

# EMERALD CITY

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## Introduction

Back home, back to chaos. Every time I jet off round the world I miss my flat, my bed, and not having to spend so much time on aircraft. Every time I get home I realise that at least when I'm in the air I get time to sleep. Contrary bitch, am I not?

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## By the Rivers of Brisbane

"Beautiful one day, perfect the next": thus the Queensland Tourist Board promotes the virtues of a tropical climate. But, as we all know, even tropical climates need rain sometimes. They just get it in short, sharp bursts. So it was for Parliament of Dreams. The assembled might of Australian Babylon 5 fandom descended on Brisbane only to find the place ankle deep in water and getting deeper all the time. In the space of about 2 weeks, Brisbane was visited by something in the region of 30 inches of rain. It was wet.

Fortunately we didn't need to leave the hotel that often. I did once to go to a cash card machine in a nearby shopping mall. I found a break in the downpour to do so. I had to get a cab back. But for the most time we sat in the hotel, listened to panels, spent lots of money, got drunk, and hid in darkened rooms. There was a lot of hiding in darkened rooms.

OK guys, what is the daggiest thing to do at a convention? Right, spend all of your time in the video room. What did Cheryl do in Brisbane? Right again. Should be ashamed of myself, huh? No way. I sat through all 10 of the episodes of third season B5 that have so far been smuggled into the country. It was great. There is, of course, no other TV series or film I would do this for. B5 is that good.

But what of the convention? Surely I didn't spend all of my time watching videos? Get with it, girl, you're supposed to be a journalist.

I don't go to media conventions often. I went to this one partly because I love B5, and partly to do some Worldcon PR. I guess I went with a few pre-conceptions of what it would be like. For example, I thought that the actors you get to these things don't give a damn about their audience: they do their speech, they sign some autographs, and then they piss off back to whatever five-star hotel they have demanded. I also thought that media fans were basically SF fans who preferred watching their stories to reading them. In both cases it appears I was wrong.

Meet Andrea (pronounced An-Dray-A) and Jerry, Hollywood's happiest, friendliest couple, here to entertain you. Jerry is tall, dark, brooding, a fat cigar glued to his lips. He is from New York. He used to work on Wall Street. He never smiles, but he tells good jokes. Jokes are good business. Andrea is pert, bubbly and instantly likeable: she smiles at the fans, coos over the babies, and enthuses at length about Australia. She has that happy-go-lucky attitude to life that you only get from being brought up in paradise (Australia). It goes down well with the audience.

The two of them worked very hard. They did two, 2-hour Q&A sessions, two long signing sessions, and at least two photo sessions. Jerry ran the auction. They did more than they were scheduled for. Although they were booked into a different hotel, they moved to ours because of the weather. It was not what I expected of actors, but then Andrea and Jerry are smart, they know good business when they see it.

You see, life in Hollywood is not easy. At any moment some suit can decide that you are too tall, too short, too blond, too bald or too good an actor. In a city awash with actors, floating to the top of the pile is as much a matter of luck as talent. Smart actors know that, and having made it to the top they work damned hard at making sure there is a safety net waiting for the inevitable fall.

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Andrea on fandom: *"No other show I've been in has a following like this. Jerry and I did a convention in UK with Denise Crosby. I asked her how much she had been in Trek. 'For one year in 1986', she replied. At that point I knew I was onto a good thing."*

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And so they work hard at being celebrities. They go to conventions, they are nice to fans, and don't object to signing the weirdest things or to having their photos taken with complete loonies. They are even thinking of opening a Planet Hollywood style chain of restaurants with a science fiction theme. But are they interested in SF? No, not really, it is a business.

For me this was a disappointment because I am interested in SF and writing, and Babylon 5 is a fascinating story. But for most of the rest of the convention it was irrelevant: they seemed no more interested in SF than the guests. Admittedly it was hard to ask a good B5 question because a lot of the questions people wanted to ask could only receive the answer, "sorry, I'd get fired if I told you that", but for the most part the audience was happy to ask about acting techniques, filming techniques, other series (they were as keen to know about Andrea's role in JAG as about B5) and the actors' lives. There were times when the questioning got quite intrusive, but never once did the happy, smiling, hard-working guests appear to take offence.

