

# Futures

## Cosmic rentals

Expansive entertainment. By Dave Kavanaugh



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**H**ey guys! Welcome to Cosmic Rentals. *Endless Entertainment for the Endless.* First time here? Awesome. We'll get you registered for a new account when you're ready to check out, but first, I'm gonna go ahead and give you a tour of the store, explain the rental process, show you the genre selection, all that.

So, we currently have more than 8,000 universes in stock, with new releases coming all the time from all the major Creation studios. All the universes you see in the store are for rent only, though we occasionally sell off some of the older ones, and you can sign up for our newsletter to be alerted when those sales happen.

What else? Oh yeah! Know that we have a 'don't rewind' policy with our rentals. What that means for you is, when you take home a universe, you can choose to start it over at the beginning, or else pick it up where the previous customer left off. I think it can be fun both ways. Resetting it for a fresh start is cool.

Unravelling what the previous renter has done can be interesting. It gives you some choice.

Same goes with how much influence you want to have within your experience of a universe. Some customers really just want to sit back and watch, others get hands-on in the cosmic planning, or like to fast forward to find intelligent life or civilizations and get involved in all of that. Play god for a species or two. Get creative with it. It's totally up to you.

Right then. Let's take a look around the store. We'll start with the outer shelves and work our way around to the middle.

So first off, here to my left, you'll see our Classics section. All these universes have cosmological constraints in the typical ranges, so standard or near-standard gravitational constants, speed of light in a vacuum, that stuff. You'll find lots of galaxies, lots of lifeforms, and a nice big story arc. Most of the universes here last about 50 trillion years, and you can always check the back of the box for the exact runtime. Personally, I find these to be a bit

predictable, but a lot of customers really love the comfort factor. Nostalgia and whatnot.

Moving on, we have some Zen universes on this next shelf. Again, these aren't really to my taste. I guess I don't really get them. Nothing really happens. Everything aligns at the start so there's no matter/antimatter war, no fusion, no heavy elements. It's just a lot of pretty plasma and ethereal humming for billions of years. There's not really anything for you to do, other than observe. But I guess some customers find it really relaxing or meditative or something. So if you're into that, these are cool.

Next we have Comedies! Some of these are really fun. Lots of especially silly lifeforms, galactic shenanigans, really unpredictable endings. I'm a big fan. This one here is ... well, I guess it's a bit raunchy at times. Cover your ears for a minute, kids. There's a lot of interplanetary ... gene-mixing, if you know what I mean. But it's just wild and pretty hilarious. To me, anyway.

Then we have Tragedies over here, if you're

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in the mood for a real tearjerker. You'll find your stillborn universes, intergalactic xenocides, Big Rips. All the serious stuff. For some reason, my mum really likes these, and then she gets all depressed, and then I ask why she didn't get a Comedy, then she yells at me, and ... Anyway, Tragedies. Oh! Fun fact. Kind of a spoiler I guess, but that universe up in the corner actually has like this weird, like, easter egg. If you fast-forward to the right spot, you'll find a lifeform who is actually reading a story about ... well, us. This store. This tour. This moment. Kind of a fun coincidence. Pretty interesting.

Coming around, on this last shelf we have a selection of Avant Garde universes. Real artsy

stuff. Some are kind of slow and monochromatic and stuff, but some are actually pretty cool. You'll find, like, conscious particles, stars that sing, or a golden dragon that breathes nebulas. All the trippy, experimental stuff. They screw with your mind but can be a really cool experience.

Finally, there's the middle of the store. This is where you'll find a bunch of stuff for the kids. We have some really fun beginner universes for short attention spans. Educational cosmologies, simple adventures, lots of pretty characters and cute lifeforms. Most have a runtime of just a couple trillion years. We do ask that you rewind these universes before returning them. That's the one exception to our rule. I guess

kids tend to get confused if they're dropped into the middle of things.

So yeah. That's the store, guys. Let me know if you have any questions or are looking for a particular universe. I'll do my best to help. For now, look around, and when you're ready, we'll get you registered and on your way. Oh, and don't forget to grab a snack with your rental. There's a 2 for 1 deal right now.

Happy renting!

**Dave Kavanaugh** lives with his family in an old brick house in an old brick town. He enjoys the company of cats, fresh fruit and books with maps in the front.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Dave Kavanaugh reveals the inspiration behind *Cosmic rentals*.

Before their extinction, I worked for a time in a video-rental store. New customers were always given a store tour and it was this little speech that inspired *Cosmic rentals*.

There's something charming to me about the idea of a listless god perusing the aisles of a corner shop in search of a night's entertainment. It takes the holiness out of the whole 'Creator' equation, a prospect that's appealed to me since I was a child. Growing up in a religious household, the reverence in which believers held their deities always seemed unnecessary to me. To believe in a god is one thing, to love and worship them is something else entirely.

I'm a staunch defender of the view that an artist's intentions and interpretation of their own work are of little importance. Instead, it's up to the individual spectator to determine meaning and judge the quality of a work of art. Why not view the Creator's handiwork in the same subjective manner? Put another way, if all the world is truly just a stage and we in it merely players, that doesn't mean we must greet the playwright with rousing applause.

Today's hot new creation myth is that of the simulation hypothesis, but this new story comes with all the same problems as the old, the same overconfidence, lack of evidence and absence of any real effect on our daily lives. But from a storyteller's point of view, it does offer some fun and tantalizing possibilities.

If our Universe is indeed a carefully designed narrative, what genre of game or story is it? Are we NPCs in a superbeing's virtual playground, spirits of a former world being punished for past deeds, or something else entirely, existing in a simulation so alien to our minds that asking us to comprehend its form is like asking a molecule of pigment to unravel the grand design of a Van Gogh painting?

In writing *Cosmic rentals*, it seemed obvious to me that whatever else our own Universe is, it is a tragedy, at least when viewed through the English-class lens of Shakespearean categories. For the Universe itself — not to mention every life within it — shall end not with a happy marriage, but with a tragic death.

Bummer.

