

imagine

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REMARKABLE, ISN'T IT? Imazine is now operating according to what I call the 'London Bus' principle. If I carry on at this rate I will put 'Quarterly' back in the title. And then when I finally overtake my own age I can fold the zine.

Nah, only kidding.

Recent issues have set me thinking a bit more about the level of ranting, and the shooting from the hip. To be quite honest, I believe this is best categorised as a necessary evil. Jonathan Tweet was recently kind enough to refer to me as the 'opinionated and pedantic publisher of *Outlaws of the Water Margin*' and I felt 'Well, someone has to be, don't they?' At the same time, I have also recently been accused of being 'serene' and 'agreeing with people'. As long as I manage to be both of these extremes simultaneously, I'll be happy.

One more thing that makes me happy is the international nature of imazine, something made possible by the Internet. We have readers and contributors from across the globe. At the same time, the 'ideological' base in the UK, and 'physical' base in Japan, prevent the zine from becoming yet another US-dominated forum, with all that that entails. One

problem of being international, though, is the tremendous potential for misunderstanding. Not only is my habitual combination of obliquity and bluntness a veritable multicultural minefield, the very nature of the magazine itself is likely to be misunderstood.

It's very common to work by projection: those who feel that the only possible reason they might have for producing a magazine would be to make money, might easily jump to the conclusion that imazine is the sort of magazine that I would consider 'pro', or 'semi-pro'. My own definition of 'fanzine', which combines a connotation of 'independence' (a vague concept, if truth be told: independence of *what*?) with not-for-profit operation, is not one that is widely known or shared.

So let me state again for any new readers: while I do indeed have an axe to grind, it is not one with strings attached, nor is it for sale. I also change my axe as often as I can. Come to that, it isn't double-headed, and it *certainly* isn't one of the silly polearm thingies that Gary Gygax insisted on putting in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* all those year ago.

Is that clear? ▲



愛 魔 院 r e v i e w s

AS USUAL, there was loads of stuff I forgot last issue, such as the Web site for that bastion of UK fanzines, *Carnel*. So from this issue I'm going to include an odds and sods section in some convenient space in the zine where I can put all these miscellaneous mentions, apologies, and so on.

Swords of the middle kingdom

Reviewed by Chuan Lin

Swords of the Middle Kingdom (hence forth, SMK) is published by Event Horizon Productions, the same folks who brought about *Hong Kong Action Theater* (hence forth, HKAT). Unlike HKAT, *Swords* is very genre specific; namely, a fictitious China—called Wulin—during the Manchu occupation. Players are heroes from various martial arts schools and gather to overthrow the Ching dynasty. Like its predecessor, various Hong Kong *wuxia* films have influenced *Swords of the Middle Kingdom*. As an oriental genre RPG, does it play like *Moo Goo Gai Pan* or *Vegetarian Chop Suey*?

presentation

The most noticeable feature of this book is its physical size. A typical RPG book is about 11" (27.94 cm) x 8 1/2" (21.59 cm); whereas SMK is 9 1/4" (23.5 cm) x 7 3/8" (18.73 cm) or about the same size as a computer game guide. It is very portable. A first glance reveals that this book is divided into three logically progressing sections: Players, Adventures, and Game Master. Each chapter has a watermark of appropriate Chinese characters denoting its topic. It has a table of contents and useful indices. Art within SMK is divided into two categories: scanned movie scenes and black & white drawings. The scanned movie scenes are much more interesting than the b/w drawings. My initial impression was that this is a methodical, well-designed book.

recipes

Ingredients. The player's section consists of game mechanics, kung fu/wire fu, stunts, magic, character creation and kung fu sects. Starting with the game mechanics, SMK explains the core mechanism as stat+speciality+D20 vs. target number (ranging from 10, easy, to 40, impossible) for simple actions. For compli-

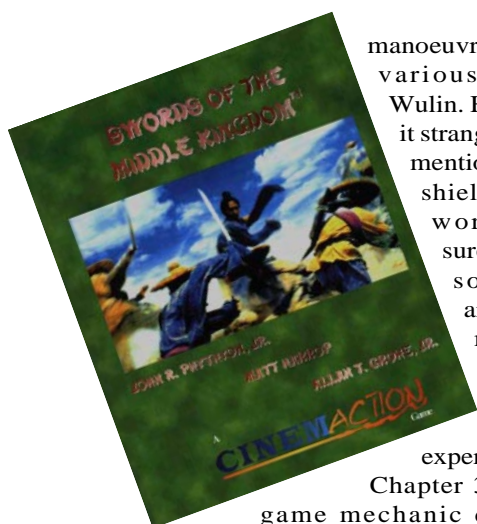
cated actions, it is stat+speciality+D20 vs. opposing stat+speciality+D20. Whoever rolls higher is successful. Also in this chapter, player's stats—Skill, Muscle, Speed, Toughness, Brains, Cool and Chi—are explained. Specialties are specialized skills that are different from the Skill stat, which represents dexterity, coordination and balance.

Chapter two's title is a misnomer. Although called Kung Fu, it is about combat and not about various martial arts. Combat initiative is determined by Speed + D10. There are two constraints. The first is internal: what you want to accomplish. It ranges from doing nothing (a difficulty of 10) to moving, attacking, casting a spell and doing stunts (a difficulty of 25). If the player's initiative roll is less than or equal to the target number, he can only perform one action. For every point by which his initiative roll exceeds the target number, a player gets an action. It is possible for a highly agile character (speed of 20) with luck (roll of 10) to perform a complex manoeuvre of running (1 action), attacking (1 action), jumping down a cliff (1 stunt action) and casting a feather fall spell (1 spell action). And he still has an action left for defence, or for boosting his to hit or damage bonus. The second obstacle is external: comparing the player's initiative to an opposing roll to determine who goes first.

Optionally, a character can perform a *posedown*, which is often seen in Hong Kong movies and Japanese *anime*. Nameless NPCs are often portrayed as being awed by the main character's posture (the most popular being a guy who used *chi* to pop off his shirt prior to a fight) before rushing to be slaughtered. It is a contest of rolling Cool + D20. If the player rolls higher, opponents lose a number of actions equal to the difference between the two rolls. Of course, it only works against nameless NPCs. Named NPCs are much more confident with their fighting prowess and not impressed by PC poseurs. The posedown option does contribute to the cinematic feel of this game.

In order to hit someone, a player rolls Skill + appropriate martial art speciality (punch, kick, bite, etc.) + D20 against a target number. This depends on the target's importance: if it is a minor mook, you would need a 20. Most player characters are considered to be of major importance and require a 30 to be hit. The villain of an adventure is extremely important and needs a 35. Damage is fixed at the character's Muscle x martial art speciality (punch = 2, kick = 3, etc.). A character's hit points are equal to both Chi x 10 and Toughness x 10. He has the option of deciding which stat absorbs damage. In order to simulate those movies where the hero takes a huge amount of damage and is still able to make a comeback, a character regains hit points equals to his Cool x 2 at the end of every active combat round.

This chapter wraps up with additional combat



manoeuvres and discusses various weapons of Wulin. However, I found it strange that there is no mention of armour nor shields. Even in the world of Wulin, surely there must be some sort of armour to protect massed ranks of soldiers from player character martial arts experts?

Chapter 3 concludes the game mechanic description by explaining how to apply it to situations other than combat. Some possible circumstances are stunts and chase scenes. It also explains how to use hero points (affecting external surroundings) and *chi* (affecting internal state). The latter is also used to activate wire-fu, simulated kung fu powers based on Hong Kong *wuxia* movies (such as jumping and fighting in mid-air). Samples of wire-fu are detailed in the Kung Fu Sects chapter, but this chapter has charts on how to customize wire-fu much like *Champion's* custom power building.

Whereas the previous chapter deals with wire-fu, the next focuses on magic. The entire magic system is based on the *I Ching*. The eight basic trigrams have macro effects and the sixty-four hexagrams have micro effects. A brief description is given under each trigram and hexagram to give ideas on spell improvisation. A system of customized spells is detailed and sample spells round off the chapter. Spells also require the expenditure of *chi* to cast. The only glaring error I found in this chapter is on the opening page where it declares that a dashed line represents Yang and a solid line represents Yin. I guess this is 'artistic license'.

The next two chapters start to involve players in the world of Wulin. A system of randomization determines a character's stats and provenance. Initial skill points (for lack of better words) are the sum of Brains and *Chi*. Additional points can be acquired by choosing disadvantages. These points are used to purchase specialities and advantages. Outfits are included and notes on how to improve character abilities conclude this chapter. This is one of the more confusingly laid out parts of the book. Various circular charts, showing where a character comes from, are randomly placed in the latter part of this chapter. These inconsistently sized charts distract the reader. Character names are randomly determined with no meaning behind them. Surprisingly, Erick Wujcik's *Mystic China* handled Chinese names better than other Chinese-oriented games.

Chapter 5 has to be the most exciting part of SMK, as it describes various Kung Fu Sects. Unlike the previous chapter, it has very well-structured layout, and the added effect of correct Chinese character watermarks under each sect really make it a thrill to read. There are eight major kung fu sects in Wulin with the eighth being the school of sorcerers. The well-known and popular Shao-

lin and Wu Dang also appear in Wulin. There is also a sect that is specifically run by women, the Emei. Each sect has a history, headquarters, master, martial style, wire-fu, signature weapon, bonuses, favourite colour, strength, weakness, views on other martial arts schools, and sample character.

Sauces. The next four chapters deal with the culture, mythology, geography and history of Wulin. The author claims the mandate of artistic license to pick and choose from nearly five thousand years of Chinese culture and compress them down to around two thousand years. The book includes a map of Wulin. Descriptions of various major provinces and cities do sound Chinese at first but on deeper reading, they aren't. Instead, they remind me more of Machiavellian Italy, from the way city mayors compete for local resources, provincial governors scheme for better transfers, to imperial courtiers contriving for their amusement. Other than that, the Wulin culture is supposed to be like early Ching dynasty sans gunpowder technology and Western influence. They believe in a healthy mixture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Besides taking the civil service exams, joining kung fu sects was a way to advance one's lot in life. When the Manchus take over, life becomes harsher, government positions are for pro-Manchus only, and all kung fu is prohibited. It is up to our heroes to overthrow the Manchus.

The mythology of Wulin pretty much follows the Chinese. Heaven, Earth and Man define the universe. Man attempts to govern Earth in accordance with the celestial court. If he governs in a manner agreeable to Heaven, his dynasty will flourish. If not, there are others who are eager to replace him via the Mandate of Heaven. Wulinese worship some of the more popularly known gods: Shang-Ti, Hsi Wang Mu (Mystic Queen of the West), Kuan Yin (I know, she's Bodhisattva, it's more artistic license) and the ever-mischievous Monkey King. Other lesser-known demigods, the eight immortals or Ba-Xian, also grace Wulinese mythology. Then there is Hell. Here, it seems there is no escaping a Judeo-Christian concept of Hell as evil. However, the Chinese view of Hell is not that it is a malignant place. It is simply a place where the spirits of malicious sentients are punished. The Ten Judges of Hell and their minions are not malevolence personified. Rather, they are spirits and demi-deities sent to administer proper chastisement. They do not plot to overthrow Heaven and to enslave Earth.

Technique. Advice on how to game master, building a campaign, antagonists and artifacts make up the remaining four chapters which comprise the final section. It starts with a chapter devoted to how to be a referee. After explaining referee duties, the chapter offers advice on how to run adventures in Wulin. Melodrama is heavily emphasised, with a clear distinction between good and evil. Like *wuxia* genre movie heroes, player characters are expected to go through series of hardships. To quote from the book, 'Cantonese Melodramas typically put the hero through hell and more often than not, the hero gets only a pyhrric [Pyrrhic] victory at the

end.’ The book suggests several ways to make life more interesting for players.

The chapter on how to build a campaign is missing something. There is advice on how different sects might work together, on how to create NPCs, and on how to run various types of campaign. But what about a sample adventure to get players started? A simple adventure can show the referee how to run a *wuxia* genre game. There is no lack of inspiration, since most of the authors’ ideas obviously came from watching videos. Instead, the book offers several adventure seeds.

Everything a referee needs to know about the Manchus, and other nefarious sects, is included in the chapter on antagonists. The Manchus are northern barbarians who had always wanted to get into the rich southern lands of Wulin. Finally, they succeeded. They brought their own Manchu-style martial arts and wire-fu to teach the people of Wulin, whose martial arts are superior. Less conspicuous is the Ngam Sik Yuet, a cult of sorcerers who also believe that they have received the Mandate of Heaven. They are secretly getting rid of various kung fu sects before kicking the Manchus off the Jade Throne. They, too, have their little marital arts, wire-fu and spells. Of the remaining chapters, one gives brief descriptions of popular monsters of China, while the last chapter offers a variety of magical artifacts to make players drool.

Taste test

In terms of game mechanics, this is a clean and simple system. Everything can be resolved by appropriate traits + speciality + D20 against a target number or opposing roll. The idea of being able to take multiple actions within a combat round encourages players to simulate stunts commonly seen in action movies. The ability to strike a pose or *posedowns* allows us to gleefully act out our best Bruce Lee, Jet Li, Jubei (of *Ninja Scroll* fame), or Brigitte Lin imitation at the start of any major melee. And to start the adventure with a fairly powerful character is also a welcome change for those who are sick of playing young Luke Skywalker when they wanted to be Han Solo.

The most significant problem for me is magic. Why bother with it if there is wire-fu? Granted, the ideas of using the *I-Ching* as magical spells is very interesting and by-passed the ever-popular, yet soon-to-be-overexposed, five element system. However, by introducing magic, SMK demonstrates an inconsistency according to Chinese philosophy; namely, the harmony of three: Heaven—Man—Earth, Confucianism—Taoism—Buddhism, and New Hope—Empire Strikes Back—Return of Jedi. So, logically, when we read wire-fu, and spells, we are then expecting to see a third type of power—Buddha investiture, for example. Instead, with only two, both seem to be repetitive and unnecessary. Personally, I would be much happier if they had just stuck with wire-fu. It would have made the game stand out more, like, say, *Pendragon*.

I have mixed feelings toward the background section. It seems to be the weakest link. Looking at their bibliography shows that they have made only a superficial stab

at understanding Chinese culture. However, they do list a fair number of *wuxia* films. The problem with these *wuxia* films is that they are bits and pieces of Chinese fantasy with heavy doses of artistic license. So what we have here is a copy of a copy. But then maybe for a game that simulates Saturday afternoon kung fu action, a bare minimum of information is sufficient. After all, it does detail various kung fu sects and the hated Manchus very well. That may be sufficient for a cinematic adventure. Not to mention the fact that, unlike the Japanese, there are few English translations of works on ancient Chinese life and culture. Perhaps it is sufficient just to say that an adventure begins with a party staying in an inn on the edge of a desert while on a mission to deliver two kids who are being pursued by elite eunuch-led Manchu cavalry, and there is a dust storm ahead of their destination.

The referee section is well thought out and progresses logically. It has chapters to teach the novice referee and it provides ideas for the veteran. If they had included a sample adventure it would be perfect. An adventure is a very useful tool to guide a referee and set up the tone of this genre. This is especially true for a setting which most people know little about.

Who might be interested in *Swords of the Middle Kingdom*? Obvious candidates are those who missed out or enjoyed the *Feng Shui* RPG, and fans of the original *Hong Kong Action Theater*. It is also perfect for those who watch Saturday afternoon kung fu and want to play a fast-paced cinematic RPG. For those who want more depth in the background, there are still *Outlaws* and *Sen-goku: Chung Kuo* in process.