One of the few questions I did take note of was when someone asked if they had ever had any influence on the story line. Naturally, with JMS in charge, the answer was "hardly ever", but Jerry did point out two occasions where he had won small victories. In the story GROPOS the original script called for him to take a swing at the female soldier: Jerry said he wouldn't hit a woman in real life and refused to do it on screen either. Also in one episode the Warners merchandising people had tried to insist on having two of their dolls on Garibaldi's bed in one scene. Not getting anywhere with direct complaints, Jerry resorted to moving the dolls into compromising positions whenever no one was looking, until the management got so fed up of re-takes that they backed down. He went up another couple of notches in my estimation.

Meanwhile, back with the convention. It was, I'm sorry to say, a far worse organisational disaster than Swancon. There were several major reasons for this, the most obvious of which was the rain which prevented a lot of people and things getting to the convention when they were supposed to. It may also have been responsible for the loss of one of the function rooms and the disappearance of one entire stream of programming.

The guests were another thorn in the concom's side. A lot of the time they were just too willing to please, and kept offering to stay on stage longer, or schedule additional appearances. Other stuff had to go to make way. Then Hollywood intervened, summoning Andrea back for some filming on JAG, and everything got changed again.

Also the programming was far too ambitious for the nature of the convention. Given that we had two big stars on stage much of the time, and a few fascinating panels when they were not, who wanted to go to anything else? OK, so some people were busy poring over the hucksters tables paying large sums of money for photographs and trading cards (or in my case small sums of money for second hand books), but most of the time most of the convention was in the main function room. The secondary programme items often got no audience at all. Chris Ballis's talk on costuming was the only one to draw a sizeable crowd. For the most part, only one stream was needed.

It must also be said that there was little or no sense of preparation or control on behalf of the committee. People on registration did not seem to know what was expected of them. No one knew how to operate the lights in the main function room, let alone the projectors. No one was responsible for making sure panellists turned up on time. None of the panels had been rehearsed, and timings were way off. Panels were allowed to keep going until the panellists got tired of speaking or noticed people waiting for the next one. The costumers were hopping mad that no one on the concom seemed to know how to run a masquerade, or to think to ask advice.

To my surprise, most of the other members just shrugged this off and said "it always happens". It may well do in Australia, but it doesn't have to. Folks, there are better ways to run a convention. It doesn't take much effort, just a bit of forethought and planning, plus a few people prepared to get things done on the day. Those of us who have been to or run Worldcons or other large conventions know it can be done. There are even manuals to tell you how to do it, freely available from SMOFish persons in the US and UK.

I think part of the problem is that Australian conventions tend to be run by isolated groups, each in their own city. Melbourne people do not get involved in running Perth conventions, Sydney people do not help out in Brisbane, and so on. In these days of email there is little excuse for insularity, but even before such things were available con running expertise has been shared. There is a loose body of people known as the floating Worldcon population: fans who turn up to almost every Worldcon, have a wealth of experience, and are happy to work wherever they find themselves. A similar thing happens on a smaller scale with UK Eastercons. It could be done in Australia.

One thing that I hope will come out of the Worldcon in 1999 is that a lot of Australians will get a lot of experience in convention running. I would like to see that spread throughout the country, not just Melbourne, and used to improve conventions everywhere. Indeed, there is no need to wait for 1999. We are already starting to get in some of the con running manuals I mentioned so we can start planning organisational structures. I'd be happy to pass them on to anyone who is interested. But to get things running properly I think what we need is a SMOFish mailing list on which such topics can be discussed between people

from different cities, and through which convention staff can be recruited. All we need is someone with the technical bits to set one up. Any offers?

