



imagine

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Letters to the Editor

I JUST couldn't resist it. I know that the compulsive desire to redesign is a force of Evil, a near relative of that Emasculator of Heroes, system-tweaking.

But I realised how long it is since I've done any design. I'd set up *imagine* to be dead simple, in order to save myself the hassle of design work. But I'd forgotten that design work isn't just hassle. Sometimes it's fun.

So we have a new look. Yeah, yeah, I know. Most of you couldn't care less what the zine looks like, so long as it's readable. Well, look at it this way: this issue, like the last one, is out considerably earlier than recent performance might have promised. That's entirely due to my motivation to get it finished, and see what it looks like. So if you think that a more frequent *imagine* is a good thing, then you have the redesign to thank.

This issue my series of articles on the conduct of gaming takes a slightly unusual turn, discussing possibilities for ditching the referee. It's another of those topics which is hardly new, but which needs to be brought up every now and again, if only so

as to give us a clearer understanding of what a referee can do. Maybe we can't rid ourselves of referees, but at least we can learn how better to tie them down and stuff gags in their mouths...

For those of you who have been dangling on tenterhooks, bated breath charging the air, I can reveal that I managed to get my second Masters 'thesis' proposal accepted. It's not actually a thesis, but a 'creative project', which in this case means I finally get to write one of the novels I've been hoping to for the last few years. Or at least, that's the theory. Given the word limits I may end up only writing half of the novel I've been hoping to write! But that's nothing to the realisation that apparently what I'm writing is postmodernist. Could have blown me down with a Derrida.

Finally, you may notice that this issue sort of has a theme: in the immortal words of Freddie Mercury (or was it Frank Sidebottom?) 'It's a kind of magic!' Don't worry, it's entirely coincidental, and I have no intention of making theme issues a habit. But then I've said stuff like that before and been proved wrong. ▲



愛魔 reviews

YOU MAY NOTICE there are several reviews I promised last time which do not appear here. Partly these are games which I don't seem to have an URL for (in which case there's not much point me reviewing them) and partly I just felt that I didn't have much of use to say about them.

For next issue I'm interested in volunteers to review the new Hogshhead game, John Tynes' *Puppetland*. I would also appreciate any offers to review *Swords of the Middle Kingdom*. I really don't feel I can review this fairly, as I'm just too close to the subject matter. Moreover, if I review it you'll have to put up with a load of tedious pedantry about China, when all you probably want to know is whether it kicks ass. I'd like to give it a fair crack of the whip, so any takers?

Over the edge

Reviewed by Paul Mason

I know it's an old game, but since *Over The Edge* has become something of a quality watchword, I think it's worth taking a look at it. I'm reviewing here the 2nd Edition of the game, as well as the *Players' Reality Guide*, which has something that no other role-playing game has: a puff by Pete Stover on the back (taken from abortive UK fan/prozine *The Last Province*).

Starting at the beginning, physically these books are absolutely nothing to write home about. The covers, as you can see, are lacklustre pictures, though the main book is slightly better than the *Player's Guide* with its messy, semi-readable text. The latter is a design-free zone if ever there was one.

Inside, the game is perfectly readable, but again it's clear that there hasn't been a designer within several metres of the *Players' Guide*. The typography is extremely messy, and comes from the 'I've got Word so I don't need to bother learning how to lay out text properly' school of production. (Someone will no doubt tell me that the game was laid out with Quark XPress or Pagemaker—well yes, it's perfectly possible to produce inept typography and layout with these, too).



I only mention this because the game is so seminal, and because around the time *OTE* came out I was being told by Andrew Rilstone that my draft design for *Outlaws* was 'pedestrian' and out of touch with that of the marketplace. Too right it was—even in the crude form I presented it, it was ahead of this!

But these are quibbles based purely on presentation, and I'm supposed to be more interested in content, aren't I?

The content is indeed, despite Pete Stover's claim on the back of the *Player's Guide*, very well written. One of the most refreshing things about it is that it is blunt on some subjects that are often treated with caution. The disclaimers are hilarious, and the author writes in the *Player's Guide*: 'I included information for playing African PCs because too many US players are just too ignorant when it comes to that continent.'

The setting is the imaginary island of Al Amarja, and I'll come back to it later. Actually, there's little point in me saying much about it anyway, as one of the key points of the game is the keeping of 'secrets' both on the part of players and, especially, the GM. So yes, this is a contemporary-setting postmodern conspiracy game.

In fact, the game seems to go out of its way to get up my nose. The bibliography at the back of the *Player's Guide* looks like an extended cv for someone trying to get a job posing at parties saying 'Look how kewl I am!'. Now I'm not criticizing the material itself: I like Burroughs and Dick as much as the next droog. Actually I was surprised, but not impressed, to see *A Taxing Woman* in the list but not *A Clockwork Orange*, and I find the omission of that and *Angel Heart* in a game purportedly about 'surreal danger' absolutely baffling. The problem with the inspiration, however, is the way it points out the game's superficiality so clearly.

The game's 'culture' is modern US, even if the Al Amarja setting throws a few curve balls. Like setting it rather improbably in the Mediterranean, for one. And being a load of bollocks, for another. Really, Burroughs and the estate of Dick should sue.

Perhaps Jonathan Tweet is being ironic in his nationalistic ravings here (apparently all modern technology was created by the US: try telling that to the inventor of the computer, and the man who split the atom). However there are plenty of places in the book where he is ironic, and the styles just don't seem to match.

I'm reminded of the story Michael Moorcock told about trying to script a (never made) Arthurian movie for Irwin Kershner. Kershner made loads of noises about the movie being modern, and non-racist, and all kinds of stuff, but it slowly started to dawn on Moorcock that the words didn't match the actual wants: beneath all the PC posturing what Kershner wanted was a cod-medieval buddy movie. *Over The Edge* seems to be making a lot of hip noises about libertarian and anarchist political structures, and political control in general. Scrape beneath the surface, however, and it's just another chauvinistic libertarian tract.

Thus *Al Amarja* is (deliberately) a parody of the contemporary USA. That's USA in a North America which does not include Mexico (p43). Although *Al Amarja* is supposed to be cosmopolitan, and contain a multitude of value systems, in fact it's an MTV diversity—the only foreign elements in it are mere decorations. It's like the *D&D* character who carries a *katana* and pretends to be a *samurai*.

I recognise, however, that this particular dislike of Disneyfication marks me as something of an eccentric. I would probably be very happy if I felt that *Over The Edge* was parodying the eradication of the Other, but I confess I don't feel that.

As I mentioned earlier, William S. Burroughs and Phillip K. Dick are evoked as influences. Far more evident (though perhaps perceived as having less *cachet*) is the influence of Shea and Wilson's *Illuminatus!* trilogy. And the *X-Files*. In fact any old pile of nonsense involving conspiracies, psychic powers, magic, parasites and piles of gloop.

Despite the above, though, I believe that *O.T.E* probably does deserve its reputation. This is because it is an excellent example of a stripped-down rules system. I particularly admire the rules, because it is evident that the author started from a blank piece of paper and asked crucial questions: what *do* we need to know about a character? what is the best way of storing information about them?

There are none of the traditional attributes and skill system superstructures. Instead you just describe your character, limited by a particular number of 'slots'—for example, you have one 'central' trait and three 'side' traits. You also come up with entries in other categories which relate a character to the game story: motivation, background, an important person, and the inevitable secret.

The mechanics are phenomenally simple. Each of your traits has a number of dice associated with it. You also have some hit points. As far as numbers are concerned, that's pretty much it. The core mechanic is similarly simple: the GM assigns a difficulty number and tells you how many dice to roll (which will depend on your traits). If you roll more than the

number you succeed (equal to the number is a draw, obviously).

The author writes: 'This reliance on common sense over game mechanics frees you to role-play with vigor. Instead of trying to learn these rules and to devise ways to manipulate them to your best advantage, forget the rules and run your character naturally'.

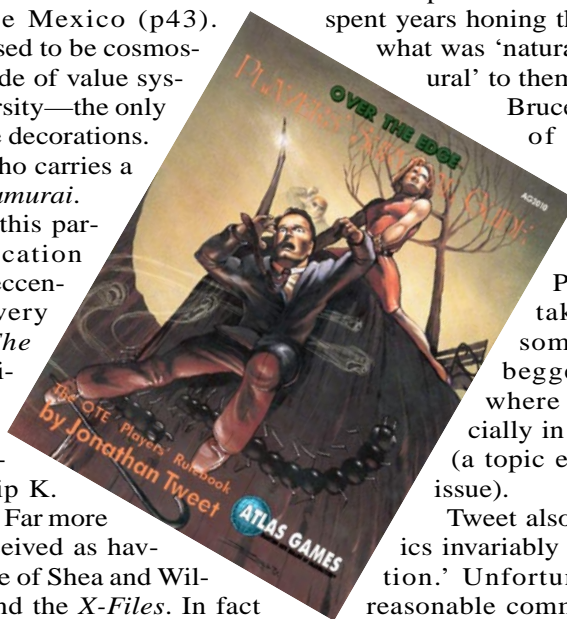
Truly, Jonathan Tweet is the Bruce Lee of role-playing design. The above quotation is based on a philosophy that is extremely popular in role-playing design. I agree with it to some extent, but I worry that those who follow it are making the same mistake as Lee. He urged *Jeet Kune Do* practitioners to be natural. The problem was that unlike him, they hadn't spent years honing their *Wing Chun* skills, and thus what was 'natural' to him was not quite as 'natural' to them!

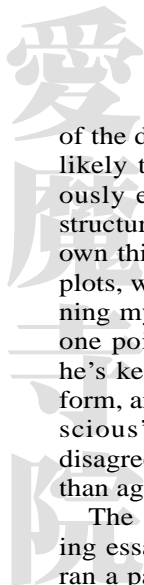
Bruce Lee was, whatever the failings of his teaching philosophy, a superb martial artist, and I would say that *Over The Edge* is a masterful example of this type of game (but see also Patrick Brady's *Mayhem* which takes similar approaches, with some neat quirks). The question begged by the game, however, is where this takes role-playing, especially in terms of the role of the referee (a topic explored in an article later this issue).

