of anyone’s imaginings, just a practical observation.

Now, before the physicists in the audience can protest, we do indeed know about relativistic effects, Tipler cylinders, and lots of the other proposed ways around the “time barrier.” But it’s just as easy to argue that there is no “barrier”; there is no place where Alexander and Shakespeare are still physically alive and available for conversations. I certainly can’t say that time travel is forever impossible. But I respectfully suggest that one’s attitude toward its possibility (my own included) says more about one’s own philosophy than about the real world.

So everything that follows is, to one degree or another, fantasy. If I knew how to build a time machine, I’d be on my way back to 1450, to put a couple of gold double eagles in the Medici Bank. When I got home, compound interest would have made me the richest rules writer on earth.

That said, time travel is a *great* fantasy, probably as universal as the dream of flying. I would trade a very great deal to visit Samuel Johnson’s London, even though I know very well that it was crowded, filthy, plague-ridden, and stank to high heaven; I would jump at the chance to ride the Orient Express of the 1920s; I would not hesitate to strangle Hitler and Stalin in their cribs.

And great fantasies are what roleplaying is all about.

— John M. Ford

Reeling In The Timeline

This book has been a long time in appearing, for several reasons. The greatest of these, as JMF points out above, is that the whole idea of time travel fails the reality check. And if you make assumptions that give a *chance* of avoiding paradox, you either get unplayable complexity (“Sorry, guys. Come back tomorrow after I resolve this causal loop”) or unplayable simplicity (“Whoops. You created a paradox. You don’t exist any more and neither does the world you came from”).

So the project was not a quick one. We all got very tired of the joke “Why don’t you just travel to the future and pick up a copy?” But at long last, it’s done: a choice of campaign backgrounds to fit any taste. The PCs become Time Agents, fighting to save their history, with a playable treatment of paradox and history-changing. Or they can just romp through history with gun and camera (or maybe just with very big guns) in one of the other backgrounds.

This book is also aimed at the GM who wants to design a unique time travel campaign. There’s a detailed discussion of time travel “theory and practice,” with several alternative treatments of causality and paradox, “rubber physics” though they be. And there are alternative campaign frames, too, including some suitable for lower-tech campaigns.

Finally, the bibliography describes several dozen important time-travel and alternate-world stories (out of *thousands* that have been written), as further sources for inspiration.

But there's more. There's a closely related genre that offers all the fun of time travel with none of the paradoxes: *parallel worlds*. You can travel to a parallel 1905 Germany and strangle little Adolf without creating any paradox at all; it's not *your* past. So this book also includes the "official" **GURPS** cross-universe campaign background. This can take the campaign, not just to historical worlds, but to not-quite-historical worlds and outright weird parallels. (And, because the "Keep Them From Changing History" adventure is so popular, we've worked in a variation on that theme: enemies who are trying to change the flow of history on the parallel worlds. Who says you can't have your cake and eat it too?)

Finishing this project meant a lot to us. *GURPS Time Travel* is the book that fulfills the original potential of the system! If you like, you can create a super-team from across history and fiction (say, Merlin, Conan, Miyamoto Musashi, Erik the Red and Flamin' Jane) and send them on any mission from any period or any genre.

So one way or another, I'll see you last week.

— Steve Jackson

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steve Jackson has been devouring time-travel and parallel-world science fiction since he was about seven years old, and jumped at the chance to inflict his own contribution on the field.

He is the founder and editor-in-chief of Steve Jackson Games, but, as shown by the present book, occasionally still manages to *write* something. He hopes to do it again soon.

Steve lives in Austin. He enjoys science fiction conventions, gardening, computers, tropical fish, and — oh, yes — gaming.

John M. Ford is the author of more than a dozen books, including the alternate-history novel *The Dragon Waiting*, the multiple time-track story *Fugue State*, and two "Star Trek" novels, *The Final Reflection* and *How Much For Just The Planet?* His next book will be the hard (or maybe semirigid) SF novel *Growing Up Weightless*. His short fiction has appeared all over the place, including *Omni*, the *Liavek* anthologies, *The Space Gamer* and *Autoduel Quarterly*. His adventure for the *Paranoia* game system, *The Yellow Clearance Black Box Blues*, was considered odd even by the standards of *Paranoia*.