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Gosh I'm rambling today. I was trying to talk about Parliament of Dreams. Somewhere back there I mentioned a few fascinating panels. There was some really good stuff, proving that some media fans do think hard about what they are watching. By far the most impressive was Annie Hamilton's talk on the origin of names in Babylon 5. If anyone had told me beforehand that many of the leading characters and major locations were directly mappable to people and places in Lord of the Rings I would probably not have believed them. Now I'm convinced. Annie has been through her Middle Earth dictionaries with a fine tooth comb, and they are all there. Translate the name using one language and you get a meaning which often makes sense. Translate it back into another and often you get the name of an LotR character. Babylon 5 is not a story dashed off in a hurry to earn a few bucks, it is a labour of love on which phenomenal care and attention to detail has been lavished. And JMS is clearly a big Tolkein fan.

Annie believes that the entire plot of the series can be discerned from examining the names. Here I am not so sure, because a fair amount of moving stuff around has been done. For example, the technomages are clearly wizards, one of them even uses a direct quote from LotR. But plot-wise there seems little doubt that Delenn is Gandalf and Londo is Saruman (remember that hand in his dream?). And then we must ask ourselves why Sam Gamgee (Vir) is working with Saruman, not Frodo (Garibaldi?), or why Psi Corps seems to have been mapped onto the northern Rangers. JMS has not just plagiarised wholesale. Besides, there are other influences as well.

Another interesting panel drew parallels between Mimbari culture and Japan. There is a lot there if you look for it, ranging from clothing, through the meal as complex as any tea ceremony, to the social structure and Samurai-like attitudes of the warrior caste. I have even heard it suggested that much of the background can be interpreted in terms of ancient Babylonian history. Sometimes it seems like B5 has more interpretations than the Bible. You couldn't do that with Trek.

On the negative side, another interesting panel was on the characterisation of women in B5 and how it has changed as the series has progressed. Several interesting female characters have vanished (Talia, Na'toth, Sinclair's girlfriend) whereas others have changed almost beyond recognition. The most obvious is Delenn who has gone from being a serene, elegant and commanding figure to an overly-emotional wimp able to do little except stare adoringly into Sheridan's eyes. Annie believes that this is JMS being given more of a free hand now that Larry De Tillio is no longer around. Again I'm not so sure. Looking at the way the Hollywood suits have messed around with my favourite female Trek character, Kira Nerys, I have this feeling that there are other forces at work. As proof I cite events in season three: when the shit really hits the fan, and the plot needs someone to take charge, Delenn comes through.

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One of the few secondary panels that was a minor success was one on fanzines. As you might guess, this was of some interest to me. Imagine, then, my surprise on discovering that the entire ethos of fanzine production is different in media fandom. Here were people talking seriously about protecting their copyright, about people in the US and Japan pirating their work, and their right to make a profit out of their 'zines. When I mentioned

that my 'zine was free and available electronically to easy copying I was almost lynched. I also took exception to the suggestion that perzines were worthless crap consisting largely of lurid descriptions of their authors' sex lives (I wonder where people got that impression, Terry?).

If nothing else, these people simply do not understand the economics of 'zine production. They are not losing significant amounts money if people copy their 'zines unless their profit margin is quite large. The majority of the expense of 'zine production comes in paper, printing and postage, all of which are variable costs which rise pretty much in line with the numbers of copies produced. The only major fixed cost is for the computer and printer the 'zine is composed on. I guess they felt that their subscribers should pay for these too. What was really weird was that they seemed happy to have agents who printed and sold their 'zines overseas, but objected when people printed and distributed them without permission, all for the odd few cents profit per issue.

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And finally (yes, I have noticed it is page 5 already), I cannot leave Parliament of Dreams without mention of Robert Jan's masquerade costume. As I mentioned last issue, there were a lot of very good B5 costumes at the masked ball in Perth. The one character type that was conspicuous by its absence was the Narn. This is hardly surprising, seeing as it requires a lot of latex and loads of studs. Robert did not just do a Narn, he did G'Kar in full ceremonial gear, complete with gem-studded jacket and peacock feather cloak. It was stunning. Naturally he won, no one else came close. And having received his prize he said he would like to sing the Narn national anthem. Not heard it? It goes like this:

*"Narn Narn Narn, Narn Na-Na-Narn, Narn Narn Narn, Narn Na-Na-Narn".*

Anyone remember the Banana Splits? We creased up.