Tweet also comments: 'complex mechanics invariably channel and limit the imagination.' Unfortunately here he undermines a reasonable comment; indeed turns it into total bollocks. Would it really have hurt him so much to replace 'invariably' with 'usually'?

One of the most interesting sections of the book is the set of essays collected in the 'GM Rules' chapter. Here Tweet makes explicit the inevitable consequence of stripped down rules: that it is a godsend to referees who like to dominate and control the game, the *auteurs* that Dave Morris dubbed 'Thatchers'. He rather ironically sets the seal on this with an (uncredited) quotation from Gary Gygax: 'I roll those dice just for the sound they make' (p180). This, for me, was the quintessential Gygax quote, expressing perfectly the man's overweening will to power.

In contrast to this, however, Tweet has enlisted Robin D. Laws (author of *Feng Shui*) to put the case for player power. So we have something of a debate conducted in this chapter, a debate which has helped me finish the 'ere Ref! article that appears later this issue. The two propose two aspects of role-playing, the 'author' aspect and the 'artist' aspect. Tweet argues that placing players in the 'audience' role is better for suspense and secrecy, and also for player immersion in their character. Laws, on the other hand, suggests that 'the GM is not a "storyteller" with the players as audience, but merely a "first among equals" given responsibility for the smooth progress





of the developing story.' (p192) You can see that I'm likely to be sympathetic to Laws' approach. Curiously enough, he goes on to describe a means of structuring the game, allowing characters to do their own thing and cutting between them, while layering plots, which closely resembles the way I've been running my Outlaws game for the last year or two. The one point where I part company from Laws is that he's keen on this idea of role-playing being an art-form, and that we should be 'making the artistry conscious'. This, it has to be said, is a very minor disagreement on my part, and I'm far more with him than against him.

The 'GM Notes' chapter also contains an interesting essay in which Tweet walks us through how he ran a particular adventure, including his mistakes as well as his successes, explaining why he made the decisions he did. I felt that this was an excellent resource for an inexperienced referee, and is the sort of thing that should always appear in beginners games. Shame *OTE* isn't a beginners game...

I've been reviewing the *Player's Guide* as a bundle with the main game here because this is a good thing. Or maybe not so much 'good' as necessary. In a game based on secrets how do you <cynicism on> sell product to other players <cynicism off> or provide the rules to players who would like to see them? Thus the *Players' Guide* presents an expanded version of the first chapter of the main rules at a reasonable (one might even say 'Hogsheadian') price. I read the *Players' Guide* before I read the main book, and I have to say, it made me feel far more impressed by *OTE* than the main rules did! This was probably because there was less conspiracy nonsense, just a set of rules that reminded me of projects I considered running years ago.

You will probably have noticed a certain level of schizophrenia in my reaction to this game. On the one hand, it represents the epitome of the pseudo-post-modern game against which I have railed for so long. There's even a suggested plot which is self-reflexive: the player characters slowly discover that they are player characters in an *Over The Edge* game. Yawn.

Despite my dislikes of the background concept, and the unimpressiveness of the production, I must still recognise that this is a very good game. I can see why it has become the cult classic it has, and more importantly, I can see why so many people have advocated using the *Over The Edge* rules and philosophy divorced from Al Amarja. In fact Bruce Baugh, who indexed *OTE*, advocated on the Usenet using these rules to run a Judge Dee style Chinese game. He claimed that all he needed was *OTE* and Patricia Ebrey's *Chinese Civilization*. I'm sure he's right, but what he seemed to miss was that he was answering a question of how *someone else* could run a Judge Dee game, and his solution wasn't going to be much use to them. This is the crux of the *OTE* philosophy: improvisation and 'anything can happen'

are fine things, but are often the bedfellows of domination and vanilla-blandness. Or the sort of self-conscious artiness which leads to silly ideas like the Cut-Ups rules from the *OTE* supplement *Weather The Cuckoo Likes* (in which followers of one of the innumerable secret societies do things by pulling words from a hat and justifying their relevance to what they want to do).

One final point, though, which bears on a question I am often asked ('Why don't you do *Outlaws* for an established game system?'). The author of *OTE* is Jonathan Tweet. However the game and its setting are copyrighted by John Nephew. Now these two may be the best buddies in the world, but I still regard this habit of publishers stealing author's copyright as rather obscene, as well as being unnecessary, and it constitutes one reason why I wouldn't consider doing *Outlaws* as, say, a GURPS supplement (the shit royalty rates and the awfulness of the GURPS mechanics being other, compelling reasons).

Over The Edge: Players' Survival Guide, and *Over The Edge: The Role-Playing Game of Surreal Danger* are published by Atlas Games. Both can be ordered from Amazon.

Sorcerer

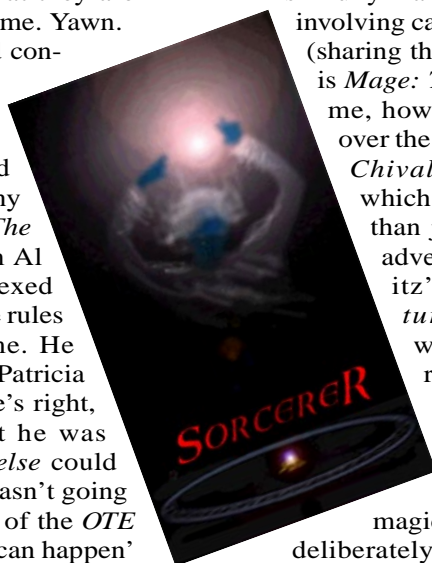
Reviewed by Paul Mason

Magic. It's a bit of a goose really isn't it.

Ever since everwhen, role-playing games have had magic in. It's part of the statutory EU composition of the genre, and in this age of genetically modified vegetables and growth hormone beef, let us not buck the trend.

But there are some shadows which loom over the whole genre. Commercially speaking, there is that skilfully marketed eponymous waste of time involving cards. A near relative in title terms (sharing the rather ludicrous word pattern) is *Mage: The Ascension*. For old lags like me, however, the shadows which loom over the world of magic are far older: the *Chivalry & Sorcery* magic system, which made of mages something more than just slot machine dispensers of adventurers' comforts, and Bonewitz's seminal *Authentic Thaumaturgy*, a fascinating document written by a real, live nutter (and recently published in a new edition by Steve Jackson Games).

Sorcerer is a shareware game which attempts to put a bit more interest back into magic from a slightly different tack. I deliberately place it in this position in the



zine because it is a post-*Over The Edge* game. The author is quite upfront about this influence, which is a healthy sign.

Although it isn't limited to this, *Sorcerer* is basically a contemporary game. The distinctive feature is that rather than presenting magic as a spell-list, it represents it purely in terms of summoning and binding demons. Old lags may recall that this was the approach taken in the old Chaosium *Stormbringer* game, and that game is namechecked here too.

In order to make this work as the entire foundation of the game, the details on demons have to be extremely flexible, and this game does succeed in allowing for a wide variety of situations, with extremely simple mechanics.

There are many refreshing elements to the game. Consider the following quote, for example: 'Sorcerer is a dice-based RPG. It doesn't matter what sort of dice are used, as long as they all have the same number of sides.' This may clue you in to the fact that it is, like *Over The Edge* and many other modern games, a dice-pool system. It is driven by a simple system of three attributes: stamina, will and lore. For each of these you must write a description which justifies (or interprets) the score being what it is.

You also have humanity points, which can be lost by morally charged acts, and the process of dealing with demons. When your humanity reaches zero, logically enough, you become an NPC.

The game takes this basic idea and provides a large number of ideas on how to make games out of it. It's really frustrating having a game lecturing you about how free you are to develop the concepts anyway you want. This, after all, is something you already know. *Sorcerer* keeps the lecturing down to a minimum, but instead provides numerous directions, way beyond the standard clichés.

Finally, I will just say that the game's presentation is no-frills, to say the least. It's perfectly readable, and the artwork is good, but won't be winning any design or typography awards in this or any other dimension.

Sorcerer was written by Ron Edwards. The Apprentice version of the game can be downloaded from: <http://www.sorcerer-rpg.com>, where you can also find details about ordering the full version.

tribe 8

Reviewed by Tom McGrenery

Several years ago, a small games company from Quebec called Dream Pod 9 released a game called *Heavy Gear*. It was based around anime-styled mecha—the Heavy Gears of the title—but with somewhat more hard science. The reviewer in *Dragon* hated it, which is, for many people, a huge recommendation. *Heavy Gear* was followed by *Jovian Chronicles*. Both games

featured mecha heavily in the background, both had artwork to die for, and both used a rather nifty rules set called Silhouette. Each book contained rules for a role-playing game *and* a war-game, with each using the Silhouette system, and easily integrated with the other. This was an interesting move, and developed quite a following.

The latest product from Dream Pod 9 departs from the previous games in that it is 'just' a role-playing game (that is, there is no war-game component). It also has very different artwork.

Tribe 8 is set at an undisclosed time in the future. Civilisation has been shattered by an alien invasion. The human population, having been put in concentration camps by these attackers, the Z'bri, were liberated by eight 'Fatimas', avatars of the Goddess, who fought back the Z'bri. One of these eight, Joshua, the only male Fatima, was killed at this time. Now, each of the seven living Fatimas rules over her own tribe, which is named after her. But the Fatimas have ceased to be benevolent protectors. Now, they are oppressive dictators. The tribes have been liberated, but they are not yet free. Those who do not obey the dictates of the Fatimas are made outcast, or Fallen. Their tribe's Fatima 'withdraws her love' from the Fallen, ostensibly stripping them of their magic, called Synthesis, and connection to the Goddess. Some Fallen, however, retain their use of Synthesis, which would seem to indicate that the Fatimas are not being entirely forthright.

The name Tribe 8, as well as being shared with a little-known rock group who will turn up whenever you search for the game on the Internet, refers to an 'eighth tribe', made up of the Fallen. The origins of this eighth tribe is with Joshua. He left a prophecy, which many Fallen believe unites them as a tribe, and gives them a destiny to overthrow the Fatimas to free the tribes. All player characters in *Tribe 8* are Fallen.