He has won the World Fantasy Award twice, the Rhysling Award for SF poetry once, the Game Designers' Guild Award twice, and has been nominated for a Nebula Award.

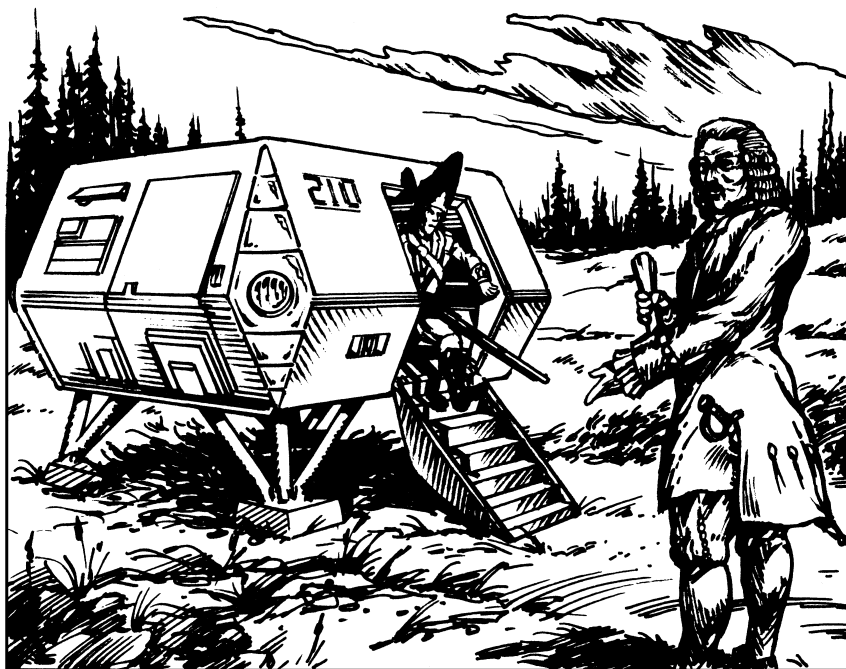
He lives in Minneapolis, where the fabric of reality has been worn thin in numerous places.

Alternate Worlds in Other Campaigns

Past times and alternate worlds can also be used for a "change of scenery" in other campaigns that have begun to get too familiar. When powerful characters have conquered everything in sight, saved the world against all comers, and have more wealth than they can spend . . . flip them into an alternate reality where they have no assets but their skills and what they're carrying, and "everything they know is wrong." Homeline allies could be enemies, and vice versa; there might even be alternate versions of the PCs themselves — who might not be heroes!

Some ways to do this are discussed on pp. 10-12. It is entirely up to the GM whether the PCs can ever return, or whether they'll have to carve out a new niche in the new world.

The farthest-out possibility is travel to alternate worlds in which actual physical laws are different; the standard example is the group of modern-day people who find themselves in a heroic fantasy world. This is very much a matter of personal taste (the idea of machine-gunning dragons seems rather unfair, once the novelty wears off). But it is one of the things that *GURPS* was designed to make possible.



Roleplaying is about solving problems and taking actions inside a framework of rules. So this book has rules for time travel, of several different flavors. But it's very important to understand that the "laws of time travel" we provide are designed to be (we hope) reasonable and consistent, like any good science fiction. But they're *imaginary*, intended to get the players to use their heads to accomplish their missions. If they don't suit your game or your group, tweak them to fit.

Campaign Plans

On the last two pages of this book are Campaign Plan forms – one for a time-travel campaign, one for an alternate-worlds campaign. The GM will find these very useful. The process of filling out the campaign plan will make sure that all the most important questions are considered in advance. And by giving a copy of the completed plan to each player before the first game session, the GM answers all *their* most important questions at once.

MISSION TYPES

Time travel adventures fall into four general categories. The first three may be actual "missions" in the sense that someone assigned them to the party. But the characters may also find themselves caught up in events by accident, or even tricked by NPCs into performing some sort of dangerous task.

Research Missions

Research missions are sent to find something out: who was Jack the Ripper? Who really wrote the Zinoviev Letter? What happened to the crew of the *Marie Celeste*? Researchers are usually not supposed to change the past; they are supposed to observe, measure, photograph, perhaps even conduct interviews, and then return, without having any effect on the timestream.

