

## verview by Charles E. Fuentes

I'm your average Internet lurker. You know the type. Those people who constantly lurk in the background, reading the newsgroups. As a lurker, I spend most of my time absorbing discussion of my favorite Usenet groups, but I'm often reluctant to jump in. I'm not sure why, but maybe I'm still a bit shy about participating in worldwide Internet discussions. As a long-time science fiction follower, I'm a veteran follower of the larger SF newsgroups: the Star Trek heirarchy, the X-Files, and lately, the Babylon5 newsgroup. Lurking seems to have its advantages. For one thing, us lurkers tend to be more objective and emotionally detached from the often-heated debates and arguments posted endlessly.

I'm a recent convert to B5, and only began watching the show during the middle of its second season. It's hard for me to describe what B5 has that Star Trek and DS9 "just don't have".

B5 began its first season on a slow note. Much of the first year was devoted to fleshing out the characters, the universal background, the politics and history. Towards the end of the first season, cancellation of the show was a very real fear for its producers. Back then, B5 stood on shaky ground. It was up against the hugely popular Star Trek The Next Generation, a show that was just about to wrap up its 7-year run followed by the "Generations" Trek movie.

Fortunately, the handful of fans rallied to the side of Babylon5 creator Joe Michael Straczynski. A good browse of the Internet's rec.arts.sf.tv.babylon5 newsgroup reveals that Straczynski — better known as "JMS" on the Net — is a frequent and fan-respected participant in the newsgroup. A handful of messages on the newsgroup are sporadically addressed to Straczynski. Look hard enough, and you'll even see that JMS occasionally responds to some fan-posted messages too. There is no doubt in my mind that the B5 creator's online support is an ingredient to the show's continued survival and growing success.

With B5's third season just beginning, the fear of season-end cancellation is no longer even an issue. Recent ratings have placed this show in the top 5

syndicated SF shows in the US. Its overseas following has grown steadily too, and B5 is hugely popular in the United Kingdom.

Just what explains this surge in popularity that has skyrocketed B5 into "cult" status? Many Internet fans will bring up at least a couple of fundamental differences from the Trekker standards. For one, they insinuate that B5 can be very political, but not necessarily politically correct as the Star Trek franchise. B5 seems more concerned with developing and maintaining its own unique, soap-opera storyline. Likewise, B5 die-hards claim that Star Trek is guilty of contrasting and making too many parallels between the future of humanity and 20th century Earth paradigms and ideals. The result is that Babylon5 tends to offer more spontaneity from episode to episode. B5 has more freedom to resolve its interstellar conflicts with humanity's good old-fashioned militant approach: might makes right. It would be wrong to say that B5 is just a show about blowing up alien enemies into space dust (when diplomacy fails). In fact, earnest diplomacy between five major interstellar nations — aboard the Babylon 5 station — is at the very heart of the show's premise.

There are times when diplomacy works aboard the B5 station; other times, it fails miserably. Regardless of the outcome, there's always an air of dramatic, and tense, excitement as we watch the humans, Centauri, Minbari, Narn and Vorlon settle their differences, resolve their conflicts, or look after their own people's interests. Babylon5 is Science Fiction's own "War and Peace" in the Tolstoy tradition. It's a dynamic saga that has a flavor of its own, and its now-solid fandom has assured that this saga will be written, completed and watched to the very end.

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