The setting described in *Tribe 8* is the island of Vimary, the home of the tribes. It is expected that most games will take place there, as only the Squats (those born outside the tribes) and the Z'bri live outside Vimary (and some within, too). It is implied in the book, though, that adventure further afield may be possible. It seems this idea may be developed further



by DP9, most likely just to sell more books. Inspection of the map of Vimary and of south-eastern Canada reveals that, more likely than not, Vimary is built on the ruins of Montreal (the name comes from 'Ville-Marie,' a part of Montreal).

In the east of the island live the Keepers, who hid underground during the time of the Z'bri and who hoard ancient relics. Like guns, for instance, or cars. Only Fallen characters are given character creation rules—I suspect Keeper PCs will turn up in a supplement—but it should be simple to create a Keeper if a player really wants firepower. They may be playing the wrong game, though.

A hundred and ten of the two hundred-odd pages in the book describe the world of *Tribe 8*, and contain no rules whatsoever. They are put at the front of the book. This is very good. The information is generally presented as memoirs of various characters, or correspondence, and the illustrations serve to make clear the text at various points. This section is excellently done. Through the stories which unfold in the voices of the 'writers' of each fragment, an overall picture is built up of Vimary before you even realise it. Even those things which are not true are valuable in understanding the game's setting.

A huge pat on the back should go to DP9 for the design of the Seven Tribes. Each of them has enough that a player, and thus their character, might partially identify with them, but the Fatimas and the tribal structure are just repulsive enough to prevent anyone actually wanting to be a member. Each tribe provides a character with two Eminences to choose from, which reflect their outlook on life, and thus in which areas they may be expected to do better than normal. An Eminence is also chosen upon a character's Fall. They can be used once per session to gain a bonus on an action, which is a fairly neat way of tying in some very basic personality mechanics with the game system proper.

The Tribes also provide the plot-sparking device of faction conflict, as well used in White Wolf games, for example. It seems unlikely that any of the 'clan stereotypes' which afflict *Vampire* will be present in *Tribe 8*, though, as none of the tribes' stereotypes, from the Evan nurse to the Sheban judge seems particularly appealing.

The standard Silhouette system is used, in which one rolls a number of D6s equal to the relevant skill level and count only the highest result. A modifier based on an attribute is added, and if more than one 6 is rolled, then additional 6s each add one to the result.

Clean, simple, and not suited to those keen on character advancement, as there are only four realistically obtainable levels of skill.

On the down side, *Tribe 8* can be inconsistent. It is at times too mysterious and then not mysterious enough, rendering the Z'bri, for example, about as frightening as something encountered in *AD&D*. Another problem is the spelling. It's awful. There are more typos in *Tribe 8* and its accompanying books than I've seen in *The Guardian* lately. Grammatical errors also creep in from time to time, though less frequently than spelling mistakes. Normally, I wouldn't mind this so much—there's nothing which makes a sentence unintelligible. But in a book that relies on atmosphere so heavily for its effect, breaking concentration in this way can spoil the enjoyment of reading to some extent.

In many ways, *Tribe 8* is refreshingly new. The innate mystery of its setting means that there is no need to buy any supplements to run the game properly. It's also nice to see a fantasy game with nothing approaching orcs and elves. It is a mix of post-apocalyptic and fantasy gaming, two genres I thought were dead in the water. I am very glad to see that this is not the case.

Tribe 8 is published by Dream Pod 9.

a magical medley

Reviewed by Paul Mason



I reviewed *Sorcerer* above, so keeping with the magical theme here's an interesting little morsel for you to consider. It's subtitled 'A Magic-Rich Supplement for FUDGE and Other RPGs,' and it is published by Grey Ghost, who publish the non-shareware version of FUDGE.

Now that we have a market full of role-playing games, and people are sick of seeing yet another system, it is common to hear people crying out for more generic supplements, and this book demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the idea. Along the way it also demonstrates the flexibility of FUDGE as a means of presenting gaming information that can be applied to other games.

The book opens with some general notes about how to apply its contents to 'other role-playing games'. The only one specifically mentioned is GURPS, and the book plugs *GURPS Magic* quite

generously. It's followed by notes on how to design your own magic system. The guidelines given here are very much in the FUDGE mold of 'toolbox' rather than 'prescription'.

The bulk of the book is given over to sections exploring magical traditions, and modelling them in FUDGE terms. There is African Spirit magic, Bioenergetics, Celtic magic, pseudo-medieval magic, occultism and Chinese magic (so you can see why I ordered it).

Although it is largely inevitable because each section is written by a different author, the most fascinating idea here is the way in which these approaches to magic differ. Indeed, in the introductory section explaining how to design a magic system, the book explicitly suggests the idea of having multiple magic systems to represent different traditions.

Thus the African Spirit Magic section details a magic in which pretty well all effects are produced by manipulating spirits (so this might be an interesting chapter to read in conjunction with the *Sorcerer* game reviewed earlier). Bioenergetics is really a means of reproducing slightly mystical psionics, like the Force from *Star Wars*.

I could really do with someone more learned in the subject to comment on the authenticity of the Celtic magic system (certain parts made me vaguely uneasy, but there was nothing specific enough to mention). As a magic system, though, it's interesting, with all spells being constructed on-the-fly by sorcerers (who learn general categories like 'Transformation' and 'Healing'). I associate this approach with a school of thought developed in *Alarums & Excursions*, and certainly Lee Gold's *Lands of Adventure* was the first published game I can recall employing it. I used it myself for a long while when the intricacies of C&S-derived systems seemed ill-matched to the simplicities of the rest of my game system.

Talking of C&S, 'The Grammar' is a chapter dealing with pseudo-medieval magic, and it bears a clear resemblance to both C&S magic, and the system used in the surprisingly good SPI rolegame, *Dragon-Quest* (like the latter, it uses the term 'colleges' to distinguish types of magic). Similarly, the Occultism chapter basically reproduces a *Call of Cthulhu* style magic system.

Obviously I was most interested in the Chinese system, and I was shocked and pleased in equal measure to see how closely it resembled what I've already done with *Outlaws*. Not that I'm suggesting plagiarism—although my game was up on the Web well before this was written, it seems highly improbable

that the authors might have seen it. Their system separates Buddhist and Taoist magic, includes spells divided according to the Five Elements, and has an attribute called 'Joss' which represents the character's oneness with the Tao.

Overall it's nice enough, and free from howlers. My main disagreement is the way they identify the non-Taoist or Buddhist practical magicians as 'Feng Shui men'. Not really a major objection, when all is said and done.

The book has a list of magic items, some of which are interesting because they are presented as stories, or have some mythic atmosphere, and the rest of which are tedious *D&D*-style items. It's then wrapped up with a selection of adventure seeds which provide examples of applications of the magic systems included. I wasn't too impressed with this. The Chinese adventure, especially, was weak (and the editor didn't bother to find a correct spelling for *jiangshi*). Basically it consists simply of 'A village is being menaced by a stiff corpse/hopping vampire'.

Overall, then, it's an interesting enough book, but I'm not entirely convinced it's worth the \$20 I paid for it. However it does demonstrate the possibilities that FUDGE offers for producing 'generic' material which nevertheless includes rules mechanics.

A Magical Medley is published by Grey Ghost Press, Inc, and can be ordered online from Amazon.

C&S Light

Mentioned by Paul Mason



I can't really review this for two reasons: firstly I don't yet have the finished version of the game, and secondly, because I'm putatively on the C&S team of writers (fingers crossed that I can get some momentum going on my project) I'm not in a position to give it an objective review.

However, I thought I should mention the game, as the mere title will no doubt strike many as an oxymoron. It demonstrates that the spirit of the age is short, reasonably-priced games, and that spirit has even affected the epitome of complexity: the venerable *Chivalry & Sorcery*.

Even in 'light' form, it's by no means a simple game, but is considerably stripped down from the 1st and 2nd editions, and it does correct some of the dodgier aspects of the Highlander 3rd Edition. For C&S is now published by a triumvirate

of companies, one of which is based in the UK. Somehow this seems 'right' to me. More on C&S in future issues.

magic moments

by Tom McGrenery

THE MYSTIC CONNECTION BETWEEN ROLE-PLAYING & MAGIC: WHY ARE WE ENSLAVED BY THE FANTASTICAL?

GO TO YOUR local shop that stocks RPGs, or just look at your bookshelves. Now, try and find one game there that doesn't feature something 'magical', like elves or wizards or vampires or psychic powers or Elder Gods which Man Should Not Ken. Doesn't leave much, does it? Probably all you have left is 'hard' SF like Cyberpunk or some obscure small press outing you picked up in a shop you stumbled across while on holiday. Why? Well, let's see.

The first ever RPG was a fantasy game. The fact that *Dungeons & Dragons* was about adventure in a magical world almost certainly is one of the major influences on the games that followed it. Exactly why greater identification with the lead figures in Chainmail came about in a fantasy game, rather than, say, a Napoleonic game, is hard to say. Perhaps it was because the designers were consciously trying to emulate novels rather than real life. War stories are easily as popular a form of literature as fantasy, but unlike them, the general kind of event depicted in fantasy novels does not occur in real life. Not to me, anyway. At any rate, to dwell on *D&D* would be fruitless as, while its influence is undeniable, it is not the be-all and the end-all. If it were, there would be no other genre RPGs.

genres

Shortly after *D&D*, many of its emulators were fantasy games—*Tunnels & Trolls*, for example—or, like *Traveller*, explored genres which are generally lumped in the same category, no matter how vociferously readers of SF attempt to disassociate themselves from those of fantasy. So, an evolution of gaming concepts, rather than revolutionary new ones, despite the claims of back-cover synopses, would logically lead to many games having a common element. This doesn't help much. There is no reason that someone familiar with the concept of role-playing would not choose an entirely different genre to work in, and indeed this has happened on more than one occasion. Such games, like *Gangster!*, died a death,

and the roleplaying market has learned not to be so impetuous in its production since. The answer, then, must lie not with the creators of games, but the buyers (and, by extension, players, though the two are not necessarily synonymous).