By itself, researching isn't very adventurous. Getting into a fight usually means things have gone very badly wrong. But a research mission doesn't have to be dull. The suspense and excitement come, not from a string of combat encounters, but from meeting obstacles (some expected, some by surprise) in the path of getting the data and getting back with it.

Often, the PC party will not be cast in the role of researchers, but of guards and guides to the researchers. The scientists themselves may have hidden goals or personalities that endanger the mission.

Cross-time or cross-world *espionage* is a special category of research which *can* quickly become dangerous, since the spies may be opposed, not only by "native" security troops and counterespionage, but also by opponents from their own time or world.

Repair Missions

Repair missions have the specific objective of making changes to the timestream. Assuming the characters are the "good guys," this usually means that the past has already been altered, by enemy action or accident, and has to be returned to normal. There are other possibilities, however. The travelers may be present at a historical event – say, on campaign with Julius Caesar in Gaul – in which the outcome of the larger campaign is known, but individual, unrecorded skirmishes may have unknown results. Or the team may be "agents in place," guarding a historical divergence point such as the Normandy invasion against interference by enemy agents.

Or the status quo may be intolerable to the time travelers – say, a small group of researchers discovers a time-gate, and hopes to use it to overthrow the oppressive regime.



The Bad Old Good Old Days

"The past is another country; they do things differently there." There are many everyday details of historical life that we would find distasteful, barbaric, horrifying. Description of such details – the crowding and smell of a city street before modern plumbing, for instance – is necessary and useful in making the players accept the environment as "the past," and not just a Hollywood imitation.

Unpleasant details are also useful plot and characterization devices. A group of travelers confronted by a bullying nobleman might follow their natural impulse to teach him a lesson – only to find themselves hip-deep in trouble for it. Someone who loves horses might gain points for demanding that a drunken coachman stop whipping his animals – and even more points if he found a way to do it that would not offend the customs of the time.

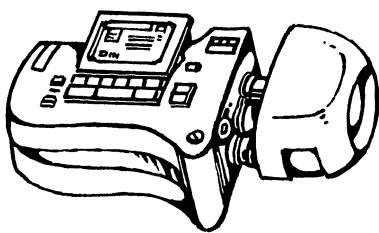
But, as with any other device, don't overdo it. A little of the griminess of medieval towns, or the horrors of the Inquisition, or the mistreatment of one class or race by another, goes a long way, no matter how historically correct it is. If the GM constantly describes cruelty and abuses that the characters cannot stop without endangering their mission, the players will quite rightly start to think that they are the ones being provoked. Just say something like, "There's a crowd gathered to cheer the public flogging – but you're professionals; you just look past and keep on walking."

The Linearity Principle

This law applies when time travelers must operate from a “home base,” rather than jumping freely around in time. It states that time moves forward at the same speed for the agents in the field and the machine operators at home. If the team spends two weeks in the past, they return two weeks after they left. Conversely, if the agents request information or assistance from Control, and it requires two days to research the data or prepare the backup team, the help arrives two days after it was requested.

The reason for the rule is, again, to prevent the team from solving problems by “magic.” Control’s inability to scan freely back and forth should be given some mechanical explanation, preferably one that can sometimes be bent a little to save the day. One possibility: Control must maintain a “fix” on the agents, which moves forward as they do; to scan back to some earlier moment risks breaking the fix, losing all communications with the team until they can be located again. (See the “In the Cube” campaign frame, p. 67, for a more detailed example of this.)

Obviously, where linearity applies, agents can’t make “pickups” in the field. If you have been out for five years, you can *talk* to someone who left home just a year after you did. But when you go home, it will be five years later; no way around it.



Beacons

If the time travelers are being projected from a base, rather than carrying their time machine with them, perhaps each time-traveling party carries (*must* carry) a beacon which lets Base fix on them to pull them back. If the party is broken up, only those with the beacon will be able to communicate with Base (if that is possible in the campaign) or to call for return, or to be returned at all.

