

Futures

A troubleshooting guide to your flat-pack planet

World-making tips and tricks. **By Arthur H. Manners**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Got a problem? The Sandbox Corporation makes every effort to provide a seamless world-building experience, but occasionally issues occur. Please see our comprehensive troubleshooting guide, with more than 10^{15} scenarios covered.

Confused? Contact a customer service representative today*. Or, better yet, see below for our curated FAQ of common issues.

My Super-Earth Deluxe 3000 is late for delivery – I paid for FTL express shipping but it hasn't left the home system yet.

Our pilots make every effort to deliver on schedule, but unforeseen circumstances can introduce delays – not limited to undetected black holes, pods of space whales, and existential panic in our workforce when faced with the endless night sky and the sudden certainty that they are a meaningless mote in a timeless,

uncaring void. We're working hard on resolving these issues. Meanwhile, read [HERE](#) about our wormhole delivery service, coming soon to a system near you.

Your sales team said you deliver anywhere but your pilot just called to say they don't have enough fuel and dumped my planet at the edge of the galaxy. It's literally sitting out there where anyone could take it. Not impressed.

As stated clearly in our Terms and Conditions (Section Z987 subparagraph J-2-Gamma), 'anywhere' is defined as any address within the galactic disk. Your registered address in the Small Magellanic Cloud is not currently serviced. As compensation, please enjoy a free meal on us at Dave's Mysterious Space Ribs Shack.

Guys there is so much lava, what the actual

hell? Like there is no solid surface, it's just volcanoes. Starting to think this is a colossal waste of money!

Oh dear! Sorry about that. The ratio of radioactive elements has been miscalibrated, and the heat from the decay products is melting your planet from within. Usually, we refer customers to our Theatrical Recreation department's premium scenario: "Duelling your former master across a fiery hellscape to decide the fate of the galaxy" – but due to unsubstantiated accusations of inciting holy crusades, this option is unavailable. We will collect your world for repair.

My world is overrun by locusts!!! They are several feet deep. My dog drowned in them last week. You gotta help me.

Have you tried telling them to buzz off? Aha! A touch of levity to lessen the horror of literally drowning in an ocean of insects. This is

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due to improperly deploying your pre-mixed biosphere.

Solution:

1. Deploy the Emergency Mice pack in your quick-fix kit, which will eat all available plant matter, starving the locusts;

2. Before your emergency mice population becomes unmanageable, deploy the Emergency Cats;

3. Continue steps 1–2 through the food chain until your city-sized kaiju apex predator is of interest to our Cosmic Theme Park department, whereupon they will transport it off-planet free of charge (minus pacifying nuclear detonations);

(optional) 4. Reseed your locusts and begin the process again. We will compensate you generously for the inconvenience of frequent monster rampages. As our company motto says: “The kaiju space war is coming. Profit while you can.”

I gazed into the abyss that opened to the core of my world, and the abyss gazed back at me. I have seen the eye of the All Thing and must spread the word to all thinking & feeling minds.

You seem to have inadvertently accessed our Nietzschean Reckoning module. This system is currently in beta and has several known issues.

We are dispatching a team at maximum FTL to seal the abyss. Please seek medical attention and for the sake of all living beings: do not listen to the voices, the terrible voices, they lie, they will devour your heart. Have a good day!

help someone please help. was testing one of your orbital mass accelerators and then BANG. pinned, bleeding. not sure how injured but i saw my arms float by a minute ago. hurry.

As one of our valued alpha testers, we guarantee to restore at least some of your limbs. We have also enclosed tickets to Paradise, our premier resort world, where you can relax on equator-spanning beaches, play racket sports using your shiny new limbs, and have your memory of this event replaced by a Sandbox Corporation promotional reel of your choosing – all free of charge!

I ordered the Ice Giant Supreme with the Habitable Moon expansion, and before I could set up the magnetosphere the whole system gained sentience. Plz help.

Oops! We cannot legally encourage you to end a nascent intelligence, the likes of which the Universe has never known, which may fundamentally change the nature of what it means to tread forests and mountains and sail surging

oceans. But we understand that mistakes happen, and are standing by to clear any wreckage.

so this aint my fault but i made my planet a planet eater and its eating everyone elses planets and making babies of itself and now the horde of murder worlds are in ftl heading for your home system. lol my bad. can i get that refund tho?

Over our dead bodies. Aha! But enough levity. Your claim cannot be processed before the customer service team is a sea of corpses soon to be swept into the magma-filled mouth of a ravenous planet. We are spiritually prepared; if anything, it will be a relief to escape the timeless, uncaring void. Our apologies for the inconvenience, and hope you have a g–

**Our customer services are currently offline. We can redirect you to our subsidiary in the Andromeda Galaxy. Note that in Andromeda, FTL technology is banned. Please allow several million years of light-delay time for your call to connect.*

Arthur H. Manners is a British writer with a background in space science. His work is published/forthcoming in places such as *Analog*, *Strange Horizons*, *Flash Fiction Online* and *Solarpunk Magazine*. Find him online at www.arthurmanners.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Arthur H. Manners reveals the inspiration behind *A troubleshooting guide to your flat-pack planet*.

Hubris has always been a plentiful, renewable resource. But at some point in the past century, a group of people bought up the world’s annual supply, and used it to invent the concept of geoengineering.

No matter how many ways its proponents try to justify a global-scale experiment on a nonlinear system — while in the midst of an ongoing separate, if unintentional, experiment on the same system — when confronted with concerns over the risks, the response sounds suspiciously close to, “We saw it on an episode of *The Simpsons*, and that’s good enough for us.”

Science fiction is difficult to define, but many stories in the genre serve as cautionary tales of possible doorways to dystopia. At least, they induce caution in sane minds. For the rich, irony has other plans. Self-styled visionaries and thought leaders instead tend to treat these stories like a shopping list. *We’ll have a twisted shadow of the metaverse, a misinterpretation of anti-imperialist rhetoric as glorification of god-kings, and — oh, look, they’re doing 2-for-1 on suspiciously opaque development of neural interfaces.*

Some might claim that I wrote this story to win arguments for the rest of my life, by sniffing and muttering under my breath, “Yes, well, I was published in *Nature* once, so...”

We must forgive these people their petty jealousy. This story

is my attempt to break the cycle of warning-turned-goal, by illustrating the absurdity of planetary engineering in the form of a story too silly to be taken seriously even by those who use cash as toilet roll.

Maybe this is the start of a new revolution in science fiction. Maybe this story is the vanguard of a new movement that addresses corporations and futurists directly. Maybe, if it’s not beneath me — and nothing is — I will unleash a deluge of satire that might turn the tide of this war of possible futures.

But, of course, I am prepared to be remembered instead as a bringer of doom, when a new dawn shines through a world-spanning stratospheric layer of aluminium oxide — that cannot ever be allowed to dissipate without cooking us all — and the tech bros chorus, “Dude, did you read that story about flat-pack planets? We should totally get on that!”