So what did it taste like? Image yourself entering the Jade Lantern Restaurant and ordering a *Moo Goo Gai Pan*. When the waiter brings you the food, everything looks and smells great. However, after you take a bite, you reach for a heavy dose of soy sauce, salt, or pepper to add flavour to it. And only later do you find out that the chef learned his trade from watching Ken Hom on TV.

Swords of the Middle Kingdom is published by Event Horizon Productions.

GURPS Traveller

Reviewed by David Platt

I must admit that I had been looking forward to this for quite some time. Good things had been said in various places about *GURPS Traveller*. Although I am by no means a *Traveller* fanatic, I have played in a couple of campaigns and am interested in the background. Consequently, a battered copy of *MegaTraveller* is in my possession, and I’ve lingered over later editions in the shops. I also like *GURPS*, am very impressed by a number of their worldbooks and hold Steve Jackson Games in quite high regard. What I found when I bought this book was by turns pleasing, disappointing and worrying.

presentation

The first thing that you notice when picking it up is the striking pre-*MegaTraveller* cover in a bold black, white and red with the radio message from Free Trader Beowulf. Old fans should feel suitably nostalgic and dewy-eyed. Artwork throughout is quite appealing—a combination of new material by SJG house artists and stuff from the old rulebooks (which I suppose reinforces the sense of continuity). The whole book certainly looks nicer than *T4*, which did itself no favours with its Chris Foss covers and black and white Larry Elmore interior art.

For your £15 (£20 hardback) there are 176 pages—6 chapters, and 3 appendices. I suppose that this represents typical, if not brilliant, value for money in the hobby at the moment. The material is clearly presented and a pleasing read. Indexing is adequate—though not as thorough as it might be, I have encountered no significant problems so far. It does not include cross references to other relevant *GURPS* volumes. This is understandable (which books would one refer to? How many before the index gets too big?), but I can see how it might lead to frantic flicking between volumes at times.

Good use is made of the traditional *GURPS* side bars. Examples include short pieces of fiction, quotations from figures in the Imperium, and notes about the history of the Imperium. They also provide space for designers' notes discussing how and why particular aspects of the Imperium were conceived, what purpose the writers hoped they would serve and so on.

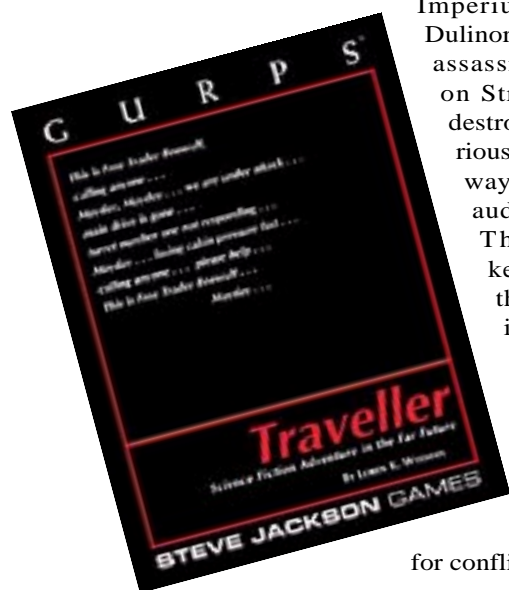
background

It's the Traveller universe. Most readers will have a fairly good idea of what that entails. A vast interstellar empire, based largely on the sort of SF written by Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein in the 1960s and 70s, with a bit of *Star Wars*. The *GURPS* book is also set in an official alternative universe/timeline. The much publicised difference between this and the original is that the year

is 1120 and the Third Imperium still stands. Dulinor never made the assassination attempt on Strephon, his gig destroyed in a mysterious explosion on his way to the Imperial audience chamber.

The writers are keen to point out that the underlying problems that caused the Rebellion in the original Traveller universe are still there, so there's still plenty of room

for conflict.



Most of the background takes the form of a reprinted Imperial Encyclopaedia, updated as necessary. Only a few key entries seem to have been added or altered. If you have an older edition of *Traveller* with this material, I can't really see this as being essential. If you haven't—well, it's all very well written and enjoyable to read.

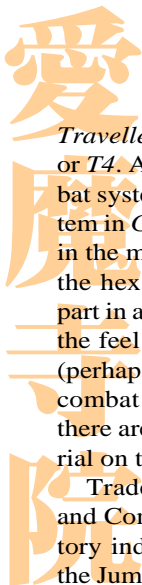
rules

One of the key complaints aimed at *GURPS* is that it doesn't do a very good job of representing the more extraordinary gaming genres, such as cinematic play, superheroes and so on. *Traveller* has always had one of the more 'realistic' SF RPG universes, so the choice of *GURPS* as an alternative rule system has always made some sense. On this level it does its job very well. Some problems do emerge in the level of detail and the sides of *Traveller* the supplement's writers have decided to emphasise. More on this later.

Chapter Three describes character generation using the *GURPS* system. All the stuff you'd expect is here: what different status levels represent, costs of living etc. The only Alien races covered for players here are the Vargr and Zhodani (in the sidebars)—there's no differentiation between Vilani and Solomani Imperial citizens (fair enough). I suppose the omissions won't be too much of a problem if you wish to set a campaign in the Spinward Marches. If you can't wait for the other races, and you can't be bothered to do the work yourself, then there's enough fan written conversions on the web. It's actually a slightly better situation than in the MT rulebooks (no other species/nations are detailed for character generation). There's even a listing of common Vilani family and personal names in a previous chapter (sidebar, 71).

The best news with regards to character generation is the introduction of a proper Template system, which will cut out the slog of *GURPS* PC generation. About time too. This has always been potentially one of the most irritating features of the *GURPS* system, at least when you include one or more world books and the referee has to start compiling lists of what skills, advantages and disadvantages are appropriate or inappropriate.

Issues raised by elements of Imperial Technology are discussed throughout the book, but the hardware itself is described chiefly in Chapter Four ('Equipment and Supplies'), Appendix A ('Starships'), Appendix B ('Modular Ship Design'), and Appendix C ('Space Combat'). The first and second of these are basically the equipment and starship lists from *Traveller* converted into *GURPS* terms. Apparently it was all (including hand weapons) done using the *GURPS Vehicles* system. If intricate vehicle design procedure is your bag then you may find that interesting. I suppose if you have these design systems then companies should make their sourcebooks consistent with them. I find them a monumental pain (I've also noticed that they all seem to be written by one man: David Pulver—hmm). I've not bothered checking the sets of lists against each other, but everything seems to be present and correct. The book, thankfully, includes deck plans of the Scout/Courier and Free Trader, two work horses of the game. These are omitted in *Mega-*



Traveller, and I don't remember seeing them in *Deluxe* or *T4*. Appendix C attempts to convert the starship combat system to *GURPS* terms. It is to the ship combat system in *GURPS Space* what the Advanced combat system in the main rulebook is to the basic one. Time to get out the hex paper. Again, this doesn't really play a major part in any game that I'd run, but it looks okay, reflecting the feel of previous *Traveller* games that I've played in (perhaps this is why it remains a two dimensional space combat system?). What I should point out here is that there are twelve pages of it. Compare this with the material on trade.

Trade is dealt with in Chapter Five, 'Travel, Trade and Commerce', and succeeds in being very unsatisfactory indeed. Three pages discuss the characteristics of the Jump drive; one page details a conversion system for *Traveller* worlds to *GURPS* and vice versa, one page trade and commerce. I keep going back and recounting, just to make sure, and the same figures crop up every time. The trade and commerce section fails to suggest different types of cargo (limiting it to freight, mail, speculative and various Passages) or the nature of speculative trade. Appalling. Considering that there is a quotation from Duchess Margaret Tukera about the importance of trade to the Imperium (sidebar, 68), it's a bit of a poor show, isn't it? There is, of course, going to be a supplement for Free Trader campaigns, but even with that in mind, I expected more than one page.

Chapter Six presents us with a system to convert your *Traveller* characters to *GURPS*. There's not much I can say about it. It does the job it's supposed to do.

Overall

GURPS Traveller looks like value for money until you realise you will need *GURPS Basic* rules, *GURPS Space* (which contains trivial stuff like ...ooh ... planetary generation, rules for Zero-G etc.) and *Compendium I* i.e. roughly £60 for the four books. Imagine that you'd like to establish a campaign in the Spinward Marches, that you might decide to invest in the Spinward Marches sourcebook and Aliens I. 'Suddenly', you've spent nearly ninety quid—for the equivalent of the *Traveller* set and two sourcebooks. Heaven help you if you decide that you'd like to exploit some of *GURPS*' much vaunted capacity to blend other material by buying other sourcebooks as well, for example, to cover robots, vehicle design or mecha (total £45). It occurred to me at about this point that I might like to have a couple of games by other companies on my shelves. Role-playing games are not cheap, but this is taking the piss.

This is the first *GURPS* worldbook that I have bought that actually demands additional volumes other than the basic rulebook, and I can't say it's a development that I'm happy with.

If you already own a version of *Traveller*, and do not wish to switch to *GURPS* (or feel that you can work out all the mechanics yourself) then I cannot recommend this particular volume. There's just not enough new background material to justify it. You will, however, probably have to come to terms with *GURPS* on some level due to the quantity of material that will be pub-

lished. I'd suggest that even people who wish to stick with the *Traveller* system download a copy of *GURPS Lite* (<http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/lite/>) and the TNS page (<http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/traveller/news.html>) from SJG's site.

If you aren't already familiar with the setting, is it worth buying into? The Imperium might look dated compared to some of the more recent SFRPG settings. To its credit, the volume does attempt to explain why the more recent SF fads of Cybertech, Nanotechnology and AI are largely absent from the background, giving interesting cultural justifications. I think that *GURPS Traveller* actually succeeds in giving the setting the feel of good contemporary SF.

Moreover, it has is by far the most interesting and flexible of the 'Galactic Empire' settings. It has the advantage that most of the ideas and themes from other similar settings can easily be incorporated into a GM's adventures, without totally screwing up the game universe. Most of the current SF RPG settings, interesting as they are, strike me as quite claustrophobic and unable to accommodate other tropes from SF: from what I've read it would be hard to have a *Fading Suns* adventure based on scientific or anthropological research, add non-human cultures to *Battletech* or squeeze a radically different environment into one of the tightly written, limited territory, universes described by *Blue Planet*, *Jovian Chronicles* or *Heavy Gear*.

Despite my disappointments, I think that I will find myself refereeing *GURPS Traveller* at some point. I can see it becoming a long running, open-ended SF campaign. It is an interesting, versatile background with a rules system that, although at times complex, is logical and works; a combination which seems to be increasingly rare in professional hobby products. The system's long term proof for me will be in the quality of the books dealing the major races, material that I have waited many years to see in print again.

What it means

What does all this mean for *Traveller*, and for Marc Miller? I'm no hobby commentator but I suspect that this book has rather worrying implications for *Traveller* enthusiasts. Granting SJG this license must have seemed like a fairly smart move for Marc Miller when Imperium Games were still a going concern. Theoretically, it would have helped to popularise the setting, giving Imperium Games a much larger audience for their sourcebooks, adventures and so on. I don't know how many *GURPS Vampire*, *Werewolf* or *Mage* players buy books designed specifically written for their original sources, but it certainly can't do White Wolf any harm.

With Imperium Games gone, I wonder if we will ever see another version of the *Traveller* rule system. SJG are set to produce their own source material for their alternative timeline, supposedly one book every two months, which would essentially make any *T4* material irrelevant for the *GURPS Traveller* player. Even if Marc Miller does find a publisher for *T5*, nobody with any sense is going to buy two books covering two barely different representations of the Aslan (for instance). Any new



Marc Miller-produced *Traveller* material is going to have to compete directly with SJG's publications. This is compounded by the assertion on the *GURPS Traveller* web-page that SJG will be reprinting/rewriting much of the previously out of print material. Allowing SJG to produce more than one or two *Traveller* world books was always going to be a mistake for Imperium Games.

On the plus side for those interested in the background rather than the rule system, at least SJG's version will be well supported—for instance, there's a reasonable web site (<http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/traveller/>) and we might see full background info on all seven major races for the first time since *Deluxe Traveller* was in print. I believe that details of only three major races have been published for *MegaTraveller* AND New Era combined (Vilani and Vargr for *MT*, Hivers for *TNE*, no major races at all for *T4!*). 'Behind the Claw: The Spinward Marches Sourcebook', 'Alien Races 1', 'Far Trader', 'Star Ports', 'Alien Races 2' (Aslan and K'kree) and 'Star Mercs' are either already in print or soon to be. The company's Author Solicitation web page has a list of books that they are looking for writers for. SJG look to be *very* committed to this line, so short of them losing the licence, I don't see this going out of print in the near future. Unlike Imperium Games, SJG should have a broad enough product base to support the rapid release of numerous *Traveller* books. Even if they give this volume a miss, any *Traveller* fan who started playing in the last ten years is probably going to end up buying SJG books at some point along the line. Hell, if die-hard *Traveller* fans hate the Rebellion and its aftermath as much as they are said to in some quarters, even they might start buying right away.

But the *Traveller* system is still stuffed.

GURPS Traveller is published by Steve Jackson Games.

Visions

Reviewed by Matthew Pook

I was going to review *Hell on Earth*, Pinnacle Games' sequel to their hit RPG, *Deadlands*. Instead, Paul wanted me to review *Visions*, the new British gaming magazine. He was going to do it himself, but the damn thing kept putting him to sleep. Wonderful. I now have to review a narcolepsy-inducing magazine, when I really wanted to say what I thought of *Hell on Earth*. Damn. All right, I'll stop whinging and get on with it.

It's *Visions*. It's a new British professional gaming magazine. It's from Tau Press. It's in full colour—inside and out! It's on glossy paper. It's a bit thin. It's £4.20. It's got a scenario or two, an article, press releases and reviews, plus sections on figures, books, comics, card games, LARP, films and Australian gaming. Plus adverts. It's in full colour—inside and out! It's on glossy paper. It's a bit thin. It's £4.20. Exciting, huh? No, not

really. That's the problem with *Visions*—that and the price.

For your money, you get a Phil Masters unofficial setting for GURPS Discworld that draws its inspiration from the Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns and Zorro to reasonably amusing effect and Jonathon Rowe's short but interesting history of hermetic magic and a scenario set in Elizabethan England. This has the players interacting with historical figures such as Raleigh, Marlowe and Shakespeare, but though not bad, it appears to be rather skeletal. Of the remaining contents, only two sections stand out. The two pages devoted to films is an irritating filler—do we really need reviews of *The Shadow* and *The Mask*, particularly when they are not made relevant to gaming? The three reviews vary in quality, but tend to be overlong and lack critical thought. In particular, the *Hell on Earth* review just appears to stop without reaching any kind of conclusion.

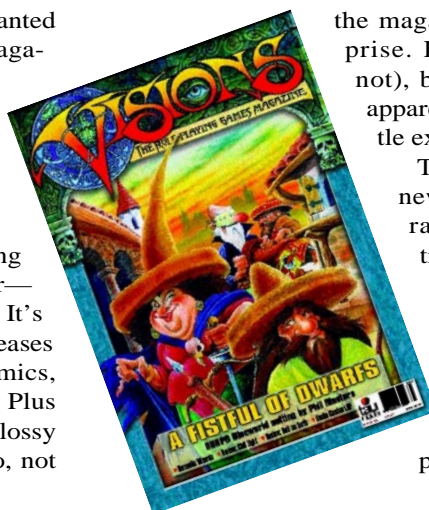
So those are the bad points. Does it have any good ones? Certainly, with its glossy paper and use of colour, the production values are high. Unfortunately, that is the only good point, one that is not helped by its repetitive use of the single pieces of artwork within each article. The rest of the magazine is just... Well, it just is. All that and I have yet to get to the really bad point!