THE PHYSICAL SETTING

The first question: how does the time machine or cross-world railway “work,” as a layman might explain it? This is not a question of rubber science (yet) but of physical description. Possibilities include:

Stage: The traveler stands on the platform of a monster machine, and technicians at a console start pushing buttons. There’s a blue flash (or a low hum, or a monstrous subsonic belch) and you’re there. In this case, the “time machine” does not travel at all, and the travelers have less control over their journeys; in particular, they cannot bounce around freely in time. See *Mission Control*, p. 9. The GM may find this limitation very useful.

Portal: A “door” is opened between two points, bridging the gap between times or worlds. Perhaps it’s one-way, perhaps two-way. Perhaps anyone or anything can walk through; perhaps it will accept living flesh only, or dead matter only. The extent of the traveler’s control over his return is this: if he can get back to the gate, he can come home . . . maybe. Some gates are only open at certain times; some can be opened only by the volition of an operator at the other end (making them more like a “stage” device).

Conveyor: The time machine is a “vehicle” which may also be able to travel in space. This vehicle may be a huge temporal battleship or a one-man capsule. It may not even be a vehicle as such; it may be a belt, harness or magic amulet that the user wears on his person. This sort of travel usually implies that the traveler has a great deal of freedom to visit different times at whim.

Combination: The above effects can be combined in various ways, as in the *Infinite Worlds* campaign (Chapter 7) in which both conveyors and projectors may be used, and must be combined for a really long jump.

Nothing at all: If the time or crossworld travel is psionic or super-powered in nature, there is no gadgetry at all involved. However, there may be a need for ritual of some sort. See *The Order of the Hourglass*, p. 76, and Chapter 5.

CHANGING THE PAST

If the past can be altered, we run into all sorts of problems that are more philosophy than physics. The best known of these is the Grandfather Paradox: suppose you hop into your time machine, go back 50 years, and kill one of your grandparents before your parents are conceived. How did you get born? And if you weren’t born, who killed Grandpa?

However, if the past *can’t* be altered, it becomes a considerably less interesting place to visit.

Any campaign background must contain a specific solution to this problem. To examine several *general* solutions:

Plastic Time

The past is freely alterable, but at the risk of “editing out” the future that you came from. Your actions change the future. There are several possible results:

Traveler at Risk: The traveler himself may be changed (or even fade out of existence). This isn’t too suitable for gaming unless the players enjoy creating new characters.

World at Risk: The traveler may be unchanged, but return to a changed (perhaps extremely changed) world. This is entertaining for the players, but puts a burden on the GM.

Return Blocked: The traveler may be unchanged, but stuck in the past, unable to return unless he can somehow undo the change. This is quite playable, because the PCs will be grossly inconvenienced, but not killed or transmuted, if they accidentally change history. And they *will* have a chance to fix it.

IN THE CUBE

The Time Research Unit was established at a major university to systematically study theories of time travel. After several years of arguing theories, a group of unit members decided to take some practical action. Working in their spare time, late at night, with any equipment they could buy, build, or borrow, they assembled the “Prototype Temporal Tesseract Generator” – the Hypercube.

The Hypercube is a room full of personal computers, homebrew circuits, tunable dye lasers, spark coils, and other unbearably scientific stuff. Against one wall is a 15-foot square of metal rods: this is the actual time portal. It is a “cube” only in the fourth dimension – only when it is actually powered up and running. This requires enormous amounts of energy. In the basement below are massive electric cables and helium-cooled power accumulators.

It looks like a pile of junk, but it works. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work very well.

During a full-power test, something went wrong. The portal opened – and a vacuum was created, a whirlwind that sucked papers, books, coffee cups, and the experimenters closest to the Hypercube into and through it.

It was days before the rest of the TRU researchers were able to establish contact with the missing people, using the Hypercube as a time viewer. The lost group was alive and well in the year 1868, hiding in a cellar in London, afraid that if they went out they would be arrested and unable to explain themselves to the police.

The TRU brought the Hypercube up to full power, attempting to bring the group home. They succeeded in pulling them out of the cellar – and then lost contact. When the fix was reestablished, the group was aboard the cruise ship *Berengaria* during an Atlantic crossing in 1928, again hiding from arrest, this time as stowaways.

Researchers in the university library found deck plans of the *Berengaria*, and enough data about the ship’s operations to enable the lost group to masquerade as passengers until the ship docked in New York, by which time the Hypercube was ready for another transfer.

