

PREFACE

The earliest forms of corporations existed on Earth during the Roman Empire. For centuries there were isolated instances of businesses forming out of a collection of funds and people which took on their own identities, separate from any of their founders; but there was no formal recognition of this practice until the late 1700s when the Industrial Revolution took hold.

With machines outputting more product than ever, profits exploded. And new inventions were being created every week, which brought with them new ventures. The promise of great wealth brought in more and more investment, which fed the ever growing machines of industry. It was an ongoing cycle, which made investing in these businesses more attractive.

This was, of course, a game for the wealthy who could afford to take such risks in the first place. The lower classes were the ones working in the factories; and though they were the ones creating the products, they did not profit from them. Thus a new cycle began, one which made the venture capitalists richer, and the working classes remained in the factories, surviving day by day.

The social construct of industrialization had begun in Britain, whose colonies around the world helped to spread this new form of business based on a global trading economy. Factories were built in new lands, and local workers were exploited for the benefit of bosses they would never meet. New products were delivered at a pace so rapid, non-industrialists could not keep pace.

The largest of these corporations was the East India Company, which grew to such a size that it competed with nations rather than other businesses. They had their own navy, which included warships, and they even had their own army, comprising of more than half a million soldiers; twice the size of their host country of Britain. This military force participated in wars and founded its own colonies inside India. Its stockholders made decisions which affected not only their profits, but the fates of thousands of people under their rule. These investors profited off the successes, and lost money on their failures. It was the first corporate empire.

After the American Civil War, the United States pushed westward, and its railroad and telegraph expansion, as well as its myriad new inventions, led the way for a new era of industry. Regulations relaxed in favor of further innovations and expansionism. This gave rise to the private corporations, which were overseen by few, and often one, individual, who made most of the decisions and garnered most of the wealth. Monopolies formed. Major “railroad barons” became famous for their greed. Wealthy “industrialists” became titans of their cities.

The early part of the 20th century saw setbacks for corporate expansionism. “Trustbusting” broke monopolies in the 1900s, and the Stock Market Crash of 1929 destroyed faith in the capitalistic systems.

But when the world had to rebuild after World War 2, the public was glad to see commercialism return. People wanted to be distracted from the horrors they had experienced the past few decades, and the efficiency of corporate America could give it to them. As such, they were given more and more leeway as the decades progressed. Like the East India Company before them, they spread to other countries; opening factories where they could get cheaper labor and selling at ever-increasing costs in countries where buyers could afford to pay.

Other countries followed suit, and the US ironically soon found itself in its steepest competition with its two former war rivals: Japan and Germany, whose cultures valued efficiency and results.

By the end of the century, however, the nations hardly mattered. Corporations were transcending borders. While they initially only had a few manufacturing factories outside of “first world countries,” facilities sprouted up all over the world; sometimes with little more than their headquarters set up in their host countries, and their official addresses listed in a territory that paid no taxes.

This international standing made every corporate entity attractive to investors throughout the world. Those who had a fortune to invest spread their wealth across varying interests, giving them a say in how businesses of various types operated. As these corporations obtained more and more power, so did these investors.

During its 200 year history, corporations were designed as single entities, separate from their founders, and all the sum of their parts. In 2010, this was formalized through the US Supreme Court decision “Citizens United” which provided personhood to corporations. They could now create ads and give donations to national political parties as if the corporate entities were individual people.

Having transcended nationalities and achieved the same rights as humans, it was time for corporations to look to the stars. Nationalities had already achieved orbit around the planet Earth, and had even made it as far as the moon with multiple landings. But they had lost steam. After the Cold War ended, there was no sense of competition between the nations, and their space programs slowed dramatically.

But the very nature of corporate entities is to compete. And so several of them created their own space programs, launching test flights into orbit, then to the moon, then to Mars.

The first space flight landed on Mars in the middle of the 21st century. It was, of course, corporate owned. Its CEO promised that it would be neutral territory, under the laws of the United States of America. The corporonauts even set up an American flag.