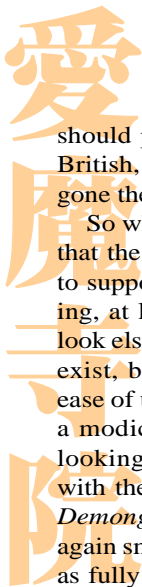
So what is the really bad point? The price. £4.20 may not be extortionate when you consider the high production values, but if you consider the contents it certainly is. *Visions* is actually cheaper if you subscribe, only £3.54 an issue if you take out a thirteen issue subscription. But let me ask you this—would you subscribe to a British gaming magazine with the track record of such animals over the last few years? I know that I wouldn't.

I did want to say nice things about *Visions*. I did not want to be quite so negative, but this new magazine really needs to make some changes if it is going to succeed. This being only a first issue, then it is likely that *Visions* will be making changes anyway. In the meantime, I suggest that it find a voice or identity, because that is one thing it lacks. Also it should concentrate less on its looks and more on its content. That will drop the high price and make it a more interesting read.

Unfortunately, since I first wrote this review, Tau Press have suspended the publication of *Visions* and made issue #2 the last one. The reason given was that it had not found the market to support the magazine. Now there's a surprise. Excuse my cynicism (or not), but this should have been apparent to any gamer with a little experience in the hobby.

The reaction of the UK newsgroup has been mixed, ranging from the pragmatism of myself to wholesale support regardless of either cost or content. Fundamentally *Visions* failed because of the shortcomings I have already given, plus poor marketing. What this





should prove, once and for all, that the concept of the British, professionally produced gaming magazine has gone the way of the Dodo.

So what of the future? To pontificate, it is clear to me that the hobby has become too fractured in its interests to support a gaming magazine devoted to general gaming, at least to a professional level. Instead we should look elsewhere for future possibilities. Two such already exist, both stemming from the relative low price and ease of use of computers and DTP software. These, with a modicum of effort, can lead to very professionally looking publications. One possibility is the Internet, with the PDF format an obvious choice—*imagine* and *Demonground* are good examples of this. The second is again small press, not published in electronic format, but as fully fledged fanzines. Like *Demonground*, which is a *Dark Conspiracy* 'zine, these tend to be devoted to just the one game and selling into a niche market. Examples include *Mythic Perspectives (Ars Magica)*—which was nominated this year for an Origins Award, *THE BIG PICTURE (SLA Industries)* and *Warpstone (WFRP)*. Black and white they may be, but this should distract from neither contents nor appearance.

One of the reasons that such publications are successful is their appearance, which is often to a very high standard. Yet more importantly, when a gamer buys a copy of any of these titles, they know that they are going to get material that not only supports the game that they play, but which they can actually use in their game. It is quite clear that a more general gaming magazine cannot support every game, every issue, but it's certainly a lesson that any future gaming magazine really needs to learn.

Visions is published by Tau Press, who hope to resurrect it subject to a couple of deals going through.

encounters

Reviewed by Matthew Pook

Encounters is a new quarterly fanzine devoted to RPG adventures. Its format is black and white, A5, 46 pages, printed on good paper with a grey paper cover. The artwork is sparse and of so-so quality.

Inside there are two adventures, both written by the editor, Mike Todd, one for *Cyberpunk 2020*, the second a more generic modern piece suitable for any modern or near future RPG such as *Feng Shui*, *Millenium's End*, *Cyberpunk 2020* or *Dark Conspiracy*. The third piece is source material for *Shadowrun*, this time by Jonathan Wright.

All of this material is very action or gun play orientated and given the games it is aimed at, unashamedly so. If this is what your group wants, then *encounters* is worth checking out. None of the material is of brilliant quality, but it isn't useless either. If this fanzine has a fault, it is in the layout, which is just a little too basic and

perhaps the editing could have been better. Certainly the game statistics need formatting to make them more easily accessible.

Other than that, *encounters* is a bargain at just US\$1.50—it will cost more for shipping elsewhere. For a first issue it is not bad, and if the quality at least stays consistent, *encounters* should be worth coming back to.

Encounters is published by Michael Todd, 833 North San Juan, Stockton, CA 95203-1454 USA. [Mike Todd <mtodd@telis.org>](mailto:mtodd@telis.org)

this and that

Here's a section in which I can try to remember to mention all those things I normally forget in the rush of slinging the zine together.

Overeager beaver that I am, there is no review of Hogshead's *Puppetland* this issue, for the simple reason that the game is due out at about the same time as this issue. Nor are Hogshead's other projects: *Youdunnit*, which one might expect to be dear to the heart of such as I, a Judge Dee fan and now wannabe mystery novelist; and *Get Your Trousers On, You're Nicked*, which, not being a big *Professionals* fan, may well disappear into the ether somewhere above my head. Of course, there are other Hogshead games on the way, including *Violence*, which is by of the great designers of our time, and which is not self-referential or post-modern, honest. Also, *Bloodlust* which looks to be mining the same vein as Ron Edwards' first *Sorcerer* supplement *Sorcerer & Sword*, with its return to the visceral pleasures of real Heroic fantasy (and not all this *DragonLance* crap). Reviews of some of this stuff should appear next issue, I hope.

Similarly with Dave Morris's review of Keith Johnstone's *Impro*, the seminal work on improvisation, which contains a mine of inspiration for the role-player, and not just the stuff about Masks which James Wallis used in an *interactive fantasy* article those many years ago. At the time, James was quite right to point to the importance of the book. Given the comments by Phil Nicholls a couple of issues back about sources of inspiration for improvisation, this book is a must for any serious *imagine* reader. Find out exactly why next issue.

The next thing is that bastion of the UK fanzine scene *carnel*, which preserves many of the more admirable qualities of British fanzines, including perversity, stubbornness, a tendency to manic depression and introspection, and flights of lyricism. Sure enough, the cover of the latest issue (13) bears a picture of a dog which, while it may not necessarily be a British Bulldog is nevertheless reassuringly ugly.

Robert Rees, the editor, also demonstrates his determination to do the unexpected and buck the system by *not* handing over editorship of the zine to someone else

Continues on page 11

i know what i like!

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by Brian Duguid

‘I DON’T KNOW IF IT’S ART, BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE!’, AS THE SAYING GOES.

SINCE YOU’RE ABOUT to read a serious discussion about the seriousness (or otherwise) of role-playing games, I thought I’d better start by stating the obvious. Role-playing games are *fun*. Whatever else they may aspire to, if they aren’t fun, they aren’t worthwhile.

One thing that they often aspire to is the status of ‘art’. In 1988, James Wallis declared that ‘role-playing gamers must become role-playing artists’. He adopted the position that although for the most part ‘merely’ games, the structures of role-playing games show similarities to the other forms of entertainment that have achieved recognition as ‘art’. For example, in looking at a film such as *The Green Ray*, where the general story line is predetermined but the actual detailed interaction between characters is improvised, there are obvious analogies to the way role-playing games are played.

In an article in 1994, Robin Laws suggested possible critical vocabularies that could be applied to role-playing games, taking for granted the assumption that the games can be treated as art. His article, *The Hidden Art*, asserted that ‘role-playing games have existed for many years as an art-form without a body of criticism’. It proceeded to trawl through the field of film criticism in a search for concepts and techniques that could be of use in a critical discussion of role-playing games.

While I don’t imagine anyone reading this would deny that role-playing is amenable to intelligent, critical debate, I think that too many problematic assumptions underlie Laws’ approach.

The Hidden Art took it for granted that role-playing games are an art-form, went on to assume that being an art-form is a ‘good thing,’ and then went on to assume that applying certain concepts of criticism to that ‘art-form’ must also therefore be a ‘good thing.’ None of these assumptions is necessarily correct, and I believe that role-playing games possess certain unique qualities that render all three assumptions untrue.

In 1988, James Wallis devoted a large portion of his *Raw Power* article to an attempt to prove that role-playing games are an art form. Like Laws, he assumed that being an art form is a ‘good thing’, and because he already believes that role-playing games are art, his arguments read more as self-justification than anything else. My dictionary has predictable trouble defining art, offering alternatives such as ‘human creativity’, ‘a making or doing of things that have form or beauty’ or ‘prod-

ucts of creative work’. With these vague standards it is easy to claim that role-playing meets the criteria, but of course, this doesn’t mean that you’ll see *Amber* being discussed on the television arts programmes in the near future.

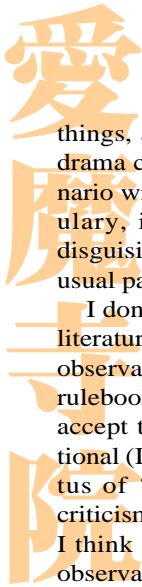
This is because ‘art’ is a quality defined not by a formula but by social agreement. We all agree that sculpture, painting and drama are art; we mostly accept that films are art; classical music is definitely art, jazz is probably art, and most rock music is probably not. You’re free to agree or disagree, but the point is that ‘art’ is not a nice clean objective word, it’s simply a collective name for those creative endeavours to which our culture agrees to apply it. Because we live in a fragmented society, and one that still attaches value to class distinctions, there are disagreements over whether certain activities are art or not. The traditional domination of the cultural media by the upper and middle classes has ensured that only ancient traditional forms are universally regarded as art. Everything else is suspect.

Adopting this kind of definition of art, where we look at how the word is used rather than what the lexicographers say, it’s clear that to the overwhelming majority of participants in our culture, role-playing games are not an art-form. It remains to be seen whether propaganda by role-players will change this situation, but I don’t think they will, and I think the reason is simple.

After listing a variety of traditional approaches to film criticism, and highlighting which aspects are superficially applicable to role-playing games, *The Hidden Art* engineers its own downfall by explicitly revealing its assumptions. It accepts that there is a distinction between the role-playing literature and the role-playing experience, and that while one of these is amenable to traditional forms of criticism, the other resists them most strongly.

It’s not difficult to find (imperfect) analogies to the role-playing literature in other fields. Rulebooks combine two functions. They act as an operating manual, instructions about what to do and how to do it, and in this respect they’re similar to, say, car maintenance manuals. They also describe an imaginary world in which the role-playing experience will be set, and for this there is no easy analogy. Scenario books, meanwhile, continue the function of describing an imaginary world, but also specify elements of plot and characters. It’s tempting, therefore, to suggest that they have a few similarities to film or theatre scripts, but although a script functions best where it ‘shows’ rather than ‘tells’, scenario books universally take the opposite approach.

As should be obvious, these analogies are very much flawed. Scenarios and scripts may contain one or two similarities, but they are emphatically *not* the same



things, and any attempt to apply the vocabulary of the drama critic to a discussion of a role-playing game scenario will be clumsy. By adopting an inadequate vocabulary, it will also run the risk of glossing over or disguising qualities in the scenario that fall outside the usual parameters of drama criticism.

I don't intend to explore the criticism of role-playing literature much further, although there are a couple more observations that are worth making. The comparison of rulebooks to mechanical manuals is fair enough if you accept that most role-playing rulebooks are only functional (I've yet to read a set of rules that aspire to the status of 'art', in any sense of the word). Functional criticism is a worthwhile field on its own, however, and I think there is room for it to develop it beyond basic observations that rules are too complex, too inconsistent, or too sterile. Areas such as cybernetics and organisational theory seem to offer a more developed vocabulary that encompasses these observations while encouraging a more fundamental overview.

The other notable point is that unlike a car maintenance manual, a rulebook is describing an imaginary situation. Rules do not just determine the success or failure of a character's actions, they may also determine less tangible aspects of the imaginary role-playing world. The rules-based simplification from a game like *Dungeons & Dragons* that characters can be described as Fighters, Thieves, Magic-Users, or whatever, has extensive implications for both the imaginary society being created, and the stylistic parameters of characterisation. In the first case, they suggest a rigid, hierarchical society, and in the second they suggest that characters fit into certain broad heroic archetypes. Any attempt to play a character whose actions and emotions aren't archetypal remains possible, but is working at cross-purposes to the rule system.

But this is only a digression. As mentioned above, the role-playing experience itself resists any form of art criticism. *The Hidden Art* recognises more than one reason why this is so. First, unlike many other forms of art, there is no fixed object to observe; there is no sculpture, no finished novel, no finished film. More importantly, the role-playing experience or process is simply not observable; it takes place primarily in the imagination. If you sit and watch a role-playing game session, you can enjoy the interaction between the characters, and the development of the plot, but no more than that. The actual experience, where you witness the characters as if they are real, in their imaginary environment, only takes place in the mind. It is different for every player (and for the referee, if there is one), and participation in the game, identification with a character is crucial.

So what does all this mean? For one thing, given that the actual game experience itself is the only important part of all the role-playing game elements, and given that there is no obvious way to subject it to traditional methods of art criticism, I believe the activity will never gain recognition as art, because the only people with the ability to define it as such, the art critics, will continue to find it unapproachable. It doesn't matter how sophisticated the game-play is, whether the players are all seasoned method actors or not, because as long as role-

playing games refuse the possibility of an external audience, they are safe from being considered 'art'.

Some people, looking perhaps for a veneer of respectability, for some form of validation to prove that role-playing games are more than just cooperative entertainment, are more than just recreation, might find this an unduly negative conclusion. I don't think they need be concerned. I can accept that role-playing games are capable of enormous sophistication and intelligence without the desire to have Melvyn Bragg peering over my shoulder.

You see, there is an alternate definition of art, although it only has much recognition on the fringes of political, artistic and philosophical debate. This alternate view suggests that everything we currently call art is flawed, because all art is *mediated* creativity. Because it relies on mediation, art can be considered an inevitably alienated activity; for the majority, enjoyment of art is enjoyment of other people's creativity, the acceptance that others have superior and privileged access to beauty and 'truth'. It promotes enjoyment of image rather than reality, of the abstract rather than the concrete. 'Alienation' of course is a major plank of Marxist theory, as well as other more recent political analyses such as post-modern philosophy and Situationist theory. It's not a particularly complex concept; in the sense applicable to art it refers to the separation of producer from consumer; the assumption that the specialisation of the occupation of 'artist' renders the audience's relationship to art unsatisfactory and partial. More plainly, art encourages people to be passive rather than active; so they become alienated from creativity.

According to Clive Bell, the intention of art is to transport us from the plane of daily struggle 'to a world of aesthetic exaltation'. The parallel with the aim of religion is obvious: distraction from the need to make everyday reality better to a passive observation of a 'better' reality. In short, escapism. The critic John Zerzan is blunt:

All art, as symbolization, is rooted in the creation of substitutes, surrogates for something else; by its very nature therefore, it is falsification... Why then would one respond positively to art? As compensation and palliative, because our relationship to life and nature is so deficient and disallows an authentic one. It is true for artist and audience alike; art, like religion, arises from unsatisfied desire.

If you accept that this is what art is *really* about, or even if you disagree but accept that there is some truth in it, then you could hardly be anxious for role-playing games to attain the status of art. Of course, 'role-playing' and 'escapism' are terms that sit happily together, and it's undeniably true that escapism is inevitably politically reactionary; it shows that rather than deal with the problems of the real world, which involves work and struggle, we would prefer to visualise a preferable alternative. In its favour, the visualisation of alternatives, the creation of dreams, could of course be considered fundamental to progressive political endeavour.