But that one didn’t work either . . .

OVERVIEW

The party is “lost” in the past, the result of a time travel experiment gone wrong. A team of scientists and technicians tries to return them to home base, but succeeds only in moving them randomly from one historical point to another, where they sometimes have to take an active hand in history, but mostly just try to stay alive.

This is a possible place for the idea of players having “themselves” as characters (see p. 36). Players may also choose to be members of the TRU team that operates the Hypercube. Research and Temporal Mechanics skills are called for here; other skills could be useful in giving advice to the Wanderers. (“First release the air brake, then let out the throttle slowly – and keep water over the crown sheet . . .”)

The GM may even allow each player to run two characters: one Wanderer, and one on the TRU group at home (“the Team”). This will eliminate those periods when several players sit around with nothing to do except listen to events that they really aren’t supposed to know about yet!

MECHANICS

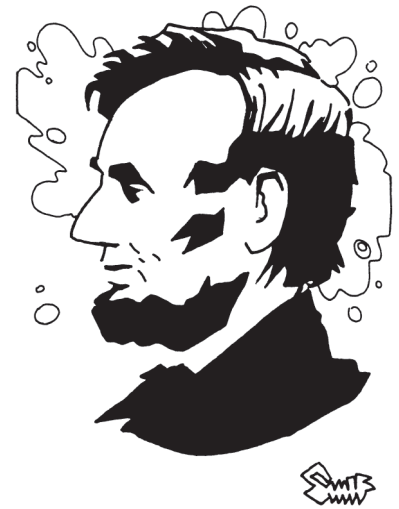
The Hypercube can view the Wanderers and their immediate surroundings, and allow voice communications with them; it can also shift them from one place and time to another, but the technicians have no control over where/when they go.

In the Cube: Physics and Paradox

This is intended as a simple “adventures in history” frame. The Wanderers are trying to survive and get home. They shouldn’t be concerned with deliberately changing history.

If they accidentally do something that would rewrite history . . . well, they do it. But they merely create a new timeline. And the next time they move, they’re back in their own home timeline.

Linearity is conserved, of course. One hour for the Wanderers is one hour for the Team.



Adventures in the Present

As a change of place, the GM can give the Team who stayed at home some interesting problems. This works best if each player also has a Team character.

To start with, how many people know that the Wanderers are in the past? The Hypercube was a “bootlegged” project at a university, done without official permission. Someone has probably filed missing persons reports on the Wanderers, and embarrassing questions are being asked. Of course, the Wanderers in the past can cooperate by dictating reassuring messages to their friends and loved ones. For a while . . .

Of course, the Team could tell the truth. But then they’d lose control of their wonderful invention. Perhaps spies, competitors and government agents are already snooping around. The campaign could even turn into Espionage on alternate weeks!

Infinite Worlds Glossary

Alternate: any timeline except the original Earth. Also “alternate world.”

Centrum: a rival civilization with the ability to travel between worlds. A “Centran” is a native or agent of Centrum.

Conveyor: a self-propelled device for traveling between alternate worlds, usually with a passenger.

Coventry: an alternate world maintained by Infinity as a prison for those – both Homeliners and outtimers – who Know Too Much.

Echo: an alternate world which is, or appears to be, identical to ours but at an earlier point in its history.

Eraser: a memory-affecting drug used by I-Cops and others to keep the secret of parachronic travel. See p. 103.

Homeboy: anyone from one’s own original world.

Homeline: the original Earth.

I-Cop: an agent of the Infinity Patrol.

Infinity Patrol: the military “enforcement” arm of Infinity Unlimited.

Infinity Unlimited: a private organization which controls parachronic technology as a monopoly and governs access to the alternate timelines.

Outtime: any alternate world except the original Earth, or Homeline.

Outtimer: anyone from an alternate world.

Parachronics: the study of alternate worlds . . . more specifically, the study of why alternate worlds exist, and how travel between them is possible.

Parallel: an alternate world which differs from ours only in that its history has been different (some are *very* different). A “close parallel” is different as the result of one identifiable historical change.

Projector: a device which can send matter to an alternate world.

Quantum: an “energy level” in 8-dimensional space, containing many alternate timelines. A quantum level may be abbreviated, e.g., Q7 for Quantum 7.

