

## Undersea and Underground, Monsterwax Digs Deep For Two Sci-Fi Classics

# Thunder Down Under

by Alan Biegel



to the *Center of the Earth* and *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, are now being turned into original artwork sets of trading cards by non-sport manufacturer, Monsterwax.

### Classic Cards

Jules Verne isn't the first sci-fi novelist to have his work cardboarded by Monsterwax. In 2005, publisher Kurt Kuersteiner says he had good success with H.G. Wells and sees a number of similarities between the two authors: "Like Wells, both writers envisioned stories that were hundreds of years ahead of their time. They were able to make an unbelievable premise seem believable, be it time travel or finding forgotten worlds deep within the Earth. *20,000 Leagues* is even more amazing because it only seemed like science fiction back when it was released. Now we know virtually everything in it is scientifically possible. It is really amazing."

The more NSU spoke to Kuersteiner, the more it became evident he has a true love for the literature he is honoring with his cards: "I'm fortunate because my degrees were in English literature and later, film production. The literature studies gave me an appreciation for good writing, and the film production gave me practical experience in story boarding scripts. A story board is, basically, a glorified card set. All the important scenes are depicted in separate drawings. It allows the director to see and show his entire movie (or script) in a sequential series of images.

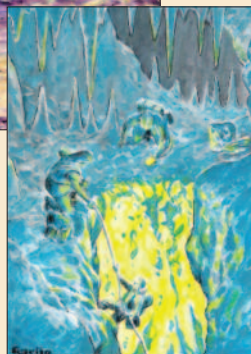
So I do the same thing with the cards that directors do with action movies. I read the script, lay out the scenes in sketches, and then have a professional artist render those sketches into beautiful paintings. Jules Verne wrote [the card backs]; I just edited them down to fit on a smaller piece of paper!"

Kuersteiner continued, "The artist [who painted the set] and I both love those classic stories, and judging from

For many a child living in the late nineteenth century, the name Jules Verne conjured up visions of a fanciful future. Chock full of scientific wonderment, the fifty-four novels published during Verne's lifetime became known as his *Voyages Extraordinaires* (Extraordinary Journeys). Still revered as classics today, Verne's work retains its importance in the world of fictional literature.

Perhaps what fascinate today's young and old readers the most is Verne's uncanny ability to have accurately envisioned the creation of many devices invented long after his death. Among his dead-on predictions was the invention of automobiles, helicopters, submarines, fax machines, television, jukeboxes, projectors, air conditioning, and even the Internet.

In addition to novels, Verne also wrote short stories, essays, plays, poems, and letters. Born in 1828 and known as the father of Science Fiction, the prolific author wrote some of the most important works of his century. Included in his long list of classics are *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Mysterious Island*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, *The Master of the World*, and *The Underground City*. Two of his most beloved works, *Journey*



the recent Hollywood interest, we're not the only ones. These stories were great books that spawned classic movies and popular comics, but they had never been released as cards before. So the real question isn't why are we doing them, but rather, why hasn't any one else?

## Drawing On His Talent

The artist Kuersteiner is referring to is Ricardo Garijo: "Garijo has been drawing and painting graphic novels and comics for decades. He's best known for his work in *Commando Comics*, which is big in Europe, but he is also a remarkable author. His last novel was called *The Fire* and now he's about to release another one called *Under the Stone Sky*, a story based on his father's real life experiences as a prisoner in a German labor camp," noted Kuersteiner.

Kuersteiner was excited to share the details of his first meeting with the talented artist: "[Garijo] sold me a very rare set of Spanish *Mars Attacks*, which he collected as a boy, and he mentioned in his email he was an artist. I humored him and told him to send me some samples, never imagining he was as fantastic as he was. Was I ever surprised!

For drawing the Jules Verne sets, Garijo worked in acrylic: The colors are very vibrant," said Kuersteiner, "and it allows him to make changes quickly and easily. He also does remarkable work in pencil. (See the Biography card of H.G. Wells from our *Island of Dr. Moreau* series).

Unfortunately, the only thing I can do well with a pencil is erase. Some guys just seem to have all the talent!"



## The Wells Not Dry

In looking back at the H.G. Wells' *Time Machine* set, an argument could be made that some of the images, particularly the Morlocks and the machine itself, bear a striking resemblance to the 1960 George Pal film version. Kuersteiner rebukes this idea, "our card series are based on the original books. The Morlocks resembled the creatures in the movie because the creatures in the movie were closely modeled on those from the book, as was the machine. The Martian ships in the [War of the Worlds] movie, however, were not based on the book, nor was the time setting (1898 in the book vs. 1950s in the movie) so that's where you see the biggest differences. You will see some significant differences in both [Verne] sets from the movies, but especially in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, because the movie left out a lot of really cool chapters. They just didn't have the C.G.I. technology to show it all back then. Fortunately, Ricardo can paint anything. In short, we copy the books, not the movies, because the books are the originals and the movies are the knock-offs. Hollywood writers are very clever, but they are rarely smarter than the masters of the genre, as H.G. Wells and Jules Verne clearly were."

