



# Lambda Sci-Fi

## DC Area Gaylaxians

(202) 232-3141 – Issue # 357 – December 2019

E-MAIL: [info@lambdascifi.org](mailto:info@lambdascifi.org)

WEBSITE: [www.lambdascifi.org](http://www.lambdascifi.org)

### The LSF Book Discussion Group

If *you're* interested in lively discussions of F&SF books (with an emphasis on elements of interest to the LGBT community), we invite you to join the LSF Book Discussion Group. Each month, we conduct fascinating round-table discussions of works by significant F&SF authors.

The LSF Book Discussion Group usually meets on the 4th Thursday of every month, starting at 7:00 PM, at Peter & Rob's home: 1425 "S" St., NW – for directions or more details, call 202-483-6369. The next book discussion will be held on December 5th.

Here are the details for the next three discussions:

**Dec. 5 (combined Nov/Dec discussion)** – *Meddling Kids* by Edgar Cantero (moderator: Teresa).

**Jan. 23, 2020** – *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (moderator: Teresa).

**Feb. 27, 2020** – *Wonder Woman: The Golden Age, Vol. 2* (moderator: Claire).

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### LSF New Year's Eve Gaming Party!



Come join Lambda Sci-Fi as we ring out the old year and ring in the new year with an afternoon and evening of gaming.

**Date:** Tuesday, December 31, 2019

**Time:** The doors will open at 3:00 PM. We'll all ring in and toast the New Year with champagne, sparkling wine, and/or sparkling cider at midnight.

**Where:** Rob & Peter's home: 1425 S St NW, Washington, DC 20009



**What to Bring:** Your favorite table game or two or three (cards, board, etc.). It's a potluck meal, so bring something to eat: appetizers (veggies, chmips, etc.), main course item (enough to serve at least 4-5 people), dessert, and/or non-alcoholic drinks (both regular and diet). For the New Year's toast, it's OK to bring some sparkling wine or cider (champagne, if you're feeling generous).

*The hosts request that no one drink alcohol during the party other than at midnight.*

**For more information,** send email to:

[PeterPKnapp@gmail.com](mailto:PeterPKnapp@gmail.com)

or

[RobGatesDC@gmail.com](mailto:RobGatesDC@gmail.com)

**Directions and Parking Suggestions:**

<http://lambdascifi.org/club/PeterRob.html>

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### <<<<< December 2019 LSF Meeting >>>>>

The next LSF meeting will be held on **Sunday, December 8th**, at Peter and Rob's home, **1425 "S" Street NW, Washington, DC**. The meeting will begin at 1:30 PM. The "group watch" will begin about 3:00 PM. Hope to see you there!



### What's Inside?

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## Minutes of the November LSF Meeting taken by Scott

A larger-than-usual attendance at today's LSF meeting – thanks to Peter for his Facebook meeting announcement.

Rob reviewed the Tingleverse panel at the October 2019 Gaylaxicon in Minneapolis. He said it was nice to have some of the con guest authors participate. Rob also made the Best Novel Spectrum Awards (winner and short list) announcements at the Gaylaxicon banquet. Melissa Scott's *Point of Sighs* was the Best Novel.

The new Disney Plus channel is launching this Tuesday, kicking off with *The Mandalorian*. Fourteen Marvel series have also been announced. The HBO *Watchmen* series is now three episodes in; it's a sequel to the graphic novel, and the opening scenes feature the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. Rob is enjoying Netflix's 2019 series *Daybreak*, based upon the graphic novel by Bryan Ralph – an American post-apocalyptic comedy-drama series. The CW is gearing up for the "Crisis on Infinite Earths" cross-overs with *Arrow*, *Supergirl*, *Flash*, *Batwoman*, and *Legends of Tomorrow* – the casts will feature Tom Welling, Dean Cain, Burt Ward, John Wesley Shipp, Cress Williams, and many more. *The Expanse* Season IV starts in December 2019.

Carl was creeped out by Robert Egger's film *Lighthouse*, starring William Defoe and Robert Pattinson; it's a 2019 psychological horror film shot in black-and-white. *The Color Out of Space*, a 2019 movie by Richard Stanley, is based upon H.P. Lovecraft's short story by the same name; it stars Nicholas Cage, but it might still be worth watching.