In fact, I think there are several peculiarities of role-playing games that deserve our attention and even cele-



bration, and which for me make the quest to treat the games as art entirely irrelevant and misguided.

First, as a form of entertainment, they share with other games a communal, social basis, quite unlike the passivity which novels, paintings or films engender. More than any other game, they involve conversation, dialogue and cooperative creativity; even if some participants often participate more than others (ie they take a more dominant role in the group), every player has an opportunity to contribute to the narrative. The interaction and inter-course between different imaginations represent a refreshing alternative to the one-way performer-audience relationship of recognised art forms.

More than this, role-playing games are a rare form of creativity that values the activity of *play* as anything other than just a childish impulse. In as much as play is spontaneous, and the polar opposite of that horrible word 'work', play is increasingly a respite from and a challenge to an alienated society.

Role-playing games help to demolish the myth of the 'creative genius' that lies at the heart of 'art', and that feminist theory (opposed primarily to 'male genius') has consistently attacked in recent decades. While all the participants do not contribute equally, role-playing games represent a rare example of an environment where everyone does have *some* creativity to contribute. At a time when post-modernist theory talks about the 'death of the author', in favour of an environment where the audience's creative interpretation of art is more important, role-playing games stand out as an example where there *is* no dichotomy to be resolved. This is an environment where creator and spectator are the same and where there is no need for interpreters or critics to mediate the creative experience.

I think that to seek to position role-playing games as just another art form, to look towards art for our critical vocabulary, is a mistake that risks drawing attention away from what is really important about role-playing. It seems to stem from insecurity, from the fear that what we are doing is somehow immature, and from a desire to have our 'seriousness' validated by the cultural arbiters of the bourgeoisie. I don't think role-playing needs any of that, and I think it's far better off without it. ▲

Brian Duguid takes a considerably less high-faluting approach when he writes about music for The Wire. He's the ex-editor of the role-playing fanzine The Blue Shaboo, and he co-founded the role-playing magazine Tales of the Reaching Moon. This article originally appeared in interactive fantasy #3. It has been slightly updated by its original author.

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This and That, *continued from page 8*

for unlucky 13 as every other fanzine in the universe does (well, as I did, anyway). You can order *Carnel* by post, or you can check out the web page at <http://www.bits.bris.ac.uk/rrees/carnel> (though you'll still have to order it by post, and quite right too).

Issue 13 contains a big *Werewolf: Wild West* scenario, and an array of articles spanning modern art, techno, magic in RPGS and *SLA Industries*. I feel there are few people around with Robert's level of creativity at using Word: it simply boggles me to imagine how he manages to get the results he does with it. He has a relationship with his word processor akin to that of Blair and Milosevic.

A new fanzine due out, with any luck, before the end of this year, is *Annwn*, a practical zine which has similar goals to *Mythago*, the subzine which some of you may remember appeared in *imagine* 20. More news on that as it happens.

Adam Reynolds has been in touch with me about his web business selling RPGs, in which he hopes to support British games especially. He also talked about putting copies of *imagine* up on the site so that they can be downloaded by customers. This, I suppose is close to getting fanzines into shops (something that drove me nuts with the old incarnation of the zine), but painlessly. The site is by no means fully functional yet, but you can check on its progress at <http://www.greatgames.co.UK>.

Another mention for a web site. This time Gaming Outpost (<http://www.gamingoutpost.com>). In particular, I recommend you check out the article by Ron Edwards on trends in the role-playing 'industry'.

Finally, a humorous little tale about copyright. You see, it transpires that *To Live and Die in Hong Kong*, a supplement for the *Hong Kong Action Theater* game (published by Event Horizon, who also publish *Swords of the Middle Kingdom*) features a piece of Keiko's artwork that had been drawn for *Outlaws of the Water Margin*, and which had also appeared in *imagine*. Unfortunately, the artwork was extremely poorly reproduced, as a result of being a 4K GIF file (designed to be reproduced on screen at 96dpi) rather than the 51K version (designed to be reproduced at 600dpi). What's more, no one had asked Keiko whether they could use it.

As you can imagine, I was rather surprised, to say the least. But I got in touch with John Phythyon of Event Horizon, and he was quick to apologize and make amends. I also discovered that the product in question had been laid out by the author of *HKAT*, Gareth-Michael Skarka, who was no longer with Event Horizon. Gareth-Michael explained that it was someone else's fault, someone who had collected artwork for him. He discreetly refrained from telling us who that person was, instead agreeing to apologise as a matter of honour.

Unfortunately his apology was two weeks late in arriving when *imagine* went to press, but perhaps it will appear in the next issue. In any case, it's reassuring to learn that there are people out there with a sense of personal responsibility, who can sort things out in a civilised manner without the necessity of enriching a bunch of lawyers and creating acrimony. ▲

the Generation Game

by Tim Harford

HOW DO WE GO ABOUT CREATING
THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PEOPLE
WHOSE ROLES WE TAKE, AND
WHAT RULES DO WE EMPLOY?

Design:

Alexandrovich Karenin

WAY BACK IN *White Dwarf* 70-odd, Pete Tamlyn won *Punslinger of the Year 1986* with his learned article, 'Origin of the PCs'. Times have changed, so let's take another look at the subject.

This article has been provoked by my own experience—after years as a referee, I'm getting involved as a player in two major campaigns. The tortuous births of Baron Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin and The Energetic and Modest Kotáru hiSháthirin have been with me throughout the writing.

Pete Tamlyn framed much of his original discussion in terms of the choice between character generation—largely random—and character design. That seems as good a point of departure as any.

Generation:

Kotáru hiSháthirin

Kotáru was 'rolled up' using Dave Morris's *Tirikélu* system. A central plank of the character generation system is a *D&D*-esque process of simply rolling attributes.

It's easy to knock holes in the random design system. It's not 'fair.' It's not 'logical.' It often used to be claimed that 'if players don't like the results, they'll suicide their characters and get new ones.' Presumably such childish players can be forgiven their grammatical errors, but I'd prefer to stay away from a game with one. But it is hard to accept with complete equanimity a character with no grand flaws, just a kind of hotchpotch incompetence. Fortunately, Kotáru isn't such a character. But I suspect I'd not be enjoying the game as much if he was...

In defence of randomization, a few throws of the dice by Lady Fate do a lot to thwart the forces of cliché. Kotáru has (Kirk-esque) Cleverness 20 and (Spock-esque) Reasoning 3—an absolute academic failure with a brilliant scheming mind! We lack literary models for this, and a good thing too. In Kotáru's case, this is a stimulating challenge for me.

Another advantage of the generation system is that I was able to produce Kotáru from scratch in about ten minutes, knowing nothing about the *Tirikélu* system.

The Baron Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin was designed for a game of *Traveller* using a system I've advocated for a long time, Steve Jackson's *GURPS*. *GURPS* has a full-on design system: attributes, training, status, appearance and contacts all have a price, with a budget set by the referee.

Now, it's all very well putting detailed design rules in, but one of the reasons it had been so long since I'd designed a character in *GURPS* was that I simply didn't have the energy—I'd let whoever was refereeing do it for me.

Now, with both a campaign and a character I could really get excited about, I'd been looking forward to designing Karenin.

Karenin took me eight hours to design—and this given ten years familiarity with the system and a very clear character conception to work from. But that wasn't the only problem.

In fact, the firm preconception I had was itself a real obstacle. The aim of character design systems is to allow you design exactly the character you want, within reason. But this only works if the character fits the system. Superficially, *GURPS* allows anything. In fact, there's an envelope of efficient designs which, while broad, excludes many perfectly reasonable character concepts.

The *GURPS* point system pretty much requires that you choose particular complementary abilities. We see a lot of sneaky, acrobatic warrior types, because if you buy high Dexterity to boost your combat skills, you might as well spend a few coppers to become an all round Olympic gymnast. You can get a similarly fearsome bruiser by making him strong and tough, but the fringe benefits of being able to shadow people, escape from handcuffs, cheat at cards and ride horses just don't come packaged in. Shame.

We also see wizards or engineers or netridders who also happen to be splendid tacticians, diplomats or doctors.

As I say, it's a broad envelope but there are plenty of perfectly fair designs that just don't fit.

Agreed that the *GURPS* prices aren't well conceived. But is there a more fundamental problem? Alexei faced a tremendous expense in acquiring the fencing and motorcycle skills he wanted, more as an affectation as anything else. In a fantasy campaign, being able to fight and ride as well as the Baron could would be formidable. In a science fiction campaign, it was mere colour, unlikely to be more than chrome. *GURPS* aspires to

price up characters for any background, and the project seems doomed to fail on those terms.

There are patches for this, of course. Frazer Payne suggested a simple multiplier. The referee spends a few minutes—or hours, more likely—going through the book and applying multipliers to each advantage and skill. There's a point break: Primary ($x1$), Secondary ($x^{2/3}$) and Peripheral ($x^{1/10}$). Alexei's strength is secondary, as is his Baronial status. His theological studies and his fencing are peripheral. On the other hand, his ability to pilot a starfighter is fairly central to the game... This sort of system may be worth a try, but in the end I wonder whether it's going to good enough to be worth the bother.

Certainly, any system which prices abilities based on how difficult it is to acquire them, rather than on how useful they will be, will fail to create 'fair' characters—which presumably was part of the aim.

One wonders whether we wouldn't be better off using Paul's 'Outlaws Light' system:

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 (although most areas should be 1 or 2). If you aren't 'mature,' then you might want to agree some numerical limits with the referee.

As character design systems go, I've seen worse. One might even say it was adequate.

Design and authoriality

Depending on one's view of the nature of role-playing, character design has a serious flaw, or great benefit.

In the Black Corner, we have White Wolf and the Storytellers. Boo!

In the Corner of Iridescent Holiness, we have me, Dave, Paul and all right-thinking folk.

The bout is to decide whether the players and referee are combining to tell a story—the Black Corner's viewpoint—or whether plot is something which only exists in retrospect, having arisen from the interaction of fictional personalities.

The Black Corner holds that the character is a storytelling tool: the player should wield this tool to help the other players and the referee produce a good story. We might call this an authorial approach.

The good guys suggest that the pursuit of a good story is self-defeating. The best way to play, we suggest, is to treat your character as a person and think yourself into the role. You may skew what the referee had in mind, but perhaps she should have been more flexible—with a good referee and a mature bunch of players, the outcome will usually be a fine story which surprises everyone.

Anyone who's encountered this old chestnut will have their own opinion. Suffice it to say that a self-conscious process of character design is highly authorial and so it plays into the hands of the Storytellers.

In creating Alexandrovich Karenin, I could have been

a storyteller and designed a character with a view to helping the referee. I'm glad I didn't, because I am sure the result would have been insipid. Instead, I turned myself into the referee for a while. I thought about how he should be played, the kind of political interests he would have, his contacts, his allies, his old lovers and his mortal enemies. This has certainly provided the referee with some material to go on, but at the same time gives him a real headache. This kind of conflict is inevitable in a character design system.

Kotáru grows up

Let's return to Kotáru. I said that Kotáru took about ten minutes to generate, but this was disingenuous of me. Kotáru's character actually took eight hours, just the same as the Baron Karenin.

As I've said, while creating Karenin, I was referee for the day. The result was good, I feel. The eight hour generation of Kotáru hiShathirin was better. Having taken a few minutes to put together the basics about Kotáru, and to think a little bit about what he was like, I joined the other players and the referee in a joint prelude.

I've argued before that a good prelude might involve some or all of the players, and span many events rather than focusing on a single epiphany. And in this case, that prelude turned out to be a fantastic session.

As Kotáru grew up we found out about life on Falesa Island, the Hlüss under the pile of stones on the rock, my unexpected enemy, when Kotáru's wife Kala turned the air blue with her curses, and whether she was justified, how Kotáru's weird younger cousin, Kishónu hiLanáka is insatiably curious, and what the friendship between Kishónu and Kotáru is really based on.

When the game itself started, we understood how weird The Nom was, and how great the sacrifice of Chóndrek hiLanáka, and why we owed the Stranger great honour.

Much as I love Alexei, I wonder which was the better use of eight hours.

das and dip

Paul Mason tells me that this discussion has been called 'DAS vs DIP,' or Design At Start versus Develop In Play.

GURPS is both the archetypal design system, and the classic method of producing full formed characters. I turned my mind to the problem of developing *GURPS* characters in play, and it turns out to be almost impossible to do this without chucking out the whole character system. Many other systems turn out to be strange hybrids in which—for instance—attributes are rolled, but skills are chosen within some kind of budget. This is less logical, but fits much better with a 'Develop in Play' approach.

I look forward to seeing a character creation system designed with the same thought and care as *GURPS*, but with the aim of allowing development in play. It shouldn't be too hard to design.



a modest proposal

Pete Tamlyn set the industry a challenge to produce a game with many ways of producing a character, from a full-fledged design system to a method which would allow fairly detailed characters to be generated with a few quick rolls of the dice—either to allow play to commence quickly, or to allow the referee to produce NPCs.

We haven't seen too many examples of that (the *GURPS* random generation system is atrocious and entirely unusable). Here are a few suggestions, at least.

From the anti-authorial viewpoint, a full-fledged design system is not what's required. Instead, we need to think more about the process which produced the person represented on our creased and coffee-stained character sheets. What is her history? Where did he grow up? How did she spend her time when she was young? Who trained him to hold a sword like that? Why is he so nervous of left-handed men? Why won't she go to confession? And what does all this mean for the numbers on the piece of paper the player holds in his hand?

The player needs a framework to think about these questions. This could be anything from a simple list of points to consider, to a programmed prelude along the lines of a gamebook (Dave Morris's idea)—make choices about your character's youth, and note down the skill bonuses along the way.

An example:

1 When you were very young, did people say about you:

- 'He'll be a great warrior, like his father.' (2)
- 'Such a sickly thing! A miracle he survived.' (3)
- 'He's got such a sparkle in his eyes.' (4)
- 'Always getting into trouble, that child.' (5)

Each answer will affect skills and attribute modifiers, and some may spin the character down unforeseen paths. Later on, the questions may be a little less mystical. These would be questions about how you spent your adolescence:

78 Now that you are a squire, what do you do with your spare time?

- Flirt with the ladies of court (+1 *Bard*, +1 *Etiquette*)
- Run errands for a castle craftsman (+2 to a *Craft* skill)
- Spend time around the stables (+1 *Riding*, +1 *Animal handling*)
- Keep training (+2 *Sword*, -1 *Charisma*)
- Get up to mischief (+1 *Stealth*, +1 *Pickpocket*)

It's possible to go into a lot more detail, but that's probably not appropriate. It may well be appropriate to elaborate, but that's probably best left to the player's imagination—or even better, some prelude time with the referee present.

The thing that appeals to me about the gamebook format is that it can be made fractal—you can zoom in or out depending on the level of detail you require. To speed the process up, sections of decision-making can be bypassed and given summary statistics:

Train as a squire: +2 *Sword*, +1 *Etiquette*, +1 *Riding*, +1 *Strength*.

Or, at any point, a one-line summary can be made into a play session lasting anything from a couple of minutes to a whole afternoon. Just how successful was that flirtation with the court ladies? You picked up some skill points, perhaps, but what else: A jealous rival? A reputation? A social disease? A bouncing baby boy? An adoring new friend?