Fantasy and roleplaying have something in common that is at the core of both forms—escapism. While varied and valid arguments have been made for both RPGs and fantasy literature that places them at the same level as any other form of art, it is undeniable that books about worlds other than our own and games about pretending to be other people are not entirely grounded in reality. It has been argued that it is precisely this freedom of ideas that gives them their appeal. Still, roleplaying has often relied on enthusiasts of genres of film and literature to be drawn into the hobby by a game that models that style. The success of *Vampire: the Masquerade* almost certainly owes a debt to the success of Anne Rice's *Interview With The Vampire*, for example.

films

The vast array of popular arts outside roleplaying, though, rarely, if ever, has any fantastic content. Few fantasy films are even made, and science fiction rarely tops any most popular movies survey, though *Star Wars* is a notable exception. *Citizen Kane* is routinely voted the Greatest Film Of All Time, and before that it was usually Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. Both are based on fact, grounding them even further in reality. So what is wrong with the real world as a game setting? Essentially, nothing.

Arguments could be made that the introduction of the violence often seen in RPGs into a game world not substantially different from reality could cause the young or easily-influenced to entertain the possibilities of carrying that violence outside the game. Then again, similar complaints have been made against *AD&D*, and one would hope that roleplayers might be a little more responsible than that. Besides that, screen violence has marked differences between settings that would seem to be in favour of a 'realistic' setting. If we take, for example, the two stalwarts of *Star Wars* and *Battleship Potemkin*, the first as an example of fantasy, then we see that while large numbers of people are killed in both, it is seen as more of a bad thing in the latter.

One boon to role-playing in general if it were to adopt more popular genres as its subject matter would be perhaps to give it some more credibility. Picking



the *Dragonlance* trilogy as your favourite book is unlikely to win you as much esteem as choosing *Foucault's Pendulum*. Whether or not this is merely a snobbish fad is irrelevant. The end result is the same.

realism

So, why don't more contemporary-set games get published? It's nothing to do with the setting itself being unpopular—the real world is the most popular setting there is. One reason may be, simply, than in modelling reality one must be realistic. If you create a fantasy world, superior research to yours won't catch you out on the details—no one knows more about your world than you (unless you have *really* die-hard fans). With common knowledge, however, you have to actually know your stuff. With *In Nomine*, for example, Steve Jackson Games really messed up. Every single attempt at metaphysics or theology in the book was laughable. A severely misguided game background does a writer's credibility no favours. On the other hand, unless your game is to be about some field with which the man in the street will be largely unfamiliar (brain surgery, perhaps), then you don't *need* to write very much background—most people are quite familiar with their own planet.

And this, I feel, may well be where the problem lies—why *should* people pay good money for something they already know about? Then again, it's been asked why people pay for printed role-playing games at all, when they could just make them up. It's merely a matter of convenience.

escapism

Another argument against the real world as a game setting is the escapism I mentioned at the beginning, and which links role-playing with fantasy. It is the possibility of being completely disassociated from ordinary life that can bring a game to life. Yet escapism doesn't have to leave the planet. When I was in primary school, we didn't run around the playground playing *Wizards and Rogues* or even *Space Pirates*. We played *Cops and Robbers*. But, and I think this is the important part, we weren't encouraged to do so. It's considered quite odd (and for good reasons) for people to grow up still enjoying having pretend shoot-outs. Those who do may well join the Territorial Army.

Maybe that's the reason we like to add magic to our games. We don't actually want to have to think about such matters as 'Well, my character shot the evil scientist—would *I* do the same?' For some, that kind of thought is unwanted, and besides, there are plenty of other places in which to discuss such matters. It's worth noting that in that first game, *D&D*, one of the most important functions of magic was to heal wounds. If we have magic spells, or cantrips, or blood-powered disciplines, we don't need to worry about getting hurt—things can be made better. The phenomenon known as the power-gamer (as distinct from the 'munchkin', though precisely why midgets

should be combat monsters is beyond me) is commonly held to stem from this. The character has greater abilities and more power over the world around him than the player does in his world. The supernatural element, in this case, makes the character concerned *special* in some way.

However, many role-players play for the sake of assuming another persona. Why would *they* shy away from a 'realistic' game? A great many people enjoy character-driven dramas, as found in soap operas, yet no one would for a moment consider playing a soap-opera style game in a serious vein. Even to those would-be actors, the appeal seems to lie in playing not simply another character, but one who does something out of the ordinary—even those games which encompass such character concepts as physicists tend to have them concentrate on the physics of large Elder Gods. An interesting thing to study here may be the distinction between traditional (sometimes called 'table-top') rolegaming and the 'live-action' (or 'L(A)RP') variety. Social LARP games, as spread quite impressively by White Wolf's *Mind's Eye Theatre* rules, would seem to be an 'actor'-type (if I may take the liberty of calling them such) gamer's paradise. And in many ways, they are—they focus almost exclusively on inter-personal relationships, every character in the game is as fully fleshed-out as you might expect the average 'table-top' player character to be (though with exceptions, as with all things), simply because everyone present *is* an active player. However, there are some things thatLARPs don't handle well. Nasty combat wounds, for example (and, arguably, combat at all), or in fact any strenuous physical action, because the physical abilities of characters may surpass those of the players. Landscapes dissimilar to the local countryside are also far harder to evoke in LARP than in 'table-top' games.

adventure

It is evident from the preponderance of games with fantastic elements that, simply, people in general, and role-players in particular, want what they can't get. An adventurous lifestyle may be one of them. An adventurous lifestyle *and* the ability to throw fireballs is definitely unattainable. On the other hand, it is theoretically possible, however unlikely, for the players themselves to become maverick policemen, or to go searching for hidden gold in the Amazon rainforest. Is that it, then? We use roles that are completely impossible in order to make sure none of our imaginary actions impinge on our real lives? This impossibility of a fantasy world is often used as a defence against those who claim a corrupting influence in RPGs. But perhaps it would be better to bring imaginary actions in to the realms of possibility, and thus bring responsibility with it. Perhaps not—the lack of responsibility, and the freedom allowed by the games' format, seems to be, for most people, why rolegames are fun.

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ere ref!

by Paul Mason

DOING AWAY WITH THE GREAT
DICTATOR OF ROLE-PLAYING; IS IT
POSSIBLE TO HAVE A PLAYER-
ONLY GAME?

OVER THE past few issues of *imagine* I've been developing a rant, with much assistance from correspondents, based on a reasonably simple proposition. This is that the great creative contribution of role-playing is the way it frees us from the totalitarianism of Art. Art is consumption. We accept what the *auteur* bestows upon us, and this Author-Audience division is a source of alienation. In role-playing we adopt elements of both roles.

Into the midst of this rolling rant dropped Hogshead's *Baron Munchausen*. I perversely started going on about how it wasn't a role-playing game, a position I still hold. But there are some other useful points to be drawn from the game, and I want to tackle one of them here.

plot points

Last issue, in 'No Limits,' I described in passing how the introduction of the referee as an essential feature of the game experience enabled the development of role-playing. I also sketched how the role mutated from its wargaming origins. In the latter part of the article I identified the problems arising from the imposition of the plot on the players by the referee.

In *Baron Munchausen* there is no referee. Perhaps it is also significant that in *Baron Munchausen* there is also no plot, at least no single plot. At this point I will have to introduce some literary terms. Unfortunately (or perhaps, luckily) this is one of the most confused areas of terminology, with some people using 'plot' to mean what others call 'story', or what others call 'narrative'. One of the most interesting definitions is that of E M Forster:

Let us define a plot. We have defined story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but their sense of causality overshadows it.

While Forster's definitions of story and plot contradict those of numerous others, one idea that we can take from this definition is that, while role-playing games allow players to contribute to the sequence of events, when it comes to causality the referee tends to be dominant. Players can influence the details of *what* happens, but the referee controls the *why*.

I mentioned that the above definitions of story and plot are by no means the only ones, so I'm going to fling at you the only stable terms in the whole mess, namely *fabula* and *sjuzet*. The former refers to 'a series of real or fictitious events, connected by a certain logic or chronology, and involving certain actors [characters]' while the latter refers to the 'narration of this series of events.'

You will see that *fabula* corresponds to Forster's 'plot', while *sjuzet* is something else again: something which is often referred to as the 'narrative'.

The nature of narration is one of the biggest subjects in the field of literature, and it should be immediately obvious that this bears on the whole issue of plot and freedom in games. Think of a typical role-playing session. How is it narrated? Actually, you will realise, it is related in quite a complex manner, with no obvious authorial presence. Well, none save the referee, that is. Yet even in the most highly Thatched game, the *sjuzet* is by no means a single voice relating events from a single perspective.

Moreover, where does the *fabula* come from? Again, the amount varies depending on the Thatcher-esque tendencies of the referee, but in general, it will be generated by a synthesis of ideas from all the participants. Unfortunately, *auteur* theory has a lot of pull, and according to *auteur* theory, a creative work cannot be art, and therefore cannot be any good, unless it is subject to authorial control. A plot must be crafted: the author or referee must be in control of the causality. As you know by now, I reject this position for role-playing games.

baron bones

And yet, my role-playing game still has a referee (me, at present). Seeing the referee-less model presented in *Baron Munchausen* made me wonder if it wasn't possible to take my position to its logical extreme—the abolition of the referee—*without* abandoning the concept of a *fabula*. In that game, there is no *fabula* save the conceit of a group of nobles gathered in a drinking establishment and swapping tall tales. There are, it is true, a set of framed narratives, Chinese boxes, related by the participants. But these narratives

are not connected by any logic other than the necessity of the game, and do not feature the same characters—unless the players of the game contrive to make them do so (something which is unnecessary, as the game is written). While the questions are framed as ‘Tell me, Baron...’ and so the implication that the protagonist is the same person, in fact there is no continuity in any but the most trivial sense. There is no causality between the narratives, so what we have is only a highly developed *sjuzet*.

It should also be obvious that, apart from the stimulation and intervention provided by other participants, the narratives in *Baron Munchausen* follow a solidly traditional line, pretty much in keeping with *auteur* theory. I’ve recently been reading a little about the storytellers of China, and it is evident that many of their sessions were conducted in the *Baron Munchausen* style, with audience intervention and challenges, the movement of money, and the consumption of alcohol. The principal innovation of *Baron Munchausen* is that everybody takes it in turns to be the *auteur*. Oh, and the money doesn’t really matter.

relegated ref

So let’s look again at this idea of putting the ref out of a job. It’s by no means a new idea. Just as diceless games preceded *Amber* by a decade, this one has been tried many times, and, some might say, spawned whole other hobbies. Much of the field of interactive literature operates this way, and some might say that the role of referees in LARPs is often different to that of traditional RPGs, and that the LARPs themselves are effectively refereeless in many places. Then there is the whole field of MUDs.