Upcoming LSF events: an LSF movie outing on Saturday, Dec. 21st, to see *Rise of Skywalker* at the Uptown Theater in DC. Rob also reminded everyone about the annual LSF gaming party on New Year's Eve. Upcoming LSF book discussion titles: *Meddling Kids* by Edgar Cantero (Dec.), *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (Jan.), and *Wonder Woman Golden Age Volume II* (Feb.)

Then we all watched the first episode of the HBO series *His Dark Materials* and the first episode of the HBO series *Watchmen*.

## Handy Robot Hand info passed along by Carl



Have you ever solved a Rubik's Cube (using both hands, of course)? And, if you've been successful, have you ever tried to solve it *with one hand*? Not an easy task, says I.

But, in October, researchers at OpenAI announced that they'd achieved a new robotics benchmark: a robotic hand that could indeed solve Rubik's Cube single-handedly (as it were). OpenAI, based in San Francisco, is a research lab focused on developing benevolent artificial intelligence. They state that their robot hand – which they've named Dactyl – moves robots one step closer to "human-level dexterity". Finding a solution to a puzzle with that degree of complexity involved a degree of abstract thinking that begins to approximate human reasoning.

OpenAI says: "Solving a Rubik's Cube requires unprecedented dexterity and the ability to execute flawlessly or recover from mistakes successfully for a long period of time. Even for humans, solving a Rubik's Cube one-handed is no simple task – there are [over 43 quintillion] ways to scramble a Rubik's Cube." With Dactyl, researchers have moved closer to creating "general purpose robots with a technique that should allow for robustly solving any simulatable dexterous tasks."

Back in July, UC Irvine researchers announced that an artificial intelligence system – known as DeepCubeA – solved a Rubik's Cube in just over a second. (This beats the current human world record by more than two seconds.) DeepCubeA is based on a reinforcement-learning algorithm; and, according to the University, it solved the puzzle without either previous knowledge of the game or coaching from humans. It relies on a set of algorithms designed to find underlying relationships by mimicking how the human brain processes information.

OpenAI's Dactyl, however, was trained by using virtual simulations before it was presented with challenges in the physical world, thus testing its ability to learn. The goal was to create a robot that learns the way humans do through trial and error. Eventually, such robots could be used to complete tasks – perhaps on the surface of another planet – with more autonomy. Before it could solve the Rubik's Cube, Dactyl needed to learn how to hold and move the cube on its own. As Dactyl improved at each stage of learning, its algorithm grew more adept and the challenges were intensified. This could change how researchers view training for general-purpose robots: instead of trying to create complex algorithms for different environments, roboticists can instead focus on designing complex scenarios in which the machines can learn.

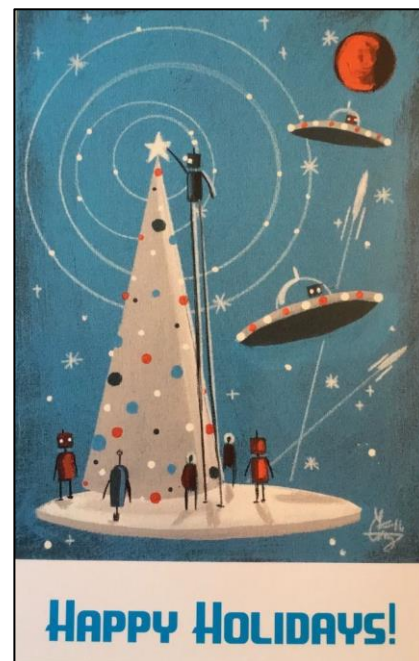
Here are a couple of links showing Dactyl at various points in its training:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwSbzNHGfIM>

<https://www.sciencealert.com/watch-this-incredible-robot-hand-solve-a-rubik-s-cube>

(I can't help but think about Wollwitz's misadventures with that robotic hand in the *Big Bang* episode "The Robotic Manipulation".)

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**HAPPY HOLIDAYS!**



## Your Face on a Robot?

info passed along  
by Carl & Wayne #1

The Oct. 28<sup>th</sup> issue of *The Washington Post* included an article entitled “Firm seeks ‘kind and friendly’ face for robot fleet”. Hmmmm. Intriguing.