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## **Things that go bump in the Night**

A little while ago I was discussing Tim Powers, and Alan Stewart's theory that he and his fellow post-Dickians had moved over to writing urban horror. I pointed out that there was little genuinely horrific about either *Last Call* or *Expiration Date*. Had you told me at the time that James Blaylock would be the first of them to write something really spinechilling I would have laughed. Once again, I would have been wrong.

In my defence I must say that it seemed highly unlikely. Anyone who comes up with characters like Ignaccio Narbondo would seem to be a natural clown. Indeed, if asked to recommend an American author who wrote funny fantasies, I would probably have fingered Blaylock. I guess that the clues were there in *The Paper Grail*, but I didn't see them for all the silly stuff about naff tourist attractions. Now we have *Night Relics*, which is a different kettle of bulgy-eyed, slimy creatures altogether.

No, don't panic, there are no Deep Ones. Indeed, there are no fish at all, which is possibly how Blaylock managed to escape the inanity trap. *Night Relics* is a ghost story, pure and simple. It is well told, it has interesting characters, and in several places it made my flesh creep. I do not normally read books that scare me, there is quite enough in the world to have nightmares about. This I read by accident because it was by an author I do not associate with horror. Oops.

There's not a lot more I can say without starting to give the plot away. It is not a deep, philosophical book, it doesn't bring anything new to the genre of ghost stories. It is just well written, and thoroughly enjoyable. If I were the type of person given to such cliches I would say that James Blaylock has come of age as a writer.

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## Infernal Devices

There are some authors who, left to their own devices, produce very nice, very entertaining, very ordinary novels that people buy in droves and are very happy with. There are others who simply cannot resist the urge to be naughty. Some, Salman Rushdie springs to mind, have an unerring ability to offend people with what they write. Others fill their books with bad words, or ramble on uncontrollably about their latest political obsession. And some, step forward please, Mary Gentle, are determined to irritate the reader by challenging the conventions of the form in which they write.

It was Magnificent Mary, you will recall, who delighted the world with her first science fantasy novel, *Golden Witchbreed*, and was hailed as the great new queen of British speculative fiction. It was Contrary Mary who, shortly thereafter, spat in the faces of her readers by obliterating her carefully crafted world, and her entire cast of characters, in a nuclear fireball at the end of *Ancient Light*. "Stuff you", she appeared to say, "I'm not writing any more sequels and I hate happy endings". Nevertheless, despite howls of anguish from her readers, she got another contract. She was, after all, very good.

And so we had *Rats and Gargoyles*, swiftly followed by *The Architecture of Desire*. This time the anarchy was a little more restrained. Both books feature the same two principal characters: Valentine White Crow and Baltazar Casaubon, but they are set in somewhat different worlds. It was an interesting idea. I quite liked it. Now they are back, in another setting entirely, and Mary is being naughty again.

London. The sky is the colour of a television tuned to John Major's face. Valentine and Casaubon have gone cyberpunk. Oh, they are still recognisable as the same people: Valentine is into historical re-enactment and software wizardry rather than her customary swords and sorcery; Casaubon has moved from buildings to systems architecture. Otherwise they are their same, somewhat less than lovable selves. It soon transpires that both are on the run from the US military for having made major software breakthroughs which were so powerful they felt unable to share them with their masters. The time of information anarchy is about to arrive, driven by the irresistible forces of thousands of hackers and the Internet. It is all very modern.

And there's more. Europe has collapsed into a chaos of warfare, London is choked with refugees and has closed its borders. Gangs of street punks seek to keep London for the Londoners. And somehow, in a manner very reminiscent of a Jerry Cornelius novel, Valentine's mother has become Minister of War for the hard-pressed European government. It is a fascinating set up, with characters whose stories you really want to hear. So what does Mary do? She decides not to have an ending.