With Kuersteiner's sentiments clearly well established, collectors can be assured there will be considerable differences between his set and Brendan Fraser's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* 3D movie releasing the same day as his cards: "There is no connection other

than we are both adapting the same Jules Verne story to our different mediums. I think it's fair to say the movie will be very loosely based on the story, whereas our cards will be very true to it. I should also point out we've been working on this project long before the movie was ever announced, as last year's Philly show visitors can attest. But we've been very lucky with both this movie and the [2005] *War of the Worlds* movie, since both came out about the time we were planning to release our cards. It was only natural to adjust our release date and combine our advertising with the movies to build up a greater synergy together. Obviously, their millions of dollars in advertising benefit us more than our limited edition card sets benefit them, but you know the old show biz saying: 'All publicity is good publicity.'"

## Twice As Nice

One of the most unusual things about the Verne product is the way it will be released: "They are two separate titles/stories, *Journey to the Center of the Earth & 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*," Kuersteiner attested. "However, they will be sold together in one box; separate sets with different wrappers, which I don't recall ever being done before. It should be twice as fun while providing a better value for customers. [By buying a box] you essentially get two series for the price of one."

The base set for the combined series will consist of 27 cards for each story plus a checklist. Chases will include Sketch cards, a Jules Verne Biography card, six Preview cards of other Verne classics, and a Prize card, which is redeemable for original paintings used in the set, uncut sheets, or other items.



While Monsterwax is providing one Promo card for each story in the boxes, as direct sales, and as give-aways, Kuersteiner has little interest in selling binders for this collection: "We focus on making great sets, making them very limited, and keeping the cost well below \$75 for everything in the series. Anytime a new set costs more than \$100 to finish, I feel that makes the product unaffordable to a big chunk of the younger audience, and those are precisely the

kids this industry needs to cater to because they are the future of this hobby."

One way Kuersteiner feels he can provide added value to his customers is by sequentially numbering his products: "It's the only way to prove our cards are as truly limited as we claim. There are only 1,000 of each set made, which makes only about three hundred 36 count boxes; an unbelievably low mintage series. The boxes are numbered too. There is a chance we might release it in 24 pack boxes instead, but that would still equal less than 500 boxes. We want to eventually go to smaller boxes to lower our prices as much as possible."

For the Jules Verne series, packs are priced at \$2 and 36 count boxes at \$65. "We have the best break down in the business," said Kuersteiner. "The six card packs should yield several sets per box and even a complete set of all the chase cards. I feel bad enough that

we have to charge \$65 to produce one box, but with such limited print runs, it's unavoidable. But I'd feel guilty if we provided a poor breakdown to force people to buy more than one box to finish the series."

## Imagination Proclamation

In addition to his love of the classic literature, it's the love of quality non-sports cards that keeps an independent producer like Monsterwax moving onward, "Like many collectors, I've grown frustrated by the lack of real art from card companies since the 1990s," Kuersteiner remarked. [Other companies] want to publish photo cards of movies and TV shows with big name recognition. Those can be fun, but they will never be as exciting as the *Mars Attacks* or *Civil War News*; sets that created original art and didn't rely on a Hollywood license. I knew if I combined the best writers with dramatic artwork, the results would be exciting. These cards will be timeless collectibles, just as the stories themselves have transcended their times."

While Monsterwax would like to develop more Wells and Verne related sets, their production schedule makes it difficult, "I would like to adapt more, but we have other projects slated to release first," Kuersteiner confirmed. "We only publish two to three sets per year, so we have to pace ourselves. Our deadlines are established only after the set is perfected. We rarely announce any release dates until



it's 90% complete. I hate to rush artists. I tell them what they paint will live on after they are dead, so [they should] take their time and do it right. If they need a few more weeks or even months to finish, I give it to them. We're making these things to last, not to cash in on a fad. It's not the best way to build publicity, but it is the best way to build a quality set. So if we're a little late with the release, cut us some slack, Jack! You'll appreciate the results."

For now, Monsterwax is keeping the details of those future products under wraps: "We have some very exciting projects going on, stuff I would love to talk about but will wait until we're closer to the finish line. Suffice it to say, the next few years will be very interesting for trading cards. Everything we do is in very limited editions; with print runs 1/10th or less than what the other guys put out, and never any reprints. So if you want to collect cards that are unique and scarce to begin with, it's worth your while to check out our products at monsterwax.com. They're not only fun to look at, they're a great read. The way classic cards ought to be!"

So pull up an easy chair and approach these cards like the great novels these stories were based on. As Monsterwax's representative puts it, "Below the Earth and Sea live worlds beyond belief. See it as the master of imagination first dreamed it over a century ago: Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth & 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea!*" □