According to Peter Holley’s *Post* article, Geomiq (a British engineering and manufacturing firm) wants to hear from you if you’re “so fond of your face that you would like to see if on a global fleet of humanoid robots for years to come”. Say what? The article goes on to say that Geomiq “claims it has been hired by a mysterious robotics company to put out a call for photo submissions” because their client “has developed a humanoid robot that is nearing completion but is still in need of the right visage” – age or gender not specified. The name of the robotics company remains unnamed, supposedly due to a nondisclosure agreement. Here are a few particularly fascinating paragraphs from the *Post* article:

*Geomiq officials note that theirs is a “unique request.” As if trying to outdo that understatement, the company points out that licensing one’s face to a humanoid robotic project of unknown origin is, after all, “potentially an extremely big decision.”*

*“The company is privately funded and says the robots’ purpose will be to act as a ‘virtual friend’ for elderly people, and is set to go into production next year,” the statement says. “The designer has said that the project has been in development for five years, and has since taken on investment from a number of independent VCs as well as a top fund based in Shanghai.”*

*“The company says the need for anonymity is due to the ‘secretive’ nature of the project, however it believes the robot will soon be ‘readily available’ to the public and hopes the campaign will create extra buzz ahead of its eventual release,” the statement adds.*

They’re willing to pay \$130,000 to whoever takes up the offer and they claim that “candidates whose faces advance to the next phase of the selection process can expect full transparency about the nature of the project”.



Are thoughts of such films as *Ex Machina* (2014) or *Westworld* (1973) or the *Star Trek* episode “I, Mudd” (1967) running through your mind? If so, I wouldn’t get too excited just yet. After all, this is the Internet. Or, as the *Post* article puts it: “Because the Internet is an unregulated house of mirrors patrolled by piratical tricksters who traffic in flimflam, it is unclear whether Geomiq’s request is a daring social experiment, a prank or a legitimate plea for assistance.”

According to the *Post* article, roboticists from the University of Washington (Seattle) identified 157 robots with rendered faces during a 2018 study. The title of their research paper is “Characterizing the Design Space of Rendered Robot Faces”. Based on various attributes, they categorized the faces and then surveyed people about their reactions to robotic facial styles. Most robot faces are black (34.4%) and most include a mouth (65.6%); but less than 50% have eyebrows or even a nose. Less than 1 in 10 robots have hair or ears.

The research paper also says: “Faces are critical in establishing the agency of social robots; however, building expressive mechanical faces is costly and difficult... We find that participants preferred less realistic and less detailed robots in the home...” Sounds like Baymax in *Big Hero 6* (2014) or EVE in *WALL-E* (2008), doesn’t it?

And, if you’re interested in human-faced robots, here’s information about a robot exhibited in the Japan Science Museum in 2016. It’s named “Alter”, and it has a series of sensors that detect proximity, humidity, noise, and temperature of the room it’s in. Changes in the room’s temperature, or how many

people are near it, will influence Alter’s movements.)

← This is a picture of Alter; and here’s a link to a short video displaying Alter in action:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjmMHGJUFX4>

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### **Reminder: Annual LSF Book (et al) Exchange at Jan. 12th Meeting**

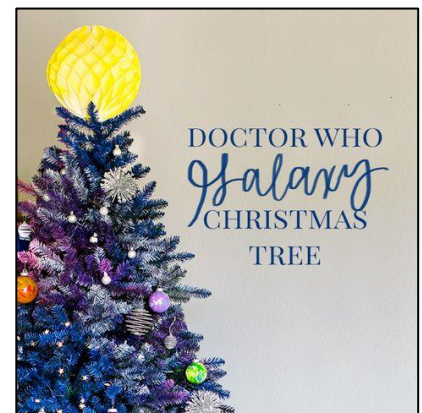


That’s right, gang, the Holiday Season is almost upon us again; and it’s time for a short reminder about LSF’s upcoming *twenty-ninth* annual book (et al) exchange, which will occur at the January 12th meeting! All LSF members are invited to participate in this “blind exchange” – and visitors are invited to join in the fun, too!

Briefly, this will be an opportunity for LSFers to exchange copies of their favorite science-fiction, fantasy, or horror books/videos/etc. and, thus, get to know each other a little better.

For those of you unfamiliar with the process, here’s how it works: You won’t be assigned to exchange with any *particular* person – it’s a “blind” exchange, where participants will get their pick from a pile of anonymous wrapped packages. Full details on the exchange in the next (January) newsletter.