But when their competitor was on approach for a landing, the corporation on the ground raised their flag – a black one with a giant white X across it – and they claimed a large region of the world with some of the best resources, setting their borders. The second corporation would have to land somewhere else. By the time the third corporation came along; the first one’s borders had grown, and the second one had set its boundaries. The planet was fully claimed after the fourth business landed.

Corporate entities that had hoped to colonize Mars realized that an attack would only lead to a war that the entrenched would win; so they moved on to outer worlds, such as Jupiter’s moon Io, Venus, and the outer asteroid belts where they could mine. By the early part of the next century, every part of the solar system that was useful was being exploited.

Meanwhile, Earth’s difficulties were mounting, and it was growing increasingly difficult for life on it. The greenhouse effect, global warming, and other pollutants made for exponential problems. Temperatures continued to rise worldwide. Weather patterns became more severe. Food and water shortages led to wars of desperation. Entire species disappeared, throwing off the ecosystem. And rising ocean levels combined with regions becoming unlivable made for major displacement and overcrowding in cities.

To make matters worse, corporations on other planets and in the belts, reliant on resources from Earth, took water, air, food, and other vital supplies. The nations of Earth, which had only created settlements on Earth’s moon and a few asteroids, tried to hold onto their resources. But the CEOs reminded them that they had signed contracts by which they must abide by interplanetary law. The trade was that the corporations paid large amounts of minerals from their mining operations; but these were becoming less valuable as necessities began to run out.

When it became too severe, several Earth nations, including the United States, Britain, Japan, Texas, Poland, and Ukraine, tried to resist. But by this time, the largest of the corporations had built battleships which could “enforce the contracts” from space.

The resistance the nations had put up had only proven to everyone that the corporations had control, and they began skimming; giving fewer resources from space for more resources from Earth. Ultimately, however, by the middle of the 22nd century, this pattern came full circle to affect the corporations. As they were reliant on Earth’s assets, when its entire ecosystem began to utterly fail, everything that was traded to them to survive was dwindling to nothing.

Scientists began predicting disaster throughout the entire solar system. No one would be spared. This warning was not accepted by many of the ultra-wealthy, who rarely saw the results of these actions, but were in charge of making those decisions. However, when the disasters began appearing in expense and profit reports, they took notice, and began to take action.

The solution was arrived at in 2161 when the Tsern Corporation invented the Spectrum Drive. (The actual inventor's name was never recorded as individual innovators were not to take credit over their employers. Companies were instead always given the credit and the inventors received a bonus during the year they achieved their goals.)

Utilizing scientific breakthroughs recently arrived at by the Institute for Profitable Research, the new technology learned how to rip a hole in space by starting at the tiniest level; a single Planck. This hole led to a dimension of pure gravity, which scientists called the Brane. Anything going into the Brane either floated in nothingness forever, or was torn apart when it came within a certain distance of a gravity well. The dimension held all the gravity missing from the standard human dimension, so the gravitational force was much stronger. Scientists learned that if they could harness the gravity, it could pull them at an incredible speed. If they could connect to multiple sources of gravity, they could navigate through the Brane – as long as they did not hold on to each gravity source long enough to get torn apart. Navigators could tell where they were because the gravity sources coincided with sources of gravity in the standard universe; though in the Brane they were much closer.

Once the ship arrived at its destination, it needed to get out of the Brane. It was the last step in the process. The scientist who learned how to access the Planck from the opposite side to rip a hole back into the standard dimension was lauded as a hero. She was then given her bonus check, and disappeared from history.

The resulting drive was called Spectrum because it took its ships out of the standard electromagnetic spectrum of our universe, and placed them into an entirely new one. It was a marvel of science and engineering; and it was immediately used to fly speculators through to distant star systems in search of valuable resources, minerals, and, most importantly, worlds where they could garner the necessities of life so they were no longer reliant upon Earth.

Resource-rich worlds were found immediately. Planets which could sustain life took a little more time, but were found within a couple years, and were colonized within a couple more. Volunteers for resettlement were not hard to find. Life within the containment of bases on Mars, asteroids, and moons always felt wrong to humans; even those who were born in them. So the prospect of living under a blue, or orange, or purple sky was highly attractive to them. Anything but the metallic ceilings they were used to.