To allow for these fractal possibilities, the generation system needs to be modular. For example, character development could consist of:

- ▼ Potential at birth: attributes, rolled randomly, perhaps, or chosen using a point system;
- ▼ Childhood: roll on a table, play it out, or use a programmed scenario;
- ▼ Adolescence: as above;
- ▼ Apprenticeship: as above. Childhood, adolescence and apprenticeship could all be combined in a summary template to save time, if that's what is required—back to the old 'character class' system;
- ▼ Careers. *Traveller* pioneered the idea of describing the training a character had received in terms of one or more careers. Each career, again, can be described by summary statistics, or the highlights can be played out.

This process builds a tremendous amount of background detail. It also allows for a significant degree of player choice while avoiding the absurd mathematical trade-offs inherent in a point-based design system.

It has its disadvantages, too. It's a lot of work for the referee and for the designers—but they love that. It's also quite incompatible with the 'generic' vision of *GURPS*: character generation is inextricably bound up with the details of the game world. Some people will find that an objection, but for me it's a tremendous way to introduce a game world and a type of campaign.

I'm struck by how little has changed in the hobby since Pete Tamlyn's article. I think that a prelude-heavy form of character generation is a step forward, despite the practical objections. Perhaps these ideas are most likely to be carried forward with electronic resources. Until then, the young heroes Alexandrovich Karenin and Kotáru hiShathirin march forward into a bright future. ▲

Tim Harford edited the Oxford University Role-playing Society Magazine Nightflyer for a while until grim necessity forced him to flee the dreaming spires and do battle with the black ogre of modern society (ie get a job). He has contributed to a number of gamebook and computer game projects, and is surely one of a fairly small number of people to have run a regular role-playing game with the creator of the game as a regular player (in this case Dragon Warriors being the game in question). He is the editor of Annwn, alluded to elsewhere. You can email him at tim.harford@virgin.net.



Outlaws LIGHT ②

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO ROLEGAMING RULE DESCRIPTION: HOW DO WE DO IT?

LAST ISSUE I presented some mechanics that you can use to resolve issues arising in role-playing games. They were highly sketchy, and deliberately so, but it was interesting that comments focused more on omission of details than anything more fundamental.

In presenting a one-page rules set I was attempting to make a point which has been made many times before. The rules are details: they are the trees from which part of the wood is composed. So let's consider a different approach to writing rules for role-playing games. Let's try to look at the wood.

goal

The purpose of this game is to take part in a story. The story isn't *told* by anyone, but is built up from the improvised contributions of all the participants. See the sample for an idea of how this works.

how to play

The game creates a story. Participants in the game all play a part in creating the story, by making *contributions*. The goal of the game is to make it as easy as possible for participants to *act* or *describe* their improvised contributions to the game, without spoiling the story.

participants

There are two basic types of participants in the game. *Players* are a little like actors. They will usually *act* the life of a single person: their *character*. The *referee* is more like a director. The referee *describes* sensory information in the story, and may occasionally *act* other characters in the story, as needed.

action

A participant who contributes to the game by *acting* does so by saying what their character is trying to do. So in the sample, Fred says: 'I climb up the gantry to the deck above.' If you like, when this action is speech, the participant can act the speech by actually speaking as the

character. So later in the sample, when Fred says 'Set it to stun!' he's actually saying what his character is saying. In some cases you might need to check which it is, but usually it will be obvious. Two or more participants can thus act the roles of their characters, conducting a conversation which forms part of the story.

Anything which is acted by a participant takes place as described, unless it is *challenged* by another participant (usually this is the job of the referee, but other players may also challenge if they like). A participant whose action has been challenged must prove that the character could succeed. To do this, they need to use an agreed game mechanic (such as *Outlaws Light* ①, presented last issue). An example of a game mechanic is that you must roll 9 or less on two dice to hit with your phaser. Really skilled characters like Worf need an 11 or less. Other Klingons need 7 or less.

Some complex interactions, such as fights, often involve continual implied challenges, and therefore may require a lot of use of mechanics. Other actions, if they seem reasonable given the character and the story, can pass unchallenged.

description

A participant who contributes to the game by *describing* does so by talking about something accessible to the senses of characters in the game. This is usually the job of the referee, but players may also occasionally describe things connected with their characters. So in the sample, Sam describes what the players can see once they have climbed the gantry, and what they can feel.

Descriptions, like actions, can be challenged. They shouldn't be contradicted outright, but senses can be mistaken! A player who describes a scene is speaking only for their character, and other players, or the referee, may perceive things differently. Note that the referee is privileged in description: because they speak for 'everybody' a player who challenges a referee's description is simply describing what their own character perceives, and not what anyone else does.

Obviously, not everything needs to be described, and referees should beware of trying to act events in the story in the guise of description! For example, if Sam in the sample goes on to say 'When you walk on to the transporter pad, there is an explosion' this is wrong, because the players haven't yet said that they are acting by walking on to the transporter pad. Remember, you're not *telling* a story, you're *creating* one!

Sample

Fred (player): I climb up the gantry to the deck above.

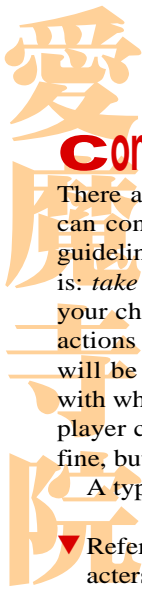
Jane (player): I'm right behind him. I'm drawing my phaser.

Sam (referee): The Romulans are already on the transporter pad. You feel a tingling in the air...

Jane: I'm firing over the Captain's shoulder.

Fred: Set it to stun!

Sam: Too late, she fired already.



Contributing

There are no fixed rules governing how and when you can contribute to a story, but there are some obvious guidelines that should be followed. The most important is: *take your cues from the story*. If you act something your character is doing tomorrow, then everyone else's actions today will have to be done in flashbacks. This will be difficult, and may even cause a contradiction with what you acted about tomorrow. Challenging other player characters, or getting into conflicts with them, is fine, but blocking the story itself is generally bad form.

A typical sequence of contributions will be:

- ▼ Referee *describes* the situation facing the player characters, and/or uses a character to act a stimulus.
- ▼ Players respond by acting their character's reaction. There's no fixed order to this, but if a player feels that their character should be able to act first, they always have recourse to a challenge.
- ▼ Participants respond to the actions. This may lead to further description—the referee, or a player, may describe the result of actions.
- ▼ Out of all these contributions, a sequence of events will soon be evident. This is the story.

Even in your own mind, separate Action from Description. At first it's tempting to think that your character could do absolutely anything, but soon you find that the limitations are what create drama. Maybe you can't leap that chasm, maybe you're not fast enough to outrun the fireball. Maybe the Ferengi saw you pick his pocket. Sometimes you should challenge yourself, not wait for other players to do it.

Timing

Time for the characters in the story does not pass at the same rate as it does for the players. At times, it will pass very slowly, if you're working out something that doesn't take long, but needs to be explained in detail. At other times, it will pass very quickly, as with a long journey in which nothing much happens. As with most things in the game, time can be skipped over, subject to challenge by any of the other participants.

Winning

There are no rules to cover winning. Players can decide on their own ideas of what constitutes winning. However they may find that other players don't agree with them! So how do you win? Well, how does a character win in a story?

ending

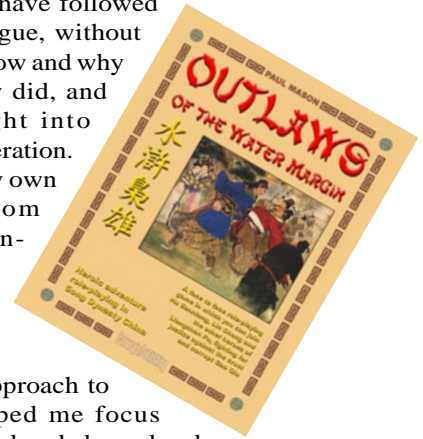
The game takes place in game sessions. A game session is when the participants get together to play the game. It can end at any time that is convenient for the partici-

pants. The end of a game session doesn't mean the end of a story. The story can continue in the next session. A story only ends when everyone agrees that it's finished, and you start a new one, or when you stop playing the game entirely!

Credits

Thanks to Dave Morris for providing comments and useful examples based on *Star Trek*. I had originally planned to fit these rules in one page, but with the examples they've slipped over onto two.

In writing this, I've been particularly inspired by all those games which have started with some vague waffle about how role-playing is like improvisational radio theatre, have followed it with a sample dialogue, without any explanation as to how and why people said what they did, and then plunged straight into tables of character generation. I'm also indebted to my own players, half of whom were complete beginners.



news

Thinking about this approach to role-playing has helped me focus some of the ideas I had already been developing for *Outlaws*. I was already disappointed with the way the game plunged the reader almost straight into mechanics. This was especially galling given that the game I actually run involves minimal use of the rules, and generally about ten dice rolls per session.

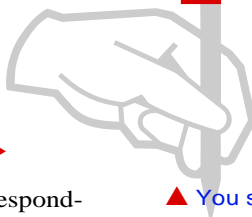
You may also have noticed that I had run into something of a block as far as the background was concerned. I just couldn't find a satisfactory way to present it. So I've decided to rejig the game a bit (groan). Instead of starting with the rules, and then featuring the background, it'll not be in the correct order: it will start with the game experience. The game will start right off with a scenario, and sufficient background and mechanics to get playing. It will then follow up with background. Mechanics will be provided where needed, but I will be at pains to emphasise their disposable nature (maybe I'll put them all in sidebars or something?).

I've been thinking about a few other points too, but more of them in the next issue. Meanwhile, here's an interesting topic for discussion, suggested by Chuan Lin, who reviewed *Swords of the Middle Kingdom* this issue. He asks about the importance of names in role-playing games. Specifically, the importance of the *meaning* of names. For example, in Tekumel, if you get hold of the Tsolyani books, you can choose a Tsolyani name that means something. Similarly, in a Chinese game, you can get a dictionary (or even *Mystic China*) and choose a name for its meaning. How important do you feel this is? Is it helpful to get into character? And does it contribute towards your feeling of the authenticity of the background? Answers on an electronic postcard... ▲



colloquy

Letters to the editor



愛魔寺院

ONCE AGAIN, A sterling turn-out from correspondents ensures that the frequency of the zine has not choked off too much of the potential discussion. Quite the opposite, in fact.

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

▲ You said it!

Adrian Bolt

Tell Robert Irwin that 'Are you winning?' is a yes/no question, whereas 'Do you think you're winning?' is your outlook on how you're doing.

David Platt

Alternate Realities? On your recommendation, managed to get hold of a copy of *Chameleon* and I enjoyed reading it (again, I don't currently have a printer, so I don't know when I'll get to play it), but where has their web page got to? Would Carter Butts tell us, please?

Carter Butts

The site's still there, but we've had problems with the name resolution. (It's a long story.) In any event, we have a mirror site up and running at <http://sds-grad.hss.cmu.edu/~eagle/AR>; there's a pointer from there to the original site (via its IP address). Once we get things back to normal, we'll send out an announcement, but having found it useful to have a mirror around, we'll probably keep that up too....

Adrian Bolt

If Paul Watson is going to plug POP Enterprises he could at least have given the telephone number so I could phone for a catalogue/price list; much gnashing of teeth. The distributors are monolithic in thought also.

▲ Telephone: 0115 913 0233.

Robert Rees

You mentioned that *imagine* is no longer influential and rest assured Master Mason I shall pass this new agenda on to the droogs. We no longer follow the *imagine* line.

▲ You've got that quite clear then? Don't do what I tell you!

reactions

Robert Rees

Dear Sir,

I was appalled to discover that my name was only mentioned four times in your 'magazine' I hope this grave error can be rectified in future issues.

▲ Getting comments to me on time, and not whining because I can get my fanzine out and you can't might help. Sending me lots of comments would also be useful... ah, I see you've got that one covered.

Tom McGrenery

Nice one. Adequate one, even.

Rob Alexander

I did notice a worrying trend, though. In the letters pages you seemed unusually serene, agreeing with people far more than is customary. Are you ill?

▲ Just happy, which I guess to most people in the modern world amounts to pretty much the same thing.

Adrian Bolt

What's this? June 14th? A deadline? I suddenly have a strong urge to shake you hard and cry 'Pull yourself together, man!'

▲ Entirely deserved. The pathetic lengths some people will go to to get more mail on their birthday...

Tom McGrenery

'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!' And 12 guineas go to the first person to spot the thinly-veiled *Due South* quote in 'Magic Moments!'

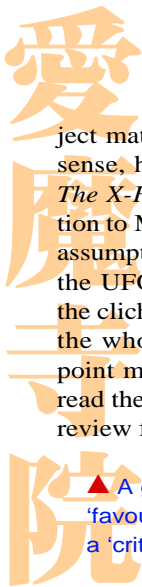
Robert Maier

I don't think this was ever thought seriously, but the hidden word is of course 'sucker'.

delta farce

Adrian Bolt

Matthew's review had persuaded me that *Delta Green* is a good book, but this somewhat misses the point. This feels like I'm stating the obvious but a glowing review is not sufficient reason *in itself* to buy something. You could find glowing reviews of books for trainspotters or fashion, or philately, or DIY or whatever, but you wouldn't automatically buy them, would you? The sub-



ject matter has to appeal. *Delta Green* succeeds in one sense, however, in that the idea of merging *CoC* with *The X-Files* does indeed fill me with horror. My objection to Matthew's response is that it is based on a wrong assumption. The *Delta Green* review mentioned it adds the UFO-government conspiracy stuff while avoiding the clichés of the genre, something I believe impossible; the whole genre is one big cliché. Another pertinent point might be that I didn't dismiss *DG* out of hand; I read the review and then decided it didn't appeal, so the review fulfilled its purpose.

▲ A good point. It's so easy for people to forget that a 'favourable' review can turn somebody off a game, and a 'critical' review can have the opposite effect.

Adrian Bolt

I'm not happy with you saying I accused John Tynes of copying, though it's my fault entirely: I lazily used *X-Files* as shorthand for 'UFO government conspiracy'. By using the former it can be construed as copying; had I used the latter it's public domain. The whole problem of this predated discussion is that the public perception is based on when something is published. There's no practical alternative. John Tynes is in a no win situation: he can rush something out that's poor and first or do it right and be seen as jumping on the bandwagon. It's unjust and I don't know the answer. Nah, you'll be accused of copying *Bushido*... (Yes I know it's Japanese.)

▲ Funny you should mention that. Ben Goodale made comments along these lines (what he actually said was 'Why do we need the *Water Margin* when there's already *Bushido*?) when I first mentioned that I was doing a *Water Margin* game, over ten years ago.

Adrian Bolt

There's also a problem with originality. John Tynes has the original idea of putting UFO-gov. con. stuff into *CoC*. But UFO-gov. con. is so grossly unoriginal and that far outweighs John. As a general impression do you say it's 1% original or 99% unoriginal (pick whatever numbers)? Does it depend on whether you're a half empty or half full kind of guy? I can't blame John for the unoriginality of UFO-gov. con. but I can blame him for his use of it. But his use of it *is* original and we've come to a rather unsatisfactory full circle. (And he's obviously done one hell of a good job when starting from some unpromising material.)

▲ All of which segues in a highly contrived and prejudicial way into...

Over the top

Tom McGrenery

I agree with your *OTE* review—I sort of liked it in some ways, but not in others. The stupid idea of a US enclave I really didn't like, especially the introduction to it, which essentially says 'D'Aubaine wanted to emulate the best nation on the planet, so she chose the USA.' None of the example adventures in it really impressed

me, but I'd be most likely to run it freewheeling like the 'party' one suggested.