No, seriously, she does. The plot is expounded, the principal characters get together and talk about it, and then they decide that events are going to take their course and there is little anyone can do so let's just forget about it. The supporting cast are left hanging, their life dramas unresolved. The world plunges seemingly unstopably into chaos and no one

knows how it will turn out. One of Baltazar's creations, as the title suggests, gets *Left to His Own Devices* before we even really find out what he is capable of. It is all, just like *Ancient Light*, very unsatisfying.

I appreciate Mary's desire to challenge the traditional forms of novel writing, and will defend her right to do so against all comers. That doesn't stop me from being thoroughly fed up when she ruins my enjoyment of yet another excellent novel.

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## Walking with spirits

Meanwhile, back in Canada, I am catching up on all those Charles De Lint books I haven't read yet. OK, so I found *Moonheart* strange, and a little unconvincing at times, but De Lint writes so well I find myself drawn back to his work. It has a unique atmosphere which resonates with my own feelings about the world. Also, after I did the *Moonheart* review, I had two people write to me and enthuse about how much they loved De Lint (hi Jean and Barbara). That hasn't happened with any other author I've reviewed, so clearly there is something special here.

*SpiritWalk* is a sequel of sorts to *MoonHeart* in that it deals with many of the same people and settings. It also has the bizarre mix of American Indian mythology with modern day Ottawa, though this time the bad guys are sorcerers and their creatures rather than a greedy businessman and his thugs. I'm not sure whether this made a difference, or whether I've just got more used to the idea, but this time things seemed to gel much better.

The "novel" is one of those things patched together from a series of short stories written around a common theme. You can tell it is easily without having to read the publisher's acknowledgments at the front. Nevertheless it works to a reasonable extent because the entire collection centres around the spiritual development of one of the characters.

Emma Foley is one of those people who has been touched by magic, who has power, but is so frightened by it that she does everything she can to pretend to be normal. Even her near suicide (somewhat assisted by bad guys, but she put herself in the position) is not enough to shake her out of her reticence. In the end it is the need of others that drives out her fear.

Emma is not a likeable character. In many ways she is as much a snivelling wimp as Thomas Covenant. But, unlike Donaldson, De Lint does not go over the top in pointing this out. The story is handled in a downbeat and sensitive manner.

It is not a book I would read again for the story, but it is something I would read for the atmosphere it generates: the American Indian spirit world so beautifully evoked; the feeling that we really do live on the edge of magical realms. Authors such as Tolkein create wonderfully believable worlds, but they are alien, disconnected from our daily experience. We might like to live in them, but we don't feel that they are just around the corner. With De Lint you really start to feel that you could sit in a park or a wood and find his world just there, waiting for you to reach out and touch it. And now, at last, I understand what he was trying to do with his bizarre mix of magic and modern. My apologies, Charles, it does work.

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## Doctor in the States

The Fox-produced *Doctor Who* film premiered in the US last week. I was hoping for a full scale review for this issue, but events have conspired against this and I do want to get this issue out on time (besides, by next month you'll all have pirate copies). Instead we'll have to make do with a few off the cuff comments.

I saw a few stills from it in *Radio Times* last time I was back in Pommie-land and I must say that Paul McGann looks utterly edible: very stylish, and very handsome. The sets looked good too. A little *Blade Runner* in places, I thought.

Kevin, who produced a couple of amateur *Doctor Who* films before he discovered SMOFing, has seen the film and had this to say:

"It's surprisingly true to the parent show, although it's got higher production values, more action, stunts, and effects (hey, that's America for you), and The Doctor kisses his companion (three times!). Sylvester McCoy comes back for the early scenes leading up to a regeneration, so the movie is definitely intended to be part of the continuity of the TV series."

Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing depends on whether you want the show to live up to your expectations or make money. Film goers tend to resent having to have prior knowledge in order to understand what is going on. Kevin says:

"The need for "prior knowledge" is mostly dealt with by narration of the McGann Doctor over footage of Sylvester McCoy during the early portion of the film."

and continues:

"This is what *Doctor Who* would have been if the BBC had ever given it a lot of money. It's British actors, Canadian sets (Vancouver masquerading as San Francisco), American money, and an Australian-owned TV network. (Well, that last one's a stretch, I know...)"