What is the importance of the referee, and how can we keep a tight hold on that baby’s bumfluff as we pull the plug on refs around the world?

As I mentioned last issue, the referee role that was inherited from wargaming was that of rule arbiter. If the experience of the last twenty or so years has demonstrated anything, it has shown that this particular role isn’t always necessary. Ironically, though, it should be clear that ‘hip’, ‘modern’ games like *Over The Edge* and *Feng Shui* are the ones which most rely on the presence of the referee as arbiter, because the rules eschew the apparent structure of older sets for a more interpretive approach. The ‘looser’ the rules, the more likelihood of disagreements arising from differing interpretations of what the rules mean.

Defenders of these games suggest that the above isn’t true so long as all the players really care about a good game, and are prepared to be creative and absolutely tolerant. This isn’t really a defence. For a start, such a situation is rather unusual: I’ve never encountered it. Whether you agree with Steve Jessop’s approach in the last issue’s article or not, you have to accept that he identified quite accurately the ‘optimising’ mentality that lies behind many peoples’ approach to role-playing games. Why should talented, thoughtful role-players cheat with their dice

rolls? While it’s hard to come up with an explanation, the fact is that some do.

Moreover, and this is probably rather contentious, I think a slight element of tension between players is actually healthy for a game. I’m not advocating *Paranoia*-style backstabbing and competition. It’s just that some of the more interesting moments in the role-playing games I’ve experienced have come about as a result of an element of friction between *players*.

Baron Munchausen solves the problem by providing a highly structured method of *play* rather than structure in the rules. On second thoughts, perhaps they are the same thing. The rules *are* highly structured in that they provide a simple resolution method for precisely this problem: how to handle player interaction. The model works as follows: players take it in turns to be god. While one player is god, other players can be tricksters. The interaction between god and tricksters is handled according to a simple set of mechanics allowing tricksters to disrupt the god’s *sjuzet* with *challenges*. A red herring victory condition is set up towards which one may direct one’s competitive urges (and the rules are structured in such a way that doing so is likely to enhance the pleasure of the game for all). Yet the game, and the game’s author, make plain that this ‘victory’ is not the point at all. It does, however, introduce the element of tension between players that I mentioned above, a tension that is not in any way incompatible with cooperation in order to have a good time.

The result is a set of interrupted narratives. They are interactive in the sense that any interrupted narrative is interactive. This includes the Chinese storytelling to which I referred earlier, gamebooks, improvisational comedy, or even good old English pantomime. So perhaps it is necessary to stipulate a more rigorous level of interaction, one that seems to be important to my enjoyment of role-playing: *joint-creation*. I would define this as a method whereby both the *fabula* and the *sjuzet* are fully shared and distributed, and causality is open to all.

player power

How are the *fabula* and the *sjuzet* shared and distributed in a traditional rolegame? Leaving aside the extremes, the majority of the events arise as a result of the referee’s creation, and are resolved according to the characters’ responses. The logic by which events are connected is either ignored (the connection is simply that they happen to the same actors) or the result of the referee, or less frequently the players, deriving the inspiration for new events from the consequences of previous ones.

The first step in removing the referee is to share responsibility for the *fabula*, and this is effectively the topic I’ve been addressing in previous articles. Rather than events and causality being imposed on the game by the referee, they should arise naturally out of the actions of the characters, and those of the world, and the interactions between these.



Here, though, we have the problem. If we abolish the referee, what happens to the rest of the world? What happens to all the people who aren't the player characters? What about nature? For in addition to a role as rules arbiter, the referee became the personification of 'the world' in most games: the living embodiment both of its physical characteristics, and its inhabitants other than the player characters.

There are a number of possible solutions to this problem. The most obvious involve what basically amounts to tag-refereeing. Players take it in turns to be referee. The may be done from game session to game session, or within the game session by some agreed mechanism.

Problems which arise at this point include those of logistics and surprise. If refereeing duties are shared in quite such an even-handed way, it becomes very hard to deal with non-player characters, as they'll be interpreted by different players. Very post-modern and disorientating! In previous *imazines* I've ranted about the tendency towards games with a self-reflexive element (this includes *Baron Munchausen*, coincidentally), something which characterises modernist and post-modernist styles of literature. I still don't believe that there's much point in stressing the fictionality of role-playing.

Planning a game in this style would be very difficult: it would have to be mostly improvised. There's nothing wrong with highly improvised games, but to work successfully they usually have to be set in a very familiar milieu.

Baron Munchausen, of course, is a form of tag-refereeing, and is highly improvised. It goes beyond this, though, because in it players take it in turns not only to be the referee, but to be all the player characters at the same time. The contribution of other players can be likened to that of rules and dice in a traditional rolegame.

These problems can be reduced by applying a little thought to how the 'refereeing duties' are shared. While it may seem attractive to assign refereeing duties according to the presence or otherwise of the particular player's character, it might be preferable to take a leaf out of the way many 'open' *D&D* games were run in the old days. Divide up the area of the game, and the major non-player characters, and dish them out among the players. This way, players will have to negotiate with each other out-of-game about important interactions between their areas of control, and of their non-player characters with other players' non-player characters. Properly handled, though, this could lead to a whole extra level of game experience.

A logical derivative of the above approach would be to explode the rigid structure of the *party*. This has been suggested many times in role-playing, but the party remains resilient because, when it comes down to it, role-playing is a group activity. If we distribute referee powers among players, however, we find that we have a structure which actually works even better for single protagonists (which, let's face it, is the dominant form in most other types of fiction). One player is the session's protagonist, and all the other

players control a large number of non-player characters, as well as elements of the world. If you've ever run with multiple referees you'll be aware of how this could work. The trick would be to make sure each ref-player had reasonably clearly defined areas of responsibility without limiting plot options.

Shared *sjuzet*

The ideas presented above should make it clear that the most fundamental problem to be faced in abolishing the referee is not a *fabula* based one, but derives from the *sjuzet*. How is the game narrated? How is the game actually conducted?

I think the single-player, multiple-ref suggestion above is one of the easiest solutions to the problem, mainly because it resembles a traditional game in many ways. All it would need would be a little thought about how a session should be prepared and conducted. The single player would set the ball rolling by establishing a potential plot: in its simplest terms a goal for their character. The ref-players could then go off and make up the essential points relating to this. Once they had divided up the NPCs involved (and perhaps established simple protocols on how 'spontaneous' non-player characters would be handled) they could start playing. The single player would announce their actions, and the ref-players would then respond, mostly through the medium of their non-player characters (somehow that term doesn't seem appropriate), but also with the usual description of scenery and so on which characterises a typical game.

I think a game like this has a lot of potential, especially if there is a little tension between the ref-players. If nothing else, it would make for an interesting experiment.

But I clearly haven't entirely got rid of the referee in this new structure. I've actually proliferated the refs, though I would argue that dividing the job among a number of people prevents any one of them from exercising the dictatorial power available to a traditional referee.

An alternative derives from my article of last issue. You can limit the scope of the game so that it doesn't involve any non-player characters, and so that locations aren't really that important. This might work for the occasional oddball game of *Amber*, I suspect, but wouldn't sustain a long-running game.

rigid roles

Following the above in various directions also brings us back to *Baron Munchausen*, and James Wallis's claim that it is a role-playing game, but not a 'character-playing game.' While this was actually little more than a piece of sophistry designed to defend an indefensible position, it does direct us to think about these words 'role' and 'character'. The traditional definition of role-playing is based on the idea that a player 'plays' the role of a character, and the word 'play' can be understood as being more or less



analogous to acting. A problematic element of this definition is introduced by the referee. Is the referee role-playing? If yes, and playing an array of non-player characters can be considered role-playing, then why shouldn't players have their own battery of characters? Indeed, why shouldn't each player have their own world to play?

Things got even more complex when people started messing around with the basic concept of one-player, one-character, and taking it in new directions. In terms of published games with which you might be familiar, there was *Ars Magica*, with its 'troupe' play, for example, and *Wraith*, with each player controlling the 'shadow' of another player's character. Ideas like these, and others besides, had been knocking around for years, of course. But they do complicate that simple definition of role-playing. Hence *Baron Munchausen*, a game which involves no more role-playing than I used to do when writing a *Fighting Fantasy* book. I was telling a story, sure, and I was imagining what characters would do, and trying to see things from their perspective. So was I playing a role-playing game when writing my FF books? Was I bollocks!

This doesn't mean, however, that I am advocating a One True Way of gaming in which players must take a single character. I don't do it in my own game, for starters. On the other hand, identifying what constitutes role-playing may reveal not only the borders of the definition (the old chestnut about *Monopoly* being a role-playing game has been done to death). I think it also demonstrates what we're up against in trying to remove the referee from our games.

player paradox

The term 'role-playing', as everyone knows, is used in a number of different fields, and it is very easy to drag a usage from a different field to attack any proposed definition relating to games. I'll try to limit myself to role-playing in a game-related sense. But I think, and here I'll draw on *Over The Edge* to help, that role-playing involves *identification* with a character. Players identify with their characters at different levels, from full immersion (speaking 'as' the character, first person identification) to a more distant control. These levels intersect with, but are not identical to, the Artist-Audience dichotomy identified by Jonathan Tweet in *Over The Edge*.

Whatever the nature of the identification, however, it is clearly meaningless to dub *any* game, or activity, in which we experience some slight identification as role-playing. This definition would encompass just about every game ever made, as well as most of our daily activities! To be role-playing, there has to be some focus on the idea of (pardon my triteness) 'playing a role'. Telling a story, while it may form part of the role-playing experience, is a defining characteristic of (again, pardon my triteness) storytelling games, not role-playing games.

So even though I wouldn't push for immersion, or identification at the very least, as the be all and end all

of role-playing, I would argue that they have to be dominant for a game to reasonably be considered a role-playing game. *Diplomacy* involves a tremendous amount of the sort of thing that happens in many role-playing games. It isn't a role-playing game, however, because the participants are not identifying with someone else.

