

MACHINATIONS - The Eternal City

The setting for the Machinations RPG

Introduction

The Eternal City is a world at ninety degrees to our own. It is a world where alchemy works and where the human animus (the spirit of life) can be captured and maintained indefinitely and then put to work in any one of thousands of useful mechanical inventions.

It is a world that lives in the dark shadow of unshakeable moral certitudes that maintain an unfair and oppressive system of class and social division.

It is also a world of progress and ambition, greed and heroism, sinister conspiracies and astounding selflessness. Where a few good people can peel back the darkness, even if only briefly.

The World of Machinations

In our timeline it would be 1898. In the world of Eternal City it is also 1898 but there the similarities end.

The creation of this world was made possible in 1745 by the discovery of the Animus and the victory of Alchemy over rational science. Reason was dead and the need for a monarchy went with it.

The Great British Republic is a society with a limited political mandate linked to both gender and annual income. Unless you are a man and earn over £5000 per annum you have no say in matters of legislature and commerce.

Many of the greatest amongst the electing classes have had their Animus preserved upon their death in beautiful Automaton Clockwork, Ivory, Brass and Gold, so becoming immortal.

Most citizens below that level have traded their animus for their position. A promise that upon their eventual death the Animancers of Combine Mechanic Ober Advancer Mercantile can extract their animus and put it to the service of the Republic.

Some of these Anima are put into Automaton Clockwork, steel and leather to continue to serve the Republic as soldiers. Most are condemned to an eternity of soulless servitude within the machinations of the Republic.

Well not quite everyone - there are those who still try to live and die free. Most of these live in the margins of society eking out a fragile existence.

Some though become valuable brokers of information, influence and goods between the great mercantile houses of the Republic. Here they use their skills to do the things that the Houses cannot be seen to do, to prosecute their secret wars and feuds.

This is where the players' characters come from. Small groups of free Adventurers, Alchemists, Artificers and Automaton form Free Companies motivated by the desire to fight back and become more than fate dealt them.

The Eternal City.

The majority of the subjects of the Republic now live in the Eternal City - London. This sprawls from what was formerly Dover to Southampton, Coventry, Norwich and Bristol. Beyond that are other smaller cities and rapidly disappearing farmland. It is only in the high lands of the South-west, Wales, the Pennines, Lake District and Scotland that real open land still exists.

The other cities include Manchester-Liverpool-Leeds, Glasgow-Edinburgh, Cardiff-Swansea and Tyne.

Between them all arable land is now divided into huge estates and is ploughed and reaped by agricultural Automaton.

The landscape is dominated and scarred by the railways. Huge locomotives transport people and goods between and around the cities. Between the nations and continents Dirigibles, many of enormous size, do likewise. Both the locomotives and dirigibles are powered by steam turbines fuelled by radium bricks.

The cities are densely populated and most people live in the shadow of the great manufactories, stations, docks and warehouses. The elite live apart from the hoi-polloi in walled and guarded city-estates.

Although there is a police force most of the Mercantile Houses handle their own affairs. The Police are there to keep the lower orders in their place and prevent widespread crime and disorder.

The same situation exists all across the 'civilized' world. Beyond the borders of Europe and the Eastern Coast of America there are the lowly dominions of the Republican and Imperial Powers. These are divided and fought over by huge mechanised armies of Automaton heedless of the cost to the native populations.

The one exception being Cathay, whose ancient and abiding sorcery has held the West at bay. The Chinaman is held up as thing to be feared and hated in all the 'civilized' nations.

The Power of the Animus

By itself an animus is a fairly feeble thing. Even that of a powerful man in life can do little more than carry a bag of sugar across the room.

But combined with clockwork and a power source such as a radium brick it can do a lot more. It is the animus that interprets the commands of a human and adjusts the clockwork controls of whatever machine is being controlled.

Upon a person's death in a Combine Hospice an Animancer binds the animus into a specially prepared spirit flask. This then is built into the control mechanism of a machine or Automaton.

If an Automaton is to retain the consciousness of its animus, or is to be allowed to develop a new one, then the animus is bound into a perfect jewel. For only the crystalline matrix of such a jewel can contain an independent consciousness.

Consciousness is necessary if an Automaton is to be able to learn new tasks or respond to all but the simplest stimuli. The crude runic work on a spirit flask is only capable of carrying simple instructions for the animus.

The legal definition of an Automaton in this world is related to this consciousness. Without this it is but a machine.

Most Automaton are built in humanoid form for the very simple reason is this is the form that a human consciousness is capable of controlling. Experienced Automaton can be trained to operate more interesting forms, but this is a new area of research.

So many basic Automaton have now been built that some have escaped the bondage they first experienced. Some were left for dead on battlefields where enterprising Free Artificers found and repaired them. Others simply fled when on missions beyond their master's domains.

The Free Companies

A Free Company is formed when four or more free men and Automaton pledge a bond of loyalty and honour between themselves.

Their previous lives, debts and crimes are erased and they take new names.

Each man or Automaton brings their skills, abilities and equipment to the service of the Free Company.

Once they are formed they contact a Free Agent and begin their new careers.

A Free Agent is a bridge between the Free Company and possible employers. He maintains the employers plausible deniability and protects the Free Company from most attempts for revenge for their acts.

The sort of work given to Free Companies includes espionage, sabotage, assassination, intimidation, smuggling, retrieval and theft.

Most Free Agents will give a new company a few relatively easy jobs to begin with to test out their abilities. This establishes them on their Free Agents card.

Once established work may also come in from other sources such as former contacts and missions they create for themselves.

Most Free Companies maintain a Ransom Fund with their Free Agent, each pledging a portion of their share from each job. This ensures that if they are captured by their mark (their target) they have a chance of being ransomed back.

Many marks do not see the Free Company members themselves as their enemies and as long as they thwart them they are often quite happy to release them for a fee.

Thus the Free Company is punished for failure but may find their next client is the one that captured them (depending on how impressive they were).

Note that not all marks are so forgiving.

Running Machinations

The world of the Eternal City is one of many wonders and one of shadows. It is a Steampunk world with a Cyberpunk feel to it.

This setting has been explained as a frame leaving it up to you and your players to fill it out to suit your own style of play and likes and dislikes.

Begin your campaign with a few simple jobs retrieving or stealing items of value for fairly low level clients.

Once the players have got the feel of the game, and have mastered the one page rules, you can begin to lay out a more complex series of linked scenarios. Look at any popular modern SF or Thriller series. You have a number of episodes for the heroes, often with specific tasks in each one.

Each episode also provides a few clues to an overarching story and opportunities for advancement.

This all leads to a climax at the series end, often with a major cliff-hanger to bring the watchers back.

At a game level the rules for Machinations are deliberately very simple. This allows them to aid play, but not to dominate it. If you are going to run Machinations you will need to get used to filling in the gaps with narrative.

A simple tip. If a player wants their character to do something, ask them how they intend to do it. If their answer covers all the obvious risks and there is nothing they don't know that might make it hazardous just let them do it. Too many RPG's have rules for everything from climbing walls to drinking beer. Most are unnecessary and only get in the way of the players and you having fun.

There is a time for making skill checks and that is when the characters can't reasonably overcome the hazards and opponents they are facing.