Jonathan Tweet

I'd enjoy going through the review and rebutting elements point-by-point. (The accusation that the game was at all inspired by *X-Files* really raises my hackles, for instance.) Such a painstaking rebuttal would be gratifying for me to write but tedious for anyone to read, so I think I'll hit the main points: no, I'm not a libertarian; yes, the game is chauvinistic; and the review missed a major point when considering the game (which is relevant to the chauvinism bit). A printable response will follow.

▲ 'But when?' the editor pondered. 'When?' Actually I have to say that the *X-Files* comment above caused me to reflect on my thoughtless insult-slinging. Really, *no one* deserves to be accused of liking the *X-Files* without concrete evidence (preferably a confession).

Ian Moore

I am interested by how down on *OTE* you are. I've never played it (well, we used the rule system once, but in a completely different setting) but have always regarded it fondly, mainly through reading the player's guide and positive reviews. It's possible that even if the actual background is spanky it can still be great to play—the players by definition won't know anything about the background and will just experience the disorientation.

Myles Corcoran

I can see your point with respect to the background being essentially a dressed-up USA, with perhaps only shallow comments to make on that culture, but I take issue with the sideways comment that Jonathan Tweet was writing a libertarian tract. I can't claim to know much of the man's political beliefs but I didn't get that impression from reading *Over the Edge*. What led you to such a conclusion?

▲ Difficult to say, really. Looks like I was more on the ball with the accusation of nationalism.

David Platt

Is it really a 'serious' setting? I'd probably put it in the same category as *Paranoia*, although perhaps I am missing the point. My preferred way of playing it would be as a send-up of all the conspiracy theory games. I don't object as much as you (Paul) do to 'gimmicky' games so long as they are simple gimmicky games, they make a nice change of pace from full-time campaigns. I agree heartily with you about the copyright issue. Of course, a similar state of affairs exists in the music industry, interestingly enough—my heart always sinks when I see on a CD case that the rights to the music of a favourite band are owned by the label.

Myles Corcoran

With respect to the point you made by analogy with Bruce Lee's teaching of *Jeet Kune Do* and urging his 'practitioners to be natural' while failing to see that what



was natural to him after years of *Wing Chun* training was quite different, I don't like the subtext here of 'you can't role-play rules-light and improvisationally without having first served an apprenticeship under more formal and rules-heavy systems'. Tosh. My wife and a good number of my friends who role play came to the hobby through first exposure to systems as diverse as *Pendragon*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Over The Edge* and even *Paranoia*. For a vocal proponent of culture games, and of minimizing the *auteur* influence of the referee it seems a bit much to be implying that players need a good spell in the *D&D* mines (or whatever more mechanistic system you prefer) before they're ready for something like *Over the Edge*.

▲ I don't much like that subtext either, and I'd like to clarify, and backpedal somewhat. You see my problem is that I don't think rules light games are going to be comprehensible to all beginners without a clear and well-structured explanation of how role-playing is done, something I haven't seen in any published rolegame. This problem is particularly great when considering the position of the beginner referee.

Myles Corcoran

You mentioned in passing that Bruce Baugh suggested using the *Over the Edge* rules for a Judge Dee campaign, to which you replied that 'his solution wasn't going to be much use to them' for someone wanting to role play but not having Bruce's background in Chinese history and the Dee novels. Doubtless the same complaint could be made about adapting any rules-set to a new background. In the absence of any Judge Dee specific system with mechanics tuned to suit the background and feel of the novels, *Over the Edge* strikes me as having at least the advantage of a minimum of mechanical distractions and associated straitjacket rules as might be found in other apparently 'universal' systems like GURPS. Any one wanting to play in a fictional or historical universe has the responsibility of doing a bit of work reading up on the background if they are looking for verisimilitude in play and a feeling of actual immersion. I agree with you that a well described cultural background in a rolegame makes for self-generating plots, stories and other events, putting the players on more even footing with the referee and helping to escape from referee-led sessions. But if you want such a background in your games you're going to have to work at it.

▲ I don't entirely agree with this. Moreover, it isn't unreasonable to ask that the workload be reduced a little. That *Over The Edge* lends itself mechanically to application in a wide variety of backgrounds—more so than so-called 'universal' systems—I don't dispute. What I worry about is that it might quietly paper over cracks in a background, and it is those cracks which make distinctive settings what they really are.

George Pletz

You cite the simple elegance of the mechanic and I couldn't agree more. It is an easy system to grasp and doesn't require the chapter and verse format of most games. This is the game which fully disconnected me

from many years as a gurpshead and returned focus to a confluence of story and system rather than what set piece could feed the growing action jones that fills players thoroughly enchanted by large piles of dice.

Now I realize from looking over numerous issues of *imagine* that you are not a fan of the genre that *OTE* is in and I can appreciate that. My contention is that you seem to discredit the game's ability to be provocative because you disdain the background.

And this provocativeness is something that pretentious or not gives The Old Bronx Cheer to games which hinge on the same old boring angst tropes. The proliferation of conspiracies in itself is a parody on conspiracies, right? To try to use every possible conspiracy in the book in the course of a campaign would lead to the game invariably falling apart.

Why fault it for not being truly postmodern when you say you hate postmodern? At least it tries to broaden the discussion of what you can do with this terminally adolescent hobby. Sure you can say it rips off Dick and Burroughs but maybe it'll push someone to be a little more daring and put down that *Forgotten Realms* novel.

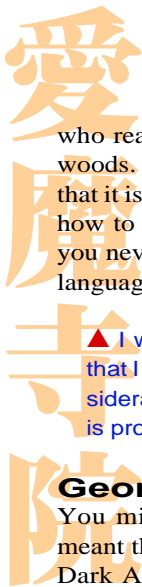
▲ I don't hate 'postmodernism' in its own right. What I dislike is cartoon postmodernism—the adoption of certain tropes and clichés associated with postmodernism. Chief amongst these are self-referentialism or 'Hey ma! Look, it's only a story!' Drawing attention to the fictionality of a narrative has a point when the narrative is in a medium where people have a tendency to forget the fictionality (film and literature, for example). It's not necessary in art, because the medium of the painting already draws attention to its constructed nature (or at least, the frame does) and sets off a boundary to create a similar tension. My point is that it's a weak gambit in role-playing because the fictionality of the medium is blatantly obvious and therefore in no need of having attention drawn to it. Rather than being a useful dissociative and provocative strategy it ends up being nothing more than an attempt to look 'cool' and 'detached'.

George Pletz

Not to say that it is the perfect game and setting but what is? But to the credit of the game it is one of the few games I have which lives up to the promise that it is the only book you need to play. Tweet makes no bones that you can alter it as you see fit, disregarding whatever you don't like. There's no über-story which must be followed, no element which can't be changed. In one version of the game released outside of the US, Al Amarja is in The Caribbean if I'm not mistaken. So yes the cultural element of the game is vague and Americanized but this can easily be rectified by the GM who wants to work it up to their own designs.

Another admirable thing about *OTE* is it really brings all of its 'pretentiousness' down to a level where you can grasp it, unlike the labyrinth which is the backstory of *The World of Darkness*. Talk about a game with too much on its plate!

Now this is not to say I don't have an appreciation for the culture type game, though I have never met anyone



who really and truly ran one. Probably my neck of the woods. The success of the Euro-fantasy background is that it is quickly grasped and you don't have to figure out how to pronounce those funny words: escapism means you never have to learn odd customs or speak any other language than common (English, of course).

▲ I wouldn't disagree with much of this, save to note that I believe that 'Euro-fantasy' is almost certainly considerably more interesting than *DragonLance et al* and is probably only rarely to be found in English...

George Pletz

You misunderstand what I meant by Euro-fantasy. I meant that to encapsulate the inauthentic East European Dark Ages Lite which is still often attached to RPGs. And yes this is clearly a very US take on fantasy but it is regularly set in a cultureless culture modelled on the Anglo-Saxon wonderland so many mistake England to be; albeit garnished with barbarians and with uninformed tourists playing the parts of locals sans any sense of regional dialect or history.

I have found that a lack of other cultures in games is directly tied to the delusions of superiority that your standard self-esteem challenged gamer has. RPG contains wish fulfilment and some people's desires are more basic than others. And that's how a cultureless culture wins out I think. It allows for a visceral release, a direct transposing of player through character onto the sound-stage of the imagination.

moments

Tom McGrenery

The 'Magic Moments' article was one of the worst pieces of journalism I have ever seen. Nice intro to it, by the way.

▲ I thought it was adequate, anyway. The title was a bit silly, though, didn't you think?

Bill Hoad

I think 'Magic Moments' was somewhat long-winded, but did hit the nail on the head with the reason that magic is such a staple of roleplay—a wish to distance the game from reality and any moral considerations. This somewhat counters claims by roleplay evangelists that RPGs are improving by broadening our experience.

Jose Ramos

I think the magic in the games is there to help you dissociate the Game and the Character from Life and Yourself. It helps to label the RPG as entertainment in your own mind, and probably helps to blot out other discoveries you make of your own mind through your characters (as differentiated from the traits you consciously invest on the character). It helps to foster the unreality of the experience (not during but after the session), and to dismiss it.

▲ So you're saying that role-playing games have tended to have fantastical backgrounds because their

players are, in some unconscious way, afraid of their own imaginations and therefore want to absolutely clear that what they are doing is 'unreal'?

Now, Pete Blanchard, meet Robert Rees. Robert Rees, meet Pete Blanchard.

Pete Blanchard

'Magic Moments.' Interesting, but flawed.

'Realistic' settings: What is 'real?' Who cares? Perceptions of the real differ. I have no truck with religion, the paranormal and putative extra-terrestrial visitations. There are people who believe these things to be real. Less flippantly, differing perspectives on the world, especially political and moral, are a potential source of conflict and disharmony. There is a greater need for 'limitations' with a real world game than one with a more fictive background. There are no characters in drama—only dramatic devices.

Robert Rees

'Magic Moments' was interesting but in terms of its analysis of why fantasy and sci-fi are more popular genres than 'real life' fiction it fell far behind a similar *Aslan* article written a while ago. That identified that fantasy and sci-fi are perhaps more suited as style of fiction to role-playing adaption than more high brow literature. That article (and I am deliberately not trying to present these thoughts as my original ideas, although I agree a great deal with them) suggested that fantasy and sci-fi (and I would add to that list detective novels, Mythos, westerns and thrillers) essentially rely on a 'what happened next' technique. There is a plot and it is unveiled through the characters' uncovering of 'what is going on' and their reactions to their discovery. It doesn't matter whether the plot is a Russian mole in MI6 planning to sell out the country or a evil priest planning to sacrifice the country to the Outer Lords, the literary device is the same and can be readily adapted to a RPG style of play.

In that respect *Battleship Potemkin* RPG is a harder proposition; the GM and players know that the backdrop is a successful revolution so the PCs' efforts revolve more around the smaller issues that get swept up in the great tide of history. Still an opportunity for a great game but one that requires more skill from the GM to present the idea in an appealing way.

I also strongly, strongly disagree that people do not play 'soap opera' type games. What is the average *Vampire* politics game but one large soap opera? Where I do agree with Tom is that players do expect to play out of the ordinary characters. And in this I fully agree with them, there is no piece of fiction or film or any other creative work that is dedicated to or about ordinary people doing ordinary things. The average creative work if it deals with ordinary people at all usually involves those ordinary people in extraordinary situations or at some defining period of their lives that is some way extraordinary.

Watching a film about people who were completely average leading completely average lives with no narrative driving force would be extremely dull, worthy perhaps but unentertaining.

I realise that I have come close to contradicting some of the ideas I have put forward in imazine before but I



think I escape by the skin of my teeth. To have some creative merit something about a piece of work should be extraordinary—not necessarily entertaining.

Pete Blanchard

Actually, the ‘vast array of popular arts outside rolegaming’ very often has fantastical content. Tom mentions surveys as a measure of film popularity. This is flawed measure. A survey in a magazine or upmarket newspaper reflects the prejudices of its readers. Of course, a *Guardian*-run survey will be topped by *Citizen Kane*. A better measure of popularity would be box office receipts, video purchase and rental figures, the amount that tv is prepared to bid to show a film and to an extent, especially in more recent times, the sales of associated merchandise.

Not just film. If I wander into a bookshop and look at the top ten fiction, well, there’s usually a Pratchett and an Iain M. Banks novel there. Some of the non-genre books will be equally as fantastic—the latest bonkbuster, ‘historical’ novels stuffed full of anachronism, vaguely fashionable ‘literary’ novels that are an exercise in style over content and that style takes precedence over everything else.

War stories tend fall into two camps—those that take the line that there is something heroic and even glorious about war itself. Others portray the grim reality of war—there is sometimes heroism here, but it is in spite of the brutal, dehumanising effects of war. Compare and contrast any war film with John Wayne in with, say, *Das Boot*. There is a third category—essentially war pornography, but it is not popular. Yes, killing a man is an almost sexual release, almost like orgasm. I kid you not.

Oh, and Eisenstein could hardly be accused of realism, not even socialist realism.

Cinema *vérité* is almost uniformly dull.

There is no such thing as ‘realistic’ fiction—essentially, the characters, events in a novel are not subject to the same forces as people and events in the ‘real world.’ They are subject to the whims of the author, who has their own agenda. Every piece of fiction is essentially fantasy—it does not exist in the real world. It may have resonances with, it may parallel the ‘real world’ but it is not real.

I don’t really understand Tom being so hung up on film as a source for rolegames enthusiasm. With the obvious exception of a few sf based games, the only rolegames directly inspired by genre films are niche products of dubious quality. Doubtless when the fad for *manga* or John Woo passes they will be consigned to the attic or dustbin. Having said that, individual films often inspire plot.

Dragging in LARP does Tom no favours. I have this terrible vision of lunatics in rubber monster costumes. That or Andrew Rilstone in a white sheet and sandals. Rubber monsterisms aside, what I’ve managed to garner about the current state of play in the LARP scene frankly appals me. For pomposity, pretension and vacuous pseudo-intellectualism, they beat the earnest young men of rolegaming hands down.

They focus almost entirely on inter-personal relationships? How awful. No plot, no narrative drive and that

fat bloke’s unnaturally hairy feet.

I hope that someone else mentions Jung and Campbell because I can’t be bothered to spell it out. Realistic settings—well, this sort of stuff doesn’t sit well—there’s too much noise. Too cluttered a stage for archetypes.

I would point to the popularity of historical romances. Yes, things were simpler in the old days. It was easier to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, butter from margarine. Simplistic stories do well against more unambiguous backdrops. The real world is full of ambiguity.

Perhaps the popularity of non real world settings is linked to feelings of alienation and dislocation for the world? I wonder if Tom’s concern for ‘responsibility’ is another manifestation of wanting approval from outsiders.

Robert Rees

Certainly this was another article that went a long way to say very little and came to very few conclusions. It did mention trying to take RPGs into the mainstream again—something of a Holy Grail I feel for gamers that want to be taken ‘seriously.’ I think though that there is nothing wrong with pursuing a minority interest. I’d like to see wider spread understanding of RPGs but I don’t necessarily want to see RPGs go to the High Street. I wonder if other interest groups have the same fascination with the crossover—does *Motorcross Monthly* have letters bemoaning the lack of mainstream appeal in dirt biking?

I think that RPGs will eventually trickle through into the general consciousness in the same way that *D&D* is used as a byword for nerdiness. I don’t think we have to force that process along by mutating the form of the activity to make it more ‘acceptable.’ I think that the very word indicates that judging the common taste is a notoriously difficult decision and certainly there is a risk of ‘dumbing down’ to suit the lowest common denominator which would be loathsome. The only way I could try and gain ‘acceptance’ is by continuing to run the best games I can and hope that people would be open minded enough to try those games.