On the other hand, no definition of 'role-playing game' that I've heard relies on the presence, or defines the role, of the referee.

Jerry Japes

All of which brings me to a rather indeterminate conclusion. I'd be interested in readers' suggestions for any other possible means of removing the referee. In the meantime it has occurred to me to go back to an idea I had over a decade ago, at the time Games Workshop allegedly acquired a license to make rolegames of all of Michael Moorcock's works. I started planning a Jerry Cornelius game, and reading *Over The Edge* recently brought it back to me. However much I dislike the background, *O.T.E.* is going for very much the same sort of radical, surreal feel that I was aiming at.

One idea that I had with the Jerry Cornelius game was to try to represent one of the stranger characteristics of the books: the way the characters seem to be wresting the script away from each other all the time. One moment one of them seems to be running the show, but the next moment one of the others has grabbed it.

My solution to this (and also a means of modifying the traditional role of the referee) was that the players would write the scenario. Or at least, they would write parts of it. Each would write up a series of locations, plots etc, perhaps involving their own character. The referee would then collect these together and run the scenario from them. Thus there would be times when a player had the sort of grasp of the plot that characters in the JC books had—for the simple reason that the player had written that section!

I think this approach would still work, and could perhaps be done with *O.T.E.* rules. With a little thought, it might even be possible to run a Jerry Cornelius game without the referee, as suggested earlier, but with players taking over refereeing duties as appropriate. It might be possible to come up with a mechanic to deal with the transitions (in the way that *Baron Munchausen* did), and I offer that as a project for readers. I'm not certain that a mechanic is the best solution, but I'm prepared to be convinced.

What this does suggest, however, is that only certain types of setting are likely to lend themselves to a refereeless game. The traditional party of adventurers, however attached to it we may be for reasons of nostalgia, and the way it suits current styles of play, may well be the greatest obstacle to development of new forms of role-playing.

Anyone out there ever tried a game without a referee? Any players of *Baron Munchausen* want to explore its possible implications? ▲

Outlaws LIGHT ①

HERE IN ONE PAGE—THE ‘BOT-TOM FLAT’ ROLE-PLAYING SYSTEM THAT DRIVES OUTLAWS

WE’VE SEEN all kinds of cut down systems, from *GURPS Lite* to *C&S Light*. It would be enough to bring a smug grin to the faces of all those *Over The Edge* fans, if there weren’t one there already. Well, ever ready to jump on a bandwagon, here’s a one-page role-playing system explained in levels of complexity. You can add complexity by adding a new level. It’s possible to run a game with just level 1.

Like all core systems, it’s a task resolution system. Although it is designed for *Outlaws* it can be used for other games, such as *Empire of the Petal Throne* (and indeed was, in prototype form, by Gail Baker). Next issue I’ll present an alternative *Outlaws Light* ② which instead focuses on how you conduct the game.

Level 1

DESCRIBING CHARACTERS: Write down what your character is like. Then go through and write a bonus number for each area in which they differ from the average. The number can be positive or negative to indicate aptitude or ineptitude, and can range from 1 to 5 (though most areas should be 1 or 2). If you aren’t ‘mature’, then you might want to agree some numerical limits with the referee.

THE DICE MECHANIC: Actions range from very difficult (1) to very easy (10). To succeed at a task, add any relevant character bonuses to this value to get a *Chance of Success*. If the result is over ten, you don’t need to roll the dice—you’ve succeeded. Otherwise roll, and if you get less than or equal to the *Chance of Success* you have succeeded.

OPPOSED ROLLS: If two characters’ actions are opposed, the character with the highest successful roll wins.

Level 2

QUALITY OF SUCCESS: If you succeed at a task, then the higher of the two dice rolled indicates how well you succeeded, again on a scale of 1 to 10. If you rolled a double, you can add the dice together (except for a snake-eyes double one).

PHYSICAL LIMITS: Your character has a **body** score, which indicates how much physical damage they can take before they are fatally injured. Your character

has an **energy** score, which indicates how much fatigue or shock damage they can suffer before being stunned. The **energy** score is also the maximum number of bonus points that can be applied to a given task at one time.

SPECIAL EFFORT: If you have a *Chance of Success* over ten you can roll to try to get a higher quality of success (if you don’t roll it’s automatically 4). A double six indicates failure, any other roll is a success, and you can add to the higher die the number of points by which your *Chance of Success* exceeded 10 (this means you can’t get doubles).

Level 3

TECHNICAL TASKS: Certain tasks are very difficult if you aren’t trained at them. A character attempting one of these tasks without a bonus that indicates training suffers a penalty of -2.

COMBAT: The ease of fighting depends on what weapon you are using. A basic combat weapon (a sword) has an ease of 8. Other weapons can be represented as follows: for each reduction of 1 in this ease, you get a bonus of +1 to either damage or protection. An exception is unarmed fighting, which has an ease of 7, -1 damage and -2 protection.

Combatants make opposed rolls. The higher successful roll inflicts the degree of success as damage. A lower successful roll subtracts its degree of success from the damage (this is called protection).

For standard weapons, the first 2 points of damage reduce **energy**. The rest reduces **body**. For impaling weapons only the first point reduces **energy**. For crushing weapons the first 3 points, and for unarmed, the first 4 points.

SNAKE EYES: While a roll of double six is always a failure, which usually means something bad, a roll of double one is a success, but one which involves some bad luck. The degree of success is 1.

Level 4

APTITUDES & SKILLS: Abilities can be divided into aptitudes the character was born with, and skills that have been acquired. While this may resemble the traditional characteristics/skills divide, that’s not how I use it. It should be possible to have both an aptitude and a skill for most abilities.

BELLS & WHISTLES: Everything else on top of the above counts as bells and whistles. Having established a basic core system, it should be possible to develop a superstructure for handling any eventuality.

colloquy

Letters to the editor

AS YOU might expect, the relatively short time between imazines (in other words, I seem to have fallen back into a quarterly schedule) has choked off a certain amount of feedback. I've still received a reasonable amount, and I also have an opportunity to include some letters that were left out of last issue owing to personal incompetence on my part.

Comments by me are indented, and preceded by that bloody annoying, ubiquitous ▲.

reactions

Tom McGrenery

Issue 32 was adequate. Only joking, I liked it, at least partially because I was in it, obviously, but nonetheless...

▲ This could be a new imazine catchphrase, along the lines of lovely Alan R Merrett's 'WAKE UP MASON!' which spawned a horde of imitators back in the old days, including the hit song 'WAKE UP BOO!' by the Boo Radleys. And look what happened to them!

Viktor Haag

Did you notice that the number in the big watermark on the front page was actually '31' not '32'?

▲ Er... give me a moment to think up an excuse for that one.

Rob Alexander

Imazine, the freely-distributable document of the gods. Many a day have I spent beneath the shade of an apple tree wondering at its radiance and ability to please. I wear gloves to read it, lest I should smudge the lettering and thereby despoil it, forcing me to beat myself with a yew branch. Again.

▲ Nah—I think 'adequate' has more of a ring to it...

Tom McGrenery

'Ye Olde Inn' was a surprise, being more the sort of thing I would have expected to see in *Arcane*, but the imazine tone came back with a vengeance for Punk RPG, so that was all right.

▲ *Arcane*? Punk? Now there's a thought. Yes, the '31' watermark on the cover (later corrected in the

online version) was a deliberate punk homage to *Arcane*'s cock-ups, a post-modernist questioning of the straitjacket of sequential numbering convention. Yeah, that sounds like an imazine sort of an excuse.

Rob Alexander

Issue 32 was very good (see that, that's me being positive that is). I've long shared the opinion you espouse in the Punk RPG article, even if I do struggle with it in practice. As you say you used to be, I'm often disappointed with amateur stuff. Perhaps it's my prize skill in action, or rather inaction—I read, I think, I maybe talk—but bugger do I do. The wonder is in the doing. In the middle of a game a tattered bit of paper is all you need.

Robert Irwin

Good issue—possibly the best ever (no less).

▲ Well, as long as it was adequate.

Tim Harford

I must say that imazine looks great: I know that I'm supposed to pretend that the appearance of the magazine is superficial, but we all know it's important. All your readers are lucky that you take so much pride in imazine's appearance—keep up the good work.

▲ It's always nice to get nice things said about the appearance of the zine just as I redesign it. Actually, of course, imazine is lashed together pretty much as haphazardly as it always was. If it looks OK then it's just because I follow a very simple set of rather conservative design rules. I still can't draw a straight line to save my life, though...

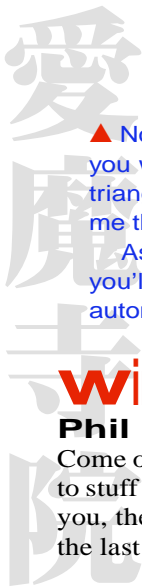
Paul Watson

Since I got my name mentioned in imazine three times in one issue does that mean I'm now part of the Hooby Quiche? Where do I pick up my membership badge?

▲ The Hooby Quiche? What might that be then? Some amusing wheeze invented by culinary role-players in times gone by?

Tom McGrenery

Oh yes, any chance of getting those little arrows at the end of each bit back on the PDF? They were very handy.



▲ Now you've got handy little triangles to click on if you want to. One of them is a secret prize-winning triangle: click on it to reveal the code word, email me the code word and you could win £5000!

As for navigation, try clicking on the text, and you'll find it is sorted into articles, which Acrobat automatically scrolls for you.

Winners

Phil Ferris

Come on Steve, we all know winning is when you get to stuff the character of the guy sitting two down from you, the guy who has been trying to wind you up for the last hour.

Dave Morris

I assume that the article about winning was a new spoof along the same lines as the ecology of the Piercer? 'Characters' actions need to maximize their chance of success... So wherever possible they should... hit a bad situation hard, and don't let up until you're done.' Every single character should always behave like that? Plus, what did the article say that wasn't said adequately by the last two sentences?

▲ Most articles can be adequately summarised by their last two sentences. I think it is interesting that there is a culture of 'co-operation' surrounding role-playing, and yet many participants clearly actually conduct themselves according to the principles outlined in Steve's article. It's very difficult to deliberately play a 'loser' character, and it happens less often than you seem to be suggesting. Most player characters seem to be acting according to scripts which identify them as winners in some way (even if they don't actually succeed).