Of course Kevin was born and raised in California and what seems perfectly ordinary to him could be crass Americanisation to others, but they do seem to have kept to the spirit of the series. Robbie Cantor (Canadian) pointed out that, although the film has a car chase, there are no spectacular rollovers or explosions, and nobody gets killed.

Mind you, not everyone liked it. Lisa Hayes described it as an abomination. The truth, as usual, is probably somewhere in between.

Meanwhile, what about the plot. Kevin?

"The very first part of the movie (the part with Sylvester McCoy in it) is on Skaro, where the Daleks execute The Master, who was on his 13th and final life. According to the narration, before being zapped, The Master asked The Doctor to ferry his remains back to Gallifrey, and he agreed. The Master's "life force" (which acts like ooze) gets out of its holding container, causes a TARDIS malfunction which causes the TARDIS to land in San Francisco on December 30, 1999."

"The Doctor steps out of the TARDIS to get cut down by a hail of gunfire (he inadvertently had stumbled into the middle of a gunfight). Taken to the hospital, he "dies" on the operating table because the surgeon (the female lead of the movie) doesn't believe the "double exposed" x-ray of two hearts. He then regenerates down in the morgue, while The Master gets away and takes over the body of the EMT on the ambulance that picked the Doctor up. That's the set up."



The Master?

“Seems to me they were trying to make him look like The Terminator, only not so beefy.”

Oh dear. A new TARDIS?

“Very much so. The console looks more like the "backup" unit used in one season of Tom Baker, for instance. The control room is a lot more ornate, probably because they had more money to build sets.”

That's all I have right now. It sounds very interesting. Now who was it said they'd be getting a copy....?

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## Miscellany

This issue's Australian politics story comes courtesy of Lucy Sussex who promises me that it true.

During the Victorian election campaign the police noticed a poster in a window which read “Kennett must die”. Concerned for the Premier's safety, they decided to investigate. As it turned out, the guy who owned the house seemed harmless enough. However, he made the foolish mistake of making a pass at one of the cops. The male one. Lady copy creases up, male cop books foolish perp.

The case then went to court with our perp charged with displaying a poster with intent to incite murder. The judge reject the defence plea that what the poster said was a self-evident truth: not even Kennett is immortal. But he threw out the case on the grounds that the poster was afixed to a blind rather than to the window, could therefore not be said to be a permanent fixture, and was therefore outside the definition of a “poster”. It is reported that the judge enjoyed himself immensely.

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Finally, a cautionary take of life under the new US Internet Censorship laws, this one having been kindly forwarded to me by Don Eastlake.

A gentleman from Scunthorpe applied to join America On Line and was informed that he would have to change his address because the word “Scunthorpe” fell foul of AOL's automated naughty work detection system (think about it...). He was finally accepted when he agreed to change the spelling of the town to Sconthorpe.

Other Netizens, on hearing of this, have taken great delight in finding more towns which would fall foul of AOL's diligence. Europe proved a particularly fruitful hunting ground, coming up with such gems as Marseilles (France), Titz (Germany), Cunta (Romania), Fucking (Austria) and Wankdorf (Switzerland).

Emerald City disclaims any responsibility for any action that may be brought against readers for possession of this document on the grounds of electronic indecency.

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## Footnote

“Ad hoc, and hoc and quid pro quo, so little time, so much to read”.

No, Jeremy Hillary Boob did not quite say that. He did, after all, need to make a decent rhyme. But if he had said that he would have been no less right, especially in my case. At Parliament of Dreams I bought eight books. When I found Merv Binns having a sale I bought two more. Kim Newman gave me a pile of his Dark Future novels. I still haven't read all the stuff I found in a remainder shop in Perth. Yet all these have been put aside in favour of two nanotech-inspired novels. Those, at least, you will see reviewed next issue (which will be a nanotechnology special).

Missing from this issue is any mention of Robert Holdstock's *Merlin's Wood*, because I am so disappointed at the increasingly formulaic and uninteresting recycling of the ideas from *Mythago Wood*. Sad.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Jon Pertwee, a most splendid Doctor.

And that, I think, is the end.

Ciao