The worlds, however, were more difficult to tame than was expected. Adapting to atmosphere, weather conditions, even the local pollen, proved difficult to humans. And most of all, there were the local animal populations. No one had encountered sentient life, but they all had encountered creatures that did not appreciate their territory being encroached upon.

The executives remained off-world while pioneers fought off the wildlife and braved the elements to tame their settlements into livable worlds. Many died, but the survivors prevailed, and heralded their victories.

Once it was safe and a security perimeter was established, managerial offices were built, and governing bodies took control. Those who had suffered to establish these territories became employees who built the colonies. These colonies answered to hubs of settlements, who were controlled by corporations. These corporations, having settled on multiple planets, became the stewards of several systems. And soon, borders between corporate entities began to form.

Earth, meanwhile, was beginning to deteriorate quickly. The wheels that had been set in motion with climate change and other pollutants were running their course and out of control. People who remained wanted to leave. The governments of every nation tried to provide vessels to get their people off-world and onto star-faring ships, but several had no such space program. Some did not have enough ships. Others had enough ships, but only got their government representatives off the planet. Still others launched as many as they could, but they had waited too long, and trips became fewer, and farther in-between.

Eventually, they stopped altogether. Occasionally, those who survived spotted a streak in the sky. It was a private vessel chartered to fly in to take someone off-world. But it was the last of those escaping from the disasters of the planet.

Those who got off-world were not home free. The colonies of the Sol system were emptying as well. With no core planet to support them, there was little reason to keep them manned. And so people had to find their way onto intergalactic vessels to travel to the new colonies. Those who could buy their way found themselves on these new worlds as newcomers, and were placed in the workforce at the lowest levels, no matter how high up they had been in a government entity. Advisors, diplomats, mayors, governors, even world leaders found themselves servants in the new corporatocracy.

Some who could not buy their way off-world got passage through other means of work and servitude. Those who could find neither remained behind, serving on land and orbital bases until they ran out of air, or waiting on ships in hopes they would be picked up, only to suffocate and freeze.

Dark clouds of pollution continued to envelope the home world of the humans. At last, Earth was so covered over that no outside observer could see in. The small blue marble in space was at last gone.

It was just as well. By the 23rd century, Earth was beginning to be forgotten. The new generations were more interested in exploring their new worlds, and profiting off of their resources than remembering the past. Some of these expeditions discovered the ancient ruins of other civilizations. Who had built them, and why they were there did not enter these people's heads, only that they were in the way. Land was most valuable when it contained a resource, or was clear enough that new developments could be built on it.

Land speculation became increasingly valuable as the populations multiplied. Human instinct had within it a desire to grow exponentially when its numbers were low. So the small population of colonies exploded during this time. By the middle of the 2200s, many of the colonized worlds had filled with people; though they were primarily concentrated within cities. The fear of local animals and a healthy respect for the hostile environments had not waned. Also, the corporate overlords preferred their employees remain close rather than finding greener pastures elsewhere. As such, the new worlds were dotted with populations rather than filled out over the landscape, like the countries of old Earth.

These corporations were still bound to their former traditions. Democracy existed as a fiduciary, and anyone who could buy into them controlled the governments in which they now lived. This included autocrats who had enough money to purchase stakes in multiple corporations. Anyone who could spend enough could control a world. Anyone who had enough to own several corporations controlled a sector. Thus began the age of the Corporate Baron. Their grip over vast swaths of space amounted to the equivalent of empires; or, as they began to be called, "corporate baronies."

The year is now 2311. Corporate baronies control entire regions of space. Ancient ruins of alien civilizations have still been located on many of the worlds upon which humans have settled, but no one knows who they once belonged to, and few care. Any secrets once held within them are soon lost as these ruins are destroyed in favor of newer, more profitable dominions.

But there are some who are still curious, and wonder what happened to these former civilizations; and could the same thing happen to humanity...