Robert Irwin

"If everyone has fun, then everyone has won." Frankly, that's just not good enough.

To which I reply, WHY??? It works for me, and the article hasn't disillusioned me of my quaint old notion. There follows the dodgy definition of winning as achieving 'a set of predefined goals'. I sincerely hope that the majority of people have a more dynamic personality than this. Take a 'real life' example of my career—I started off training as a graphic designer and got fed up with the lack of money, so have drifted off into the hazy world of middle management. Have I won or lost?

'Winning' in life is better described by the saying you'll commonly hear 'Are you winning?'. This isn't a yes/no question, it is a reflection of your outlook on how you are actually getting on.

Another quote: 'We can also assume that the characters know a bit about reality, and that this is partly accounted for by the player's knowledge of the game system. Provided the system is reasonable, then if you know that swords potentially do more damage than shotguns, using a sword is not "rules-hacking"—it's a sensible character looking at his option...'

WTF is this all about? The example above is a blatant abuse of rules to flaunt common sense. If we ever end up having a duel to decide this argument, I'll have the pump-action, OK?

Tim Harford

Steve Jessop certainly lives up to the billing you give Oxford role players by divertingly saying nothing for far too long and finishing by being absurd and then trite. Leave aside the fact that anyone who takes time out to comment that role-playing is really all about having fun should be given a sound drubbing (and I know where Steve lives).

Steve suggests that the numbers on a character sheet are a complex set of constraints within which the player should struggle for optimisation. He's not happy with players who seem to waste the potential of the numbers by all kinds of dangerous dicking about 'in character.' In one article we're back in the land of multi-classed fighter-clerics and Method V. I know there's a 70s revival on, Steve, but this is taking things too far.

Steve's complaint—although he never comes out and says so—is about players who seem to deliberately screw things up. The problem with 'loser' role-players is not that their characters have personality traits that are awkward. It's that the player views those traits in an authorial manner.

As an example, consider a player whose character is supposed to be very impulsive, watching the action carefully and thoughtfully for an opportunity to be impulsive.

No wonder everyone gets wound up.

Steve's antidote is that the player should play to win, watching the action carefully and thoughtfully for an opportunity to be successful.

That's just as bad.

The point is that players shouldn't be watching the action carefully and thoughtfully at all: they should be right in the thick of the fray, neither ignoring the fictional persona nor trying to simulate it, but trying to live it.

▲ So say those of us who are interested in an immersive approach to the act of role-playing a character, anyway. The problem comes, I think, in assuming that this is the only approach. If I am to rail against White Wolf and others for the way they appear to consider role-playing 'storytelling' and very little else, then it is hardly reasonable of me to disport myself as if role-playing *must* be done immersively.

I mean, just look at the flak I get over my comments about a certain excellent and reasonably-priced British roleplaying game.

Tim Harford

I quite agree with Paul's proposal that games should be well described beforehand, and characters chosen to fit. Having started like this, the players shouldn't try to help the referee out by sacrificing the character conception to jolly along (what he thinks is) the plot.



This kind of 'help' is worse than willfully destructive play to any ref worth his salt. If the world's interesting and the characters are interesting, we'll all have fun.

Steve's article comes from the same direction as the frantic parent at a children's party running around trying to make the kids enjoy themselves. Put your party hat on and join in, or leave us all alone...

▲ The 'purity of the character concept' argument has a long and venerable history, and perhaps because of this, I am slightly suspicious of it. I certainly agree that players shouldn't try to jolly along the plot, but there are times when a loose interpretation of the character may be in order. But maybe I'm only saying that to justify myself being lily-livered on the occasions when my character *should* have killed a fellow player's character, but I found a way to avoid it?

Phil Nicholls

Steve Jessop's piece on winning was just the type of article that makes me want to play in an epic campaign where I can explore an exciting world. As a GM at the moment, however, it left me with the feeling that some of my players may not actually want the type of game that is advocated by Steve. I suppose the very essence of role-playing is that groups can play exactly the sort of game that they want. This is fair enough, but the conflict arises when some of the players want one style of game that they do not want, it can become frustrating when the players simply do not want to play the sort of game that the GM wants to run. I suppose that I am making my players out to be awkward, which is unfair. It is quite possible that they are happy enough to allow the active players to dominate, thereby entertaining them. There is usually plenty of laughter on a gaming night, so things cannot be quite so bad. Perhaps I should distribute copies of *imagine* and see if that would encourage them to be a little more active.

▲ Naturally I would be very happy for you (and any other referees who are reading) to distribute copies of the zine among your players. Remember: it's freeware. Feel free to photocopy, pass it round, distribute the file or whatever.

inn praise

Dave Morris

Bill Hoad's article, on the other hand, was excellent. (It's almost as if *Mythago* had finally started up, only 11 issues late...!)

▲ Somehow that seems appropriate...

Robert Irwin

Some good ideas in there. Another practical article in *imagine*—what is the world coming to?

▲ An end, if the latest news from Kosovo is anything to go by... Whatever the reputation of *imagine*

may be, I am perfectly happy to print 'background' material and practical articles—and even, as issue 31 demonstrated, scenarios. The limit, for me, is the sort of 'Great Little Earners For Clerics' style articles that appear in prozines, which take some silly element of the *AD&D* approach to role-playing, and treat it with utmost seriousness and a totally 20th century US worldview.

ponk ruck

Tom Zunder

Loved the punk rpg article. I like that punk 'I know it all and I'm gonna pretend not to give a fuck' approach to zines. It's a pose, but it's refreshingly iconoclastic. Of course the deep and meaningful stuff is a bit hippy, but of course we all changed from punks to hippies and ended listening to the Doors, T-Rex and the Mission. Well not too much of the Mission, that was a bit proto-Vampyre: TheMunchkinAid

▲ The modern generation, of course, has Marilyn Manson to serve as a dire warning of the perils of Gothdom. If that doesn't work, they should perhaps be forced to watch the revived Fields of the Nephilim. But who am I to carp? After all, I saw Bauhaus in '83.

Robert Irwin

Interesting, but I'm not sure it is really relevant any more. I don't have financial figures but I would doubt if the RPG industry is worth half what it was 15 years ago. The idea of the published scenario seems to be on the way out, with the new games instead giving sourcebooks for background. While I find even that distasteful, my experience is that the hobby is moving in the 'right' (cough) direction.

▲ It wouldn't be the first time *imagine* has been irrelevant, and it wouldn't be the last. As for the hobby moving in the 'right' direction, I thought that was exactly what the article was about!

hogtied

Dave Morris

James is justified in doing anything that will sell him extra copies and yank attention away from nihilistic vampire poseur games. I'm just surprised that the role-playing label is much of a cachet these days—James, you should have called it 'The panel game that didn't quite get onto the BBC.'

Tom McGrenery

If there's anything bad about this issue, it's the way you keep sniping at that Wallis character. Once or twice, okay, but by the end of the zine, I was starting to feel sorry for him. I know there are some positive comments in there as well, but perhaps you could lay off him a bit.

It was certainly interesting to read his words in the Colloquy. I agree with many of the things he said,



too—the arrival of the *Men in Black* RPG left me overjoyed, I can tell you, at its startling originality and value for money.

▲ I guess I'm just cynical. To me it's hardly a revelation to say that RPGs are overpriced and unadventurous. They've always been that way, with the odd exception. I obviously didn't make it clear enough, but I do feel that *Baron Munchausen* clearly fits into the category of 'exception'.

Dave Morris

The fact that James seems to be bored with actually playing RPGs doesn't, of course, invalidate his argument that they have become fat and complacent. (Much like many of their former authors, sadly.) Currently there's a little bit of a debate on the Tekumel mailing list about which system is best. Some people like *GURPS*, the loonies like *Gardasiyal*, others favour *RuneQuest*, a few even advocate my own *Tirikelu* rules. But all of these are the same old same old, just like James says. I'm interested by the fact that, after writing *Tirikelu* and getting it out of my system by playing it for six years, I designed a 3-page system for Tekumel called 'Skein of Destiny' which was perfectly adequate. It even had the virtue of being based on Tsolyani metaphysics, so I guess we could call it 'immersive'. Steve Foster published it in *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder* and it garnered absolutely no response whatsoever. So, while agreeing with James in many ways (like him, I believe that Keith Johnstone's book *Impro* is far more useful for rolegaming than any number of rules supplements) I have to say that the buying public seem to be getting what they want.

Incidentally, what about Patrick Brady's *Mayhem* game? That truly is role-playing, and it's a genuinely innovative approach to role-playing, and it's the sort of thing that appeals to veteran gamers while being perfectly accessible to newcomers. So if Hogshead are looking to break the mold, there you are.

▲ I have to confess, I have seen relatively few of the role-playing games which have been produced over the last ten years. But then, I've never believed too much in the importance of commercial rolegames. As for the failure to seize on *Skein of Destiny*, perhaps EPT players are accustomed to not really giving a toss about rules? Maybe that's the point to take away from the lack of response: it's background and play style that are important; to take a leaf from Francis Fukuyama, we are now living after 'The End of Rules'.

I also think a number of readers will be intrigued by the reference to *Impro*, especially Phil Nicholls' comments last issue about techniques which can be used to stimulate improvisational ability. And talking of Phil...

Phil Nicholls

How do you feel about the idea that storytelling games can act as an aid to learning how to run an

impromptu role-play game? While you may not agree with the particular mechanisms in *Baron Munchausen*, is there any benefit for a role-player in learning storytelling skills? Would this improve their abilities as a role-player?

▲ I have no disagreement with the particular mechanisms of *Baron Munchausen*. I think they are rather good, and that it is an entertaining game. I also address some points it suggests about role-playing in this issue's article. The specific question you ask, however, is controversial, and is related to my objections to the game. A game which improves your fluency and ability to think on the spot should improve the performance of both referees and players.

I have two anxieties: that playing *Baron Munchausen* might be more difficult for a beginner than playing a simple role-playing game (or what James would call a 'character game'). Easier to explain, sure, but more difficult to play. My second anxiety, explored somewhat in this issue's article, is that it relies on the narrative being an Author construct, which I believe is counterproductive.