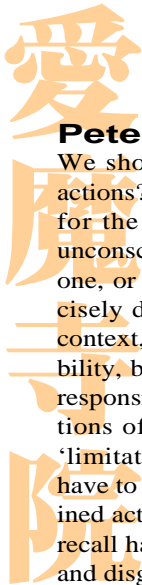
responsibility

Robert Rees

I also find the idea that ditching some feeling of responsibility for actions taken within RPG is an anathema. Part of the fun as I understand it is looking back on a session and thinking how you fit in to all that has happened. It is a link you made that in the terrible article [‘I Must Be Mad’, imazine 32], how can one person contain a multiple of distinct personae without somehow containing them all?

Naturally this probably does not appeal to the Beer & Pretzels crowd but I think they tend to want to play a *game* with role-playing elements. This is where the ‘dungeon’ and its relatives come to the form. Here the game is more of a skirmish wargame without the figures.

▲ Not clear on the ‘responsibility’ issue there...



Pete Blanchard

We should take (moral) responsibility for imaginary actions? A strange idea. So I must assume responsibility for the random nonsense that bubbles up from my unconscious mind? I might dream about killing someone, or committing some other immoral act. How precisely do I exercise responsibility for that? In a game context, yes, rolegamers should exercise some responsibility, but I doubt that it could be described as a moral responsibility. It's more playing along with the conventions of play, the consensus of play—abiding by the 'limitations,' the 'game contract.' Beyond that—you have to ask yourself the question as to whether an imagined action in a rolegame can do real harm. I don't ever recall having seen this happen. Embarrassment, distaste and disgust but never real harm.

Should an actor assume take responsibility for the actions of a character in a drama? For the duration of the drama, the audience perceive the actor as the character. Should the author take responsibility for the character, especially a character based on real life or created to make a point. Take that old chestnut of the depiction of evil—an author creates an evil character who commits terrible acts. His motivation was, perhaps, to give some insight as to the nature of evil. But the actions of the character may cause the audience upset. The usual line is that the author's responsibility to the wellbeing of the audience is overridden by a responsibility to a higher principle.

Looks

Tom McGrenery

I like the new style (of imazine, that is, not East Coast hip-hop).

▲ Aw, Tom, you almost made that into a highly topical gag, given the recent publishing marque adopted by Hogshead.

Rob Alexander

I'm probably one of those readers you mentioned who doesn't care much about the design, but the new one is certainly serviceable. As long as you don't turn into an explosion of adverts staged in a paint factory, I'll probably be happy.

▲ Adverts involve money, and since I keep imazine cheerfully insulated from the sordid reality of filthy lucre, I don't think there's much danger of your putative happiness being spoiled.

Phil Nicholls

I did enjoy the new style imazine, especially the little dice logo on the cover. Of course, I look forward to seeing how you cope with issue 37 on those tiny D6!

▲ This point also taxed Tim Harford, while others commented that they didn't like the logo. Strange that something as trivial as a little piece of clip-art on the first page should provoke such thought.

Adrian Bolt

The contents list placement/cover style is good; the change-the-first-letter-of-a-heading style is awful—everyone does it.

▲ 'Everyone', in terms that make sense to someone who is in Japan, being...?

Pete Blanchard

The new look? It's OK. I do prefer a serif face for body text, even if it is Times. It's more readable and also the colour of the type is more even—most sans-serif faces seem to show up rivers much more.

Bill Hoad

Since I have been receiving Adobe versions of your zine, I have been impressed by the design. I do prefer to read something that looks attractive, at least I do if I print the zine out. I am not so bothered if I read it off the screen, as one loses the overall view of the page. (Maybe I am not using Adobe reader to the full, but I find the two columns a poor format to read on-screen. One is always scrolling up and down, left and right.)

What I don't like about the new design is the use of a serif font. Maybe it's a personal foible but I don't like them and combining serif and san serif is even worse. Otherwise I don't see much difference.

▲ To read the two columns satisfactorily on the screen, you need to click on the text. This will enable you to read the text as an 'article', meaning that to keep reading it you just keep clicking on the text. It isn't a perfect solution, but until I can come up with an Acrobat-friendly design that also works on paper, I'll stick with what I've got.

Combining serif and sans serif is one of the basics of design: ensuring that contrast is used to signal a difference in function. I chose the serif font for the body text for two reasons: firstly because serif fonts are generally easier to read, as the letter form improves recognition, and secondly because Neville Brody, on *The Face*, used Helvetica body text, and I didn't want to end up copying him too much.

ref killing

Tom McGrenery

'Ere, ref! is rather harder to comment upon, since I've never actually attempted any of the playing styles you suggest. I did once toy with the idea of a players-only film noir (to make it easy for them to get into the habit of first-person narration), which would begin from a static setting, but it never got very far.

Adrian Bolt

'Ere, ref! is bizarre: three-quarters of the way through you admit you've proliferated the refs. That's going off on one hell of a tangent! Shouldn't the sub-heading read: 'Doing away with the Great Dictator of role-playing: is it possible to have a Mason-free game?'



Bill Hoad

'ere Paul! What traumatic experience at the hands of a ref is it that has driven you to attempt to ethnically cleanse them from the game? There are different styles of reffing, with various amounts of control. Problems arise not from the game being too plotted, but whether the ref's ego is too assertive and lacking in empathy to accommodate the players. In just the same way an over assertive egotistical player can ruin a game. It would be interesting if your ideas led to an alternative method of play. But I can see it having no impact in removing Thatching. Refs who want a strong plot will stick with traditional rules.

An easier rule which may achieve what you want is: 'Only the least experienced, least assertive person in the group is allowed to ref.'

Having said that, I suppose I have done something along the lines you are talking about. I think I have already told you about writing up a game and then projecting forward what I thought might happen next, as well as inventing a background plot not previously in the campaign but which didn't contradict the game sessions. That was an attempt to influence the game, though had no effect as the game folded soon after.

But on another occasion a similar approach did have an effect, though it didn't run as I expected. You may even feel it proved your point, because by removing me one step from the reffing, my Thatcher approach was kept under control. I will describe what happened.

BACKGROUND My character was one of two ewoks in a group playing a *Star Wars* adventure. The two ewoks annoyed all the other characters and their players because they ran around doing silly things like collecting shiny objects. One of the players' gripes was that the rules unfairly favour ewoks in terms of survivability—but they overlooked that when trouble started the ewoks kept their heads down whereas the rest of the party often pursued some very stupid tactics.

I had to leave the game when I moved, so my ewok became an NPC. But I provided the ref with a scenario which I knew would play on the prejudices of the other players.

SCENARIO EVENTS My ewok was found seriously ill, clutching his collection of shiny objects to him for comfort. One of the objects was a key component to the safe running of the ship's engine. The component was only accessible via small crawlway bombarded by radiation during the operation of the engines.

Later, the whole party gets a bad case of food poisoning.

EXPLANATION My ewok had secretly snacked on the food that was to be that evening's meal. The food has gone off and he is therefore suffering from a very painful, but non-life threatening, attack of food poisoning. The engine component was stolen from another ship which the ewok was on before joining this group. A ship with luxuries such as spares.

THE THATCHED PLOT Players will have to power down the ship (possibly at a very inconvenient moment) to return the component they believe is missing. The fact that the component turns out not to be miss-

ing, and medical examination of my ewok should provide clues to warn them about the evening meal. It's up to their intelligence and actions whether they suffer the indignity of food poisoning.

THE WAY IT WENT (as reported by the ref) The characters were most amused to find my ewok in pain and concluded that he had received a fatal dose of radiation. They felt medical treatment would be a waste of time and placed him in an airlock so that when the time came his corpse could be quickly ejected. When my ewok recovered, they were most annoyed. To this day, they remain convinced that he was exposed to major radiation and that he only survived either due to stupid rules or a chicken-hearted ref who didn't dare kill off what was once a player character.

They gave the component to a robot with instructions to put it where it belonged. The robot was able to ignore the radiation and replace the existing component with the ewok's stolen component without the engines being stopped. The characters never checked up on the maintenance so never learnt that the component was never missing.

So when they all went down with food poisoning, none of them linked it with the previous events. Instead they treated it as an unavoidable random event, and as an unnecessary intrusion of the tackiness of reality into a role-playing game.

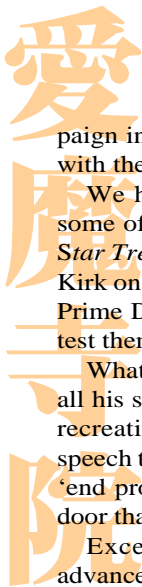
MY POINTS Being a bit of a Thatcher ref, I would probably have contrived to have made matters worse for them when they ignored the plot. I would certainly have insisted that the robot was not able to survive the radiation of the crawlway and make them power down the engines. But my point is that as it was done at one step removed, the ref didn't feel he had to rub the plot in the players faces, much as you advocate in your article.

On the other hand, I think refs and plots are needed. Players may well enjoy doing their own thing, but without challenges and without plots they build ivory towers. They need some challenges and plots which test the players and reward those that apply a modicum of intelligence.

▲ A fascinating example, to be sure. I'm not necessarily so keen on this idea of giving bright, shiny objects to players who display 'intelligence' (what if their characters are stupid?). Maybe I've just been lucky in my game. My players are adept at generating their own challenges, and in setting up their own appalling situations. My favourite was the sneaky character who insisted on spying on a military camp, was captured, and ended up tattooed and used as a replacement for one of the prisoners that it was his mission to follow and dispense justice to. I doubt if I could ever have designed such a plot before the game started, but as it was it all fell into place with an appalling, inexorable logic.

Jonny Nexus

In 'Ere Ref you asked if any of your readers had tried a game without a referee. Well I haven't, but I have written a scenario for a game in which I was player. Does this count? The game in question was a *Star Trek* cam-



campaign in which I played the Captain (a hippy Bajorean) with the other players in the main bridge positions.

We had just started, but I was already worried that some of the players seemed to have little knowledge of *Star Trek* and hence were acting something like Captain Kirk on steroids. In particular they had no idea about the Prime Directive. I therefore came up with a scenario to test them out.

What happened was that the new Captain (me) invited all his senior officers to meet him on the holo-deck in a recreation of a Bajorean garden. Halfway through his speech the alarms went off, so he immediately called out 'end program,' and they left the holo-deck through the door that appeared.

Except that they didn't. He had fixed this all in advance with a junior holo-deck technician now sworn to secrecy. The door was a fake, and they exited onto a holo-simulation of their ship.

They then found that the reason for the 'alarms' was the discovery of a derelict ship floating through space. The ship's registration number indicated that it was a Federation ship that had disappeared the previous year. But hull readings indicated that it was 300 years old.

To cut a long story short, it had fallen through a time-warp which destroyed its warp engines leaving it stranded. The life support systems were intact though, and 300 years later the ship was still populated by the descendants of the original crew, though by now they had no idea that they were living on a spaceship.

I'm sure by now you've guessed where I'm going (and yes I know lots of the above isn't particularly original). The people on the derelict ship probably qualified as a society under the Prime Directive. The purpose of my Captain's holo scenario was to test whether his crew would realise this. (They didn't. I made the mistake of making the 'Captain' in charge of the derelict people a woman, so they—Kirklike—just wanted to shag her. 'Hey doll, your entire world is a spaceship and I've come from the Federation to rescue you!')

Basically I wrote the entire scenario, word processed and all, and gave it to the ref to run. He threw in a few elements of his own just to give me some 'fun', but they hadn't actually been necessary.

I know this is a special case, because it's really a scenario inside a scenario, and it still needed a referee to run it, but I still haven't come across a situation quite like it.

Has anyone else?

▲ Since I forgot to mention it earlier, I'll note here that Jonny is one of the editor of a light-hearted web fanzine called *Critical Miss*. You can find it at <http://www.criticalmiss.com/> Its use of a two dice logo is another reason for me to ditch the one I used last issue!

Myles Corcoran

I particularly enjoyed the article investigating ways of dumping the referee in role-playing and only wish that I had players more willing to take the leap into leading the sessions proactively. Our long dead *Amber* game, despite the obvious dangers of diceless role-play reinforcing referee descriptive supremacy, did engross the players sufficiently that after the first two sessions they

were happily involved in developing their own plots, stories and campaign elements. As the game progressed I had less and less to do, except NPC characterisation and it all worked very well. As you've mentioned any number of times in *imagine*, a strong cultural background, even one of backstabbing egoists attempting to outdo one another in feats of one-upmanship, does strongly encourage player led sessions and campaign building. In *Amber* the culture is limited, being essentially the interactions within a single family, but the role within that culture—get to the top, but do it stylishly—is clearly described.

For different worlds, different approaches may be necessary. I'd like to point out the idea from *Pendragon* that noble player characters oblige their players to run occasional sessions as a respite for the regular referee, and to show off their wealth in terms of tournaments and the like. It's not something that ever actually became important in our *Pendragon* game but a session-by-session roster for refereeing is plausibly a stepping stone towards more referee-less play. If characters in the campaign world (eg NPCs by the usual definition: characters run by the referee) are always played by a certain player, some continuity of personality and behaviour should result. But it's not at all required that the person playing that character always be either 'Player' or 'Referee'. Using the *Pendragon* nobility=sometime referee idea characterisation responsibilities could be parcelled out, perhaps at the beginning of a campaign for major characters, or in play for later introductions, and whenever the currently 'played' group of characters ends up involved with one of these 'stable' characters the responsible player takes up the reins.

I can foresee a degree of divided attention and what rec.games.frp.advocacy folks call 'firewalling' or keeping different characters' knowledge separate. Certain scenes would require a person to play two characters simultaneously perhaps, which might encourage the players to develop multiple characters with quite different roles in the campaign world in an effort to minimize the chances of them meeting themselves in cheesy *Star Trek* fashion. Have you or any of your readers had much success with troupe play as means towards reducing the referee's privileged position?

Phil Nicholls

The concept of a referee-free game does sound interesting, but I think that the referee in rotation sounds more feasible. The way that the characters fight for control for the script has distinct possibilities for a fresh game atmosphere. Naturally, all the players would have to play the game with the right attitude; there could be too much scope for bias if the referee's own character was present in their segment of the game. After all, who is likely to kill off their own character?

▲ Oddly enough, I think the answer is that a referee is more likely to kill off their own character than they are someone else's! Many referees, and I definitely include myself in this, tend to be more reluctant about killing PCs than NPCs. At least if you kill off your own character when you're ref, you still have someone to play!



Phil Nicholls

Perhaps the game could involve multiple realities or realms, where certain characters were excluded from particular locales, thereby ensuring the absence of the referee's character, yet enabling the remaining PCs, and thus the plot, to continue through the myriad locations and referees. Perhaps the game could pursue a multiple, interwoven plot featuring related events, or even a warped version of the old series *Quantum Leap* with portions of the group 'leaping' between different referees' control, or the game could be based on the cartoon *Reboot* with numerous game cubes intersecting.

Regardless of the rationale adopted by the game, the various referees could link their portions of the game in a manner determined by this rationale. This does rather side-step the issue, so I will suggest one possibility. Each referee has the usual level of freedom when creating their segment of the campaign, within the limitations of the milieu, but each scenario will need a defined entry and exit point. This should be some kind of physical portal, be it a doorway, vehicle, corridor, room, etc. In this way, one referee's scenario will segue into another through these exit and entry points. This should smooth out the transitions between scenarios, but I am sure that there must be other ways to achieve this jump between different referees.

