

Physics professor creates planets as a hobby

Sheridan Simon fuses physics and fiction to aid sci-fi writers

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Copy Editor

Ever wonder what a planet would look like spinning at twelve times the speed of the earth?

Well, physics professor Sheridan Simon could tell you. For the last ten years he has been creating realistic designs for the distant dreams of imaginative science fiction writers around the world. In a very real sense, Simon is the creator of a universe.

"People write in," said Simon in a presentation he gave of his work last Friday, "and I take it from there. I give [my clients] accurate descriptions of the shape, atmosphere, color, and gravity of their planets."

In addition Simon describes the probable geology, ecology, meteorology, and biology of his commissioned creations, but he stresses that his Ph.D. is in astrophysics, not biology, so his advice in these secondary areas is purely amateur.

Nevertheless, his work is extraordinary, and his full-color, computer-generated models which, upon request, accompany the written descriptions, are like planetary "still-lives."

These pictures rank up there with George Lucas' best effects. Simon explained, though, that motion picture effects are comparatively easy, for "[the movie people] don't mess with the the scientific stuff . . . It could be done, but it would take roughly forever."

Simon chooses, instead, to photograph his computer images directly from his Macintosh Fx computer, upon which he writes the programs for this work. The final products are stunning.

One of the pictures is of an intergalactical war. The commissioning writer wanted one galaxy to shoot a giant black hole at the other galaxy. Needless to say, the calculated outcome shows a dazzling display as the approaching black hole sucks up the rainbow gas of an immense Jovian (gaseous) planet. Imagine Jupiter being eaten by a huge space-Hoover.

Another design shows a planet with an average daily rotation of two hours, therefore spinning about twelve times faster than the Earth. The thing looks like an aspiring doughnut.

Simon also gets commissions which call for him to predict real situations, as in a picture he designed of Mars' surface. In this piece he took a photograph of a Hawaiian

lava field and compu-edited it to resemble the pink iron-oxide (rust) environment which is actually a characteristic of that planet.

"This [sort of hobby] has real-life interest," said Simon to an interested student, "such as to describe the effects of ozone depletion."

But apparently no competent scientist has taken up such an endeavor, and as Simon said in response to a question about a sort of planetary design manual, "I'm the only one who does [design planets]." So he has a definite corner on this market, to which he has given a good beginning.

It all started when Dr. Simon was reading through a book called *Ring World Engineers*, a "hard" (meaning scientific) sci-fi novel by the well-known author Larry Niven.

As he came across the various physical phenomena in the book, he ran through calculations, proving, or rather mostly disproving, the reality of their occurrences. Much of Niven's physics were flawed. At the end of the novel he had a long list of things which he had proven impossible, and he sent these to the author.

In reply, Niven said he had appreciated the clinical analysis, but that he'd already sold something like 60 thousand copies of the book and was sure he hadn't needed to be completely factual.

So Simon started looking small. He put

an advertisement in *Locus* magazine, a sci-fi publication, and began to receive new commissions about once a month. In the beginning he charged nothing, but, after a couple of overly zealous requests of, say, 30 planets by next week, he soon realized he'd need to charge at least a token fee.

Now Simon's rates range from \$50 to \$100, depending on the resources of the patron. The photographic facsimiles cost more, since the printing process is expensive.

If you thought Simon were making a profit you'd be wrong. "I could charge three thousand bucks is I used my regular consultation fees," he said, but he doesn't.

When asked if this endeavor was a business or a hobby, Simon answered, "that depends on the year, but the government does tax the income." An interesting, and sobering, fact—especially for one who is honestly so far out.

It's obvious in Simon's excited delivery that he loves his work.

As he explained in a joyful tone, "Just because we can imagine things doesn't mean they exist . . . but that doesn't (stop me) from playing around with them!"

His work molds together the forces of both physics and aesthetics, creating a fictional world which makes real the most wonderful and experimental theories of physics.

WQFS Top 30

Compiled by WQFS

LW	TW	Artist	Title	Label
7	1	Nirvana	Nevermind	DGC
15	2	Lloyd Cole	Don't Get Weird On Me Babe	Capitol
2	3	Follow For Now	Follow For Now	Chrysalis
3	4	The Blue Aeroplanes	Beatsons	Ensign
4	5	The Ocean Blue	Cerulean	Sire/Reprise
5	6	Billy Bragg	Don't Try This At Home	Elektra
35	7	Tribe	Abort	Slash
1	8	Pixies	Trompe LeMonde	4 AD
8	9	Machines of Loving Grace	Machines of Loving Grace	Mammoth
11	10	MC 900 Ft. Jesus	Welcome To My Dream	Nettwerk
12	11	The Millions	M is for Millions	Smash
18	12	This Picture	A Violent Impression	RCA
-	13	Nitzer Ebb	Ebbhead	Geffen
-	14	My Bloody Valentine	Loveless	Sire/Warner
17	15	Pearl Jam	Ten	Epic
20	16	P.M.Dawn	Of the Heart . . .	Island
22	17	Various	Hearts Lust In Limbo	C'est La Mort
-	18	Curve	Frozen EP	Charisma
-	19	Grapes of Wrath	These Days	Capitol
6	20	Quit	Earlier Thoughts	Mango Head
-	22	Crust	Crust	Trance
-	23	Chris Stamey	Fireworks	RNA
10	24	Various	Tyranny of the Beat	Mute
-	25	Weird Paul	Lo Fidelity, Hi Anxiety	Homestead
-	26	Strange Boutique	The Loved One	Bedazzled
-	27	Various	Sub Pop EP	Sub Pop
-	28	Pegboy	Strong Reactino	Quarterstick
29	29	Levellers 5	The Peel Sessions	Dutch East INdia
33	30	Webb Wilder	Doo Dad	Zoo
-	31	Circle C	Circle C	DGC
-	32	His Name is Alive	Home Is In Your Head	4 AD
-	33	Cabaret Voltaire	Cololurs EP	Mute/Plastex
-	34	Pulnoc	City of Hysteria	Arista
-	35	Seven Simons	Four Twenty-Four	TVT

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