Paul Watson

Before I start ranting I'll declare my interests first. I work for an independent shop/Mail Order company (that's POP Enterprises at <http://www.p-o-p.demon.co.uk>, by the way) selling second-hand RPGs, 2nd hand miniatures, wargames stuff etc. I read James' posts about *Baron M.* on the newsgroups and liked the idea of the game. I especially liked the idea of the price because I thought it would not be such a commercial risk for our business to take on a low-priced product. I asked my boss if I could look into it and he agreed. So far so good. Then we hit the usual barrier which was that the ground-breaking, non-stagnant *Baron M.* was being distributed by the usual monolithic distributors which demanded that you buy about £100 worth of products before you got free postage (without which you end up selling the games at a much higher price than your competitors and no one buys from you). From what I remember about Punk (and I was younger than Paul Mason when the Pistols were on the Bill Grundy show) it was the catalyst for the creation of hundreds of small independent record labels some of whom managed to avoid the distributors and supplied their records directly to small independent record shops.

Admittedly, if you're going to distribute your own product then it's a lot more work, but you (the publisher of the game) get a much bigger slice of the cover price of the game (distributors usually take a pretty big slice of the cake). We approached a couple of distributors about selling our products in the US and they were asking for about 60%. In the end we advertised on the net for retailers in the states willing to stock our products, and we've found one who has already put in a £500 order, and there are a few others who are interested. It took a bit more work, but it was worth it.



Phil Nicholls

Your No Limits article was quite a trip down memory lane for me. While I have not been role-playing for quite as long as yourself, a lot of what you wrote rang true. I can remember when dungeons were the place to be and the only SF game was *Traveller*. The cartoon strip in *White Dwarf* was brilliant, but then so were *Thrud* and *Gook*. Ah, those were the days. Anyway, I totally agree with your conclusion that we should be trying to recapture the frisson of excitement from the early days of role-playing, only without the 10' poles and iron spikes.

▲ The funny thing about the comic strips you mention was that *The Travellers* only appeared in *White Dwarf* because Ian Marsh liked it (so did I, but that didn't count for much). Reaction from readers and bosses alike was generally anti. Conversely, we disliked *Thrud*, which explains why Ian was kind enough to do a *Thrud* parody for *imagine* 14. It was even reprinted in *split*, the spin-off from *International Times* which I did an article for at the time. But nostalgia aside, what were we on about?

Rob Alexander

I like the sort of article that No Limits was. A snatch of RPG history and some serious practical ideas. Not thoughtful idling, not whining, but ideas that can be used. Ideas that seem hopeful. In the article you address my sacred cow—I dream of running (maybe playing in) a campaign in a wide world, a campaign where the players have real choices. Also a campaign where there is an objective reality beyond the actions of the players and their characters, but that's another can of worms.

▲ I still think that my analogy of role-playing with music is sound. (An analogy of role-playing with literature would be equally sound, but more obvious). The trick, and the challenge, is to preserve the freshness: as our heads become balder, to aim in a John Peel direction rather than a Phil Collins...

Andy McBrien

It's clearly stupid to bemoan the fact that it's not possible to provide an unlimited fully-developed background world for a rolegame, and that the freedom granted to the players is not unrestricted. But freedom for anyone is limited, and people in the real world are probably happiest when they have a clear direction in their lives.

What I think is most important to a game, and is so often neglected, is not that the options for the characters are always completely open-ended. This is essentially unrealistic.

It is that a game offers the players at least some *real* choices. Difficult choices. And that some of these determine the direction of the game.

The problem has not been that every choice that the players faced has not been genuinely open, but that

for many games the players are not confronted with even a single *real* choice which might have made them think. Or argue. Or take a third direction when faced with a choice of two difficult ones. Or fight amongst themselves. Or split up. Or abandon their goals. Or just about anything except do what is predictable (and can be calculated by the referee beforehand).

Things are so stale in some games that when the players *are* faced with a choice which doesn't have an obvious response they search desperately for clues which might indicate which option leads to the next stage of the scenario.

Of course everybody already knows all this. But they have learned to pretend that they don't as part of the co-operative effort to make the games work.

Perhaps what it really demonstrates is a complete lack of faith that rolegames can actually work. I suppose it's quite funny really that the more successful they are in their efforts the more they guarantee that the games don't work.

Robert Irwin

Liked this one. The idea of limitation seems to echo very strongly of the idea of the 'game contract' which was bandied around years ago, but is a bit more all-encompassing. From a player point of view this is definitely the way to go. Character creation under these terms is a dream compared to your average game—there is none of the danger of creating someone who is, from the outset, redundant in the plot. Also I suspect people find it more satisfying being a big fish in a small pond.

▲ You're absolutely right to identify the connection, though I confess my own prejudice leads me to dislike the word 'contract'. For some reason, I find the nuance of the word 'agreement' far less offensive.

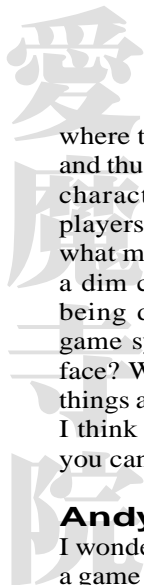
Paul Watson

I liked your definitions of explicit and implicit limitations—I think these things are important. The main problems I've encountered when running games is the clash between my view of the campaign world and the players' expectations of how the campaign world is. The problem is in making sure your players know the 'limitations'—making the implicit explicit.

Dave Morris

Robert Irwin was talking about stats on character sheets. The reason for these is not so that players know their own abilities (surely all referees would rather they only *thought* they did) but so that the mechanics of dice-rolling can be parallel-processed by players to spare the ref an additional burden. If only in real life we could find the sheet that listed our actual stats, as opposed to the ones we like to think we have!

But I agree that rules do tend to steer players towards using the actions that are clearly defined by rules. This is particularly the case where the world you're playing in appears to have no cultural rules, or



where the rules of the culture are regarded as relative and thus no more valid than whatever rules the player-characters decide amongst themselves. Then the players will tend to resort to violence, since that is what most rules systems emphasize. How do I outwit a dim character if the player won't roleplay him as being dim? How do I humiliate a character if the game system has no formal method of dealing with face? With a good player group you can do all these things and the rules don't matter—we know that—but I think the rules should teach you *everything* so that you can go beyond them to something better.

Andy McBrien

I wonder if perhaps the most effective way to plan for a game is not so much to think of a series of situations to confront the players with, which will occur in a set order, but to think instead in terms of a 'deck' of situations which may occur in any order, some of which can challenge the players with very difficult choices. Situations which may become connected (or not), and which may follow on from each other (or not). Or perhaps only one of the situations occurs or a couple or none. Etc.

This idea has clear similarities to the *Once Upon A Time* game. Perhaps that's where it springs from? It is also analogous to the potential situations a party might face in a dungeon adventure.

▲ I'm always a little suspicious of the idea of planning 'situations,' though I appreciate you mean this in a rather flexible sense. I prefer to take a step back in the causation and plan 'stimuli'. Obviously, when thinking about 'stimuli', certain situations will present themselves as possible outcomes, but I think you have to avoid allowing these to become creative blocks. Get too wedded to set-piece 'situations', and you end up the *auteur*.

Granted, though, certain 'stimuli' will be 'situations' which present themselves to the characters. This will be particularly true at the start of a game (campaign). After that I prefer to just let the blend of player reactions and stimuli work themselves out, while throwing occasional new ingredients into the stew.

and finally...

Louis Porter Jr

I am looking for editors, playtesters and feedback for my RPG that I am creating called *Haven: City of Violence*. This RPG is a cross between Frank Miller's *Sin City*, John Woo's *Hard Boiled*, James O'Barr's *The Crow*, and your worst urban nightmare come to life. We have just acquired the services of Tim Bradstreet (White Wolf's *Vampire*) to do the cover for *Haven: City of Violence*, so you know it is going to look good. If you would receive additional info please see my web site at <http://www.on-net.net/~seven>.

▲ Talk about coming full circle: 13 years down the line from my brief stint at *White Dwarf* and I find myself once more in charge of the small ads...

Magic Moments, continued

So, by sticking with settings that keep the events depicted therein well away from the real world, RPGs allow a freedom of 'action' and lack of responsibility for those actions. As in *Star Wars*, where the audience rarely feels sorry for the hapless stormtroopers (especially now they've edited out that one banging his head on the door). Maybe by making games about detectives, or emergency ward surgeons, or criminal psychologists with a troubled home life, a drinking problem and a dodgy heart, rolegaming might gain a wider audience. Then again, a wider audience isn't necessarily better—as someone once said, 'You know the average IQ of this country? Well, half the people in the country are less intelligent than *that*.' Maybe by making games about fresco painters during the Renaissance, or tormented souls in west London trying to set to rest the memories of a tragic air accident, or comical, darkly surreal journeys through Dublin in the 1960s, rolegaming might gain the respect of the cognoscenti. Or maybe we'll just do what we like, which is, apparently, playing games about being special and about standing out from the crowd, and about having a certain *magic*. ▲

a few tedious notes about the design

IT HAS been years since I actually devoted attention to design. The previous *imagine* design was intended to be simple for me to make, easy to read, and nothing more. So I started redesigning *imagine*

for a little practice. When I looked at the results of my first experiments I realised I had simply gone back to the only design I know and like: the work of Neville Brody. But I was aping the look rather than trying to learn from the principles.

I'm not a trained designer, and certainly not an artist, so there's no way I am ever going to be able to reproduce the subtleties of those designs. But a number of points struck me. Brody insisted that the typography, whether done with typesetting equipment, hand-drawn fonts, DTP or Letraset, should be no more than a tool, under the control of the designer.

I found myself turning to Times and Helvetica. These two fonts are on every computer

which has Acrobat, so if I used them it would keep the file size down. But Times and Helvetica? Urgh! So the redesign of *imagine* became an exercise in working with these two fonts alone. I later realised that Zapf Dingbats, a symbol font also supplied with Acrobat, could also be used to liven up the pages.

I don't think the result looks very Neville Brody, though it is, perhaps, a logical successor to the teen-period *imagine*. I also think I've managed to get away from that horrible computer-manual Times-Helvetica look. If anyone has any trouble printing it, or any problem with the fonts (given that they are mostly distorted in some way, this is possible) please let me know. ◆