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**\* \* INFORMATION ABOUT LAMBDA SCI-FI: DC AREA GAYLAXIANS \* \***

**Lambda Sci-Fi: DC Area Gaylaxians** (LSF) is an organization for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans-gendered (GLBT) people, and their friends who are interested in science fiction, fantasy, horror and related genres in all forms (SF/F/H). LSF's primary goals are to have fun, to provide a community, and to:

- promote SF/F/H, with particular attention to materials of interest to GLBT people and their friends;
- provide forums for GLBT people and their friends to share their interest in SF/F/H;
- promote the presence of GLBT elements within SF/F/H and within fandom; and
- promote SF/F/H within the GLBT community.

Annual membership fees are \$10, for which you will receive an e-mailed copy of this monthly newsletter and a membership directory. Newsletter submissions are always welcome.

Meetings are usually held on the second Sunday of each month at a private residence. The next Lambda Sci-Fi meeting will be held on Sunday, **December 8th, at Peter and Rob's home, 1425 "S" Street NW, Washington, DC.** Hope to see you there!

Lambda Sci-Fi: DC Area Gaylaxians is an affiliate of **the Gaylactic Network**, an international organization for gay people and their friends who are interested in science-fiction and fantasy.

**\* \* Con Calendar \* \*** by Carl

April 24-26, 2020 **RAVENCON 15**. DoubleTree by Hilton Williamsburg (Williamsburg VA). GoH: Terry Brooks. Membership: \$35 before 12/31/2019; \$40 until 4/3/2020; \$50 at the door. (Daily rates also available.) On-line registration.

Website: [www.ravencon.com](http://www.ravencon.com)

May 1-3, 2020 **AWESOME CON**. Walter E. Washington Convention Center (Washington, DC). Guests include: Zachary Levi ("Shazam!"); Ron Perlman ("Hellboy"). Includes "Pride Alley, a celebration of queer creators and fans curated by GeeksOUT." Membership: 3-day passes = \$80; 1-day passes = \$40-\$55 (depending on the day). "Tickets on sale soon." Limited tickets – on-line purchase advised via their Tickets Page. Website: <https://awesome-con.com/>

May 22-25, 2020 **BALTICON 54**. Renaissance Baltimore Harborplace Hotel (Baltimore MD). GoH: Wen Spencer; Artist GoH: Lee Moyer; Musical GoH: Cheshire Moon; 2019 Compton Crook Award winner: R.F. Kuang. Membership: \$66 until Feb. 29, 2020. On-line registration. Website: <https://www.balticon.org/wp54> Info at: [balticoninfo@balticon.org](mailto:balticoninfo@balticon.org)

July 10-12, 2020 **SHORE LEAVE 42**. Delta Hotels Marriott Baltimore Hunt Valley (Hunt Valley MD). Actor GoH: Denis Lawson (*Star Wars* "Wedge Antilles"); more TBA. Membership: \$105 for the weekend (\$120 at the door); daily rates available. Printable registration forms & on-line registration available through the Registration Page.

Website: [www.shore-leave.com](http://www.shore-leave.com)

July 29 – Aug. 2, 2020 **CONZEALAND, the 78<sup>th</sup> World Science Fiction Convention**. TSB Arena, Intercontinental Hotel *et al* (Wellington, New Zealand). GoH: Mercedes Lackey & Larry Dixon; Artist GoH: Greg Broadmore; Toastmaster: George RR Martin. Membership: currently \$452NZ (approx. \$272US); it will go up! On-line registration. Website: <https://conzealand.nz>

Aug. 20-23, 2020 **COLUMBUS NASFiC 2020, the North American Science Fiction Convention**. Sheraton Columbus Hotel at Capitol Square (Columbus, OH). GoH: Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson; Artist GoH: Stephanie Law; Science GoH: Marc Millis (NASA). Membership: currently \$100 (will go up!). Make checks payable to "Columbus 2020 NASFiC" and sent to: Columbus 2020 NASFiC, c/o Kim Williams, 4227 Beechrun Rd., Whitehall, OH 43213. On-line registration also available.

Website: <http://columbus2020nasfic.org/>

Sept. 4-7, 2020 **TCEP 27** ("Ted and Craig's Excellent Party"). "A relaxed gaming convention." Hampton Inn & Suites Washington Dulles Airport (Sterling VA). Membership: \$30 for the weekend. Website: <https://www.barkingmad.org/>

Oct. 16-18, 2020 **CAPCLAVE 2020**. Rockville Hilton & Executive Meeting Center (Rockville MD). GoH: Peter S. Beagle and Troy L. Wiggins (editor/blogger). Membership: \$50 thru the end of 2019 (will go up). On-line registration.

Website: <https://www.capclave.org/capclave/capclave20/>