Secret, or The Secret: the fact that crossworld travel is possible. Outtimers are *not* supposed to learn this. Ever.

Timeline: another term for an alternate world.

Viewer: a device which can (in effect) receive light waves from an alternate world, displaying a picture of what is happening there.

Weird Parallel: an alternate world which has many similarities to our own, but also has differences which make the similarities seem unbelievable (such as the world where intelligent reptiles speak English).

A “reasonable” alternate history is also called a *parallel world*. Inventing parallel worlds is a great intellectual game. One way to approach it is to pick a historical event and say “what if this was different?” *What if* Lincoln had survived Booth’s attack? *What if* Chamberlain had stood up to Hitler? *What if* Eric the Red had died in a brawl at age 16?

And here’s the connection to time travel. If someone could travel back in time and make a change, they would *create* a parallel world. Perhaps the traveler’s own history would change. Perhaps his own world would remain the same, but a new “timeline” would appear, adjacent in some way. Thus, the genres are very closely related, and can support very similar adventures.

As a writer or Game Master, you can invent any sort of alternate universe. When you’re creating a parallel world, you can assume as many basic points of difference as you like. But it is interesting to see what logical consequences you can develop from *one* change. Look at the Timeline in this book . . . pick any event, from great to small . . . and ask yourself “*What if* this had gone differently?”

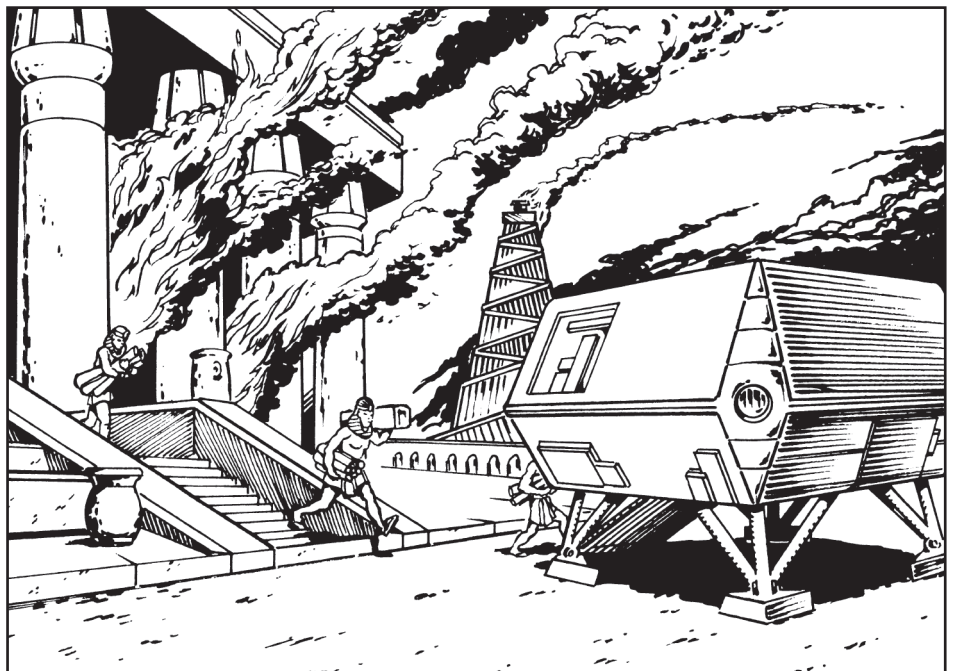
Travel Between Alternate Worlds

Some alternate-history stories just take a “what if” and run with it, creating an interesting setting. Other stories assume that travel *between* these worlds is possible. Perhaps it’s a one-way trip – unlucky travelers somehow fall through the gap between worlds. This can lead to an interesting campaign; see the sidebars for suggestions.

But perhaps regular travel between worlds is possible, once you know the trick. Alternate worlds can be visited, studied, exploited, conquered . . .

THE INFINITE WORLDS CAMPAIGN

The year is 2015. It is a time of peace and plenty . . . at least, on *our* Earth. The reason is simple: our Earth is no longer the only Earth. Our world, known as Homeline, is exploring hundreds of alternate Earths. It’s also fighting an undeclared war with another world-jumping civilization known as Centrum.



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