▲ *Doctor Who, anyone?*

Jose Ramos

A common occurrence in the Spanish RPG scene—I don't know if it is widespread abroad—is the specialized referee, the one who has refereed for ten or fifteen years and manages to spoil all the games he tries to play in. And they are usually good referees. I was one of them, but I played in a couple of great series, and got over it. Our active referee (we play every Friday, from 9 pm to 3-6 am) is a clear exponent of the kind. Even in the 'relaxation' games we intersperse every three-five months to break from the stress of living in Cairo he is unable to really wade in, immerse, or even just storytell with his characters. However, if his story has a plot beyond a series of weird happenings, our barging in, and some people who now want to kill us, we have not discovered it.

So some people have refereed so much that they seem unable to relinquish, not the power, but the mantle of 'know-it-all'. And that is where their satisfaction lies, in the secret player's plots, seeding misinformation and seeing it widespread, and keeping the world in line.

For me, he can keep his job.

Robert Rees

When I started to read 'Ere Ref I started to get a sinking feeling, another long winded article where Mason Mulls It Over. You joked about 'Thus Rolled Zarathustra' but how long before we revisit these issues to death? [▲ *amusing hyperlink*]

The article was certainly one of the best on the topic though and progressed the debate along nicely. I felt a moment's tension when we had *fabula* and *sjuzet*—was this a return of the dreaded pseudo-intellectualism

(whatever the hell that was)? But no, if you accept the terms then they are extremely useful for analysing the theory of role-playing (if that's your bag). The second insight into the fact that the less rules you have the more important the arbitrator becomes was good but I felt the theoretical example of MUDs or more importantly the use of a machine as an arbitrator was glossed over.

The machine can handle all the elements of the *fabula* but cannot produce the *sjuzet*. It can create the scene and then handle the passing of time and the resulting changes in the scene's objects. It can be the world but it cannot describe the result of that changing world in the form of a narrative. This narrative is then entirely contained in the players interpretations of what is happening.

I think you should address this possibility in another article later. However accepting for now that the only viable gaming group is a number of humans gathered together, I thought it was interesting dissection of the argument.

I didn't enjoy yet another discussion of 'what is role-playing?' but I did think you were right that any definition of an RPG involves having at least one player controlling and acting as distinct characters in a narrative *and* at least one referee moderating the results of those actions and the reactions of the fictional world to those actions. The roleplaying experience is then the dynamic friction of these two creative forces and it can only be properly observed by someone who is not involved in the game.

▲ *I don't believe anyone not involved in the game can properly observe anything.*

Robert Rees

The final paragraph was the most interesting; now we have some material to get our teeth into. The underlying 'gimmick' for the JC game, for that is what it is really, is a clever one and similar in many ways to 'cut-ups' but more surreal and controlled. I think that this method of playing would inherently involve a referee, if not in name. In many ways it reminds of the off-the-cuff games a gentleman named James Magee ran while I was at university. James would start:

'It is a cold misty night and the coach flies across the rugged moorland'

We're in a coach travelling very fast over treacherous ground at night.

Myself: 'Cracking the whip, I urge on the horses "Faster, faster! We must reach Milan before daybreak!"'

We're going to Milan as a matter of urgency. We're obviously in Italy and the coach means we're in the 1850s or thereabouts.

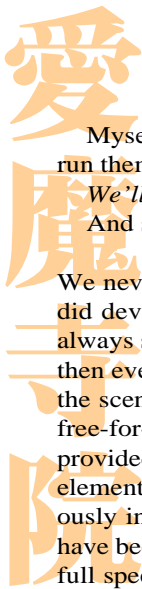
Simon: 'Careful, don't ride so hard! You'll upset the coffin!'

We are transporting a coffin to Milan! And it must be there before daybreak!

J. Spaceship: 'If we do not inter this poor child in sanctified ground she will rise and join the army of undead.'

We're transporting a child's coffin to Milan. We're obviously being chased by vampires.

James: 'There's a village ahead.'



Myself: 'We need to water the horses, I don't wish to run them to death.'

We'll need to stop at the village for a bit.

And so on...

We never formalised the rules for these games but they did develop a certain logic of their own. James would always start and he would always describe the situation, then everyone would introduce what they were doing in the scene and hence themselves. From then all it was a free-for-all we could all introduce elements to the story provided the explanation was in the introduction of the element. We also tried not to ignore any elements previously introduced. So in the above example it wouldn't have been fair play to say 'I'll ride through the village at full speed.' Although as a player I knew that at the village we would become embroiled in all kinds of delays.

If the game got too complicated or surreal (for example if some players had lost the track of the plot completely or were just too busy laughing to get on with the game (given the surreality of some of the elements it could be hilarious and you had to shout 'And then I wake up!')) we took a break and each one of us went outside with James and explained what we thought was going on. He then took everyone's ideas and merged them into something that we could start again with.

The things that set James apart as 'the referee' were: number one the above ability to decide the plot when the players had progressed it to a narrative cul-de-sac (or were too busy laughing to think of how it could be progressed); number two the ability to set the initial scene (and thereby determining the tone of the game); number three he was the only person who had the ability to introduce an element that was unknown to any of the characters (the above example is a bad one, for example any of characters might have known there was a village ahead but none could tell whether bandits had destroyed the bridge across the river). It was also his job to take on the part of anyone who had to speak but wasn't a player's character; this was not a necessary part of the job though, just a convenient one.

What were my conclusions of playing these games? They were nice diversions but I actually like to play a game that has a strong plot and theme to it, driven primarily by the creativity of one person or one team. Excitement never really mounted when you knew so much of the plot. This is not a blank approval of the *auteur*, just a statement that I felt more swept away by partaking of a grander vision that I didn't have any control of. I also like the mystery of uncovering the plot of someone else's games, in the same way I like the unfolding of a Raymond Chandler novel.

I think the gauntlet you have thrown down is how can you combine the creativeness of the free wheeling game above with the suspense and enjoyment of a regular game. I shall give your Jerry Cornelius method a go at some point and report back. I was never a big fan of the books though and almost immediately I see myself as being forced to referee by defining some sort of structure into which the player's additions can be added.

▲ More justification for *Impro*, it would seem.

David Platt

My first thought on reading 'Ere ref! was, 'Does anybody remember "Whimsy cards"?' Does anybody use them in their games? I tried them in an *Ars Magica* game that I was running (longer ago than I'd care to admit) with only limited success—my players seemed to try to use them to get extra clues rather than simply to add their own twists to the plot. Has anyone else had more luck? Does providing a system by which 'players' (as opposed to 'GMs') can provide plot changes/development beyond the control of their characters help us get nearer the 'refereeless' game? Do other readers regard them as just a gimmick?

▲ I'm put off by the name. Also, I'm not convinced that that particular mechanic is a good way to get player input. Maybe something similar... but for me Whimsy cards are a poor means to a worthy goal.

David Platt

For 'everyday' role-playing sessions I'd probably settle on a combination of 'Troupe play' and Whimsy cards, assuming that I could get my players to use the latter in a more constructive way. You recognise *Ars Magica's* use of 'companions' and 'groggs' as a way of 'exploding' traditional party structure (I'm thinking of using the 'Familia' for an embryonic Roman game). However, you seem to miss the fact that Troupe playing isn't just about having more than one character, but also the sharing of referee duties. Unfortunately, we didn't get as far in our game as alternating referees, but I was able to get all my players to participate in the setting up of the Covenant and its environs from day one. It certainly felt different from a traditional RPG.

What follows consists of just a couple of amplifications of points that you made and problems that struck me.

You identify the most immediate problem with shared refereeing responsibilities, that of the nature of the reality. I can certainly see the suggestions for a highly improvised game working in historical or established fantasy/SF settings with their own extensive 'literatures' [Tekumel, Glorantha, *Star Trek* etc etc]. Even these worlds might be subject to serious conflicts of interpretation. With the historical games this would be problem enough. I've been lucky enough to play *Ars Magica* with very helpful Mediaeval History students; by which I mean, people who seemed to be interested in similar role-playing goals to mine. I wasn't a Mediaeval History student myself (having just settled for reading the rules and a bit of stuff outside) and they were able to fill in any gaps in my knowledge. Not everybody has access to players that are that informed about the historical period in question. Moreover, it's all very well if people are inspired to rush off and do masses of 'extracurricular' reading, but I don't want it to be *required* before anybody can play games with me. I'd rather like it to be sufficient to tell my players to remember or go and see a couple of relevant films, read an article, or a particular novel. What you don't say is that with the published fictional worlds it's even worse, as there's the danger of 'White Wolf' syndrome (ie an impossibly large back-



ground literature detailing the Garou's favourite beer) and information overload. Of course, problem of the attendant bank account overload shouldn't be overlooked, as most public libraries (oddly enough) don't tend to hold these books.

I wouldn't like to think how much preparation before the gaming session might be required in order to make your proposed refereeless sessions really work. It's not that I object to pre-game sessions in principle (although I have become fed up with pre-game character generation sessions), but it's difficult enough to get people to agree to a time for a game session itself.

▲ I'm familiar with this situation all right, and I don't care much for extended pre-game character generation either. I've become very much a 'develop in play' type of person, all of which makes giving some thought to the process of improvisation quite important. More of that next issue with the review of *Impro*.

David Platt

Secondly, what happens to freedom in creating your own worlds, especially the more offbeat variety (eg fantasy worlds that aren't your bog-standard sub-Tolkien/*AD&D* setting, your SF project)? Lots of referees get a kick out of designing their own worlds, and might regard it as one of the perks of the job. I don't *think* that this desire automatically makes one a 'Thatcher', as PCs are still free to run around within the world as they will. One variation of parcelling off geographical regions might be to distribute *aspects* of the world. Taking *Ars Magica* as an example, one referee might prefer to develop dealings with the Faerie, another Hermetic politics, and a third might deal with interaction with the non-mystical world. Even then, this is still essentially 'tag-refereeing.'

What concerns me *most*, however, is that doing away with the referee might make all other motivations for role-playing other than immersive/storytelling difficult, if not impossible (eg those who enjoy detective work, the acquisition of political power, or the development of strategy). I think that the openness of RPGs to all these different approaches is one of the factors that makes them so exciting, and rather than blowing open the genre, mightn't your proposals have the opposite effect? Yes, this would only be true if taken as a 'One True Way,' but if a truly refereeless game is to add anything to the 'hobby' then we need to be able to take something away from it that we can apply to other games. If your ideas work with only one or two settings, then isn't there the danger that the game would become a 'one-trick pony,' and have more in common with the 'clever' self-reflexive games than you might like to admit?

The nearest point of reference for what we *might* want that I can think of is truly co-operative theatre (as parodied in Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*), in which the director allows the cast to bring their own ideas to the production, whether about their own characters, other people's characters and maybe even the plot. However, even in what is still considered to be radical theatre there remains a director as final arbiter of reality—to limit people's creative freedom. I dunno, maybe my problem is that I'm too attached to the *auteur* myth.

The *real* solution is to have truly co-operative players, sensitive to the desires of their colleagues, which only serves to emphasise how difficult it can be to get role-players who are in tune with what some of us might like to do. This is especially noticeable after you leave an environment like university, where there are quite large gaming societies from which you can meet potential players. I challenge any of you to go to a games shop and *want* to allow some of the people who post notices there to know where you live [*shudder*].

Very jerry

Sami Kivelä

In imazine 33 you told about your plans for Jerry Cornelius RPG. I've also been thinking about it quite some time, and have found that the biggest problem in it would be the portrayal of the increasingly fragmenting personal universe of the characters.

It's not just that the important characters vary from chapter to chapter, that's fairly conventional, but that time itself is rather relative in the Cornelius stories. If you take the Cornelius Chronicles, time keeps getting more and more fragmented, until by the end it doesn't matter in which order you read the chapters, and in some cases, paragraphs—they still make sense, in a way. However, that wouldn't probably work in an RPG, unless the players are completely at home in such an environment or stoned, as the case might be.

It also might be that the universe experienced by one character is not the same as that experienced by another character—might be a bit difficult to play if the characters aren't even in the same universe except occasionally.

Still, the mostly steampunky pseudo-Edwardian feel of the JC stories would make a nice background, even if conventionalised a bit.

Light and frothy

Tom McGrenery

The 'Outlaws Light' thing will prove quite useful, as I was wondering how to introduce my players to the system without printing out the entire PDF (yeah, I'm cheap, so what?).

Tim Harford

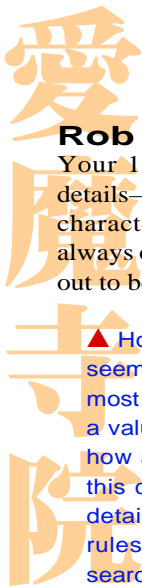
'Outlaws Light' is great but incomprehensible. It seems to be missing all kinds of subtleties (like, what kind of dice do you roll?)

▲ Dice. Those little cubes that come with games.

Robert Rees

I liked 'Outlaws Light' which worked as a parody and as a game. Except: when you say roll the dice, what dice do you mean? Later on you are referring to snake-eyes and what have you, so I imagine it's not part of the joke that the type of die is missing. The error was extremely inadequate editing on your part.

▲ Gawd, not another one. You gamer nerd, you.



Rob Alexander

Your 1-page rule set did seem to be missing a few details—like how much Energy and the other thing that characters get. Was this intentional? Either way I'm always on the lookout for new rules, maybe one will turn out to be genuinely good.

▲ How much energy do characters get? As much as seems reasonable. I thought that was obvious. Since most things in the mechanic work on a scale of 1 to 10, a value for normal people in that range seems somehow appropriate. To be quite honest, I'm amazed at this complaint. I thought I'd put in *too much* specific detail. Your quest for a 'genuinely good' set of new rules is doomed to failure until you realise that the search itself is what is obstructing you. Neat mechanics only get in the way.

imits

Jose Ramos

Some strange effects are in play in our game. All the characters are more or less normal people, with no heroes or monsters. We all have two (some people three) to cope with the geographic extension and long hospitalization times. There was a small bonus if the character really existed, and we have several of them, including a Japanese zeppelin pilot who spent the war in Italian service and now is complementing Zen with sufism. We have seen no katana, however.

We read books on the period, the books they were reading in the period (in my main character case, pulp fiction, which colours all his supernatural explanations), and we have built elaborate stories for the character, with the looming shadow of the Great War and the Spanish Flu behind them.

However, despite two years playing there we have refused to look for a map of Cairo, or the disposition of the ruins at Gizeh, or the real size and importance of Har-rar or Khartoum. Just because we fear the 'real' thing will be different from the 'game' version. And we fear contradiction. This censorship is internal, from the players. In the same vein the only atlas we use is one from 1906, so our Nile expedition is truly in a blank land.

But with all this self imposed limitation: believable or historical characters, learning how they dress, what they think and what they read, refusal to defy the referee's world, etc. what we gain is freedom to act. Most actions are brought into being by the characters, and besides some initial characters, the odd meeting with the authorities (one of the characters is an authority) and some attempts on our lives, it is paranoia, player friction and our mad schemes that keep the game going.

So in brief, to cut short the rambling, I agree with you that Culture Games (and a 20s game well done is as much a foreign setting as Tekumel), while bringing many 'internal' limitations, are those that need the least 'external' limitations, and indeed after a time they have a momentum of their own where the referee is just the background. In our case, as the referee is not really a player, he does not seem frustrated with not having

important characters of his own (although he loves playing the role of the Viceroy Allenby).

Robert Rees

Of course the shit, mud and hunting rabbits brigade still have a number of useful points to contribute as your article ('No Limits') pointed out. Roleplaying as a whole is onto its 'Second Generation' of those who have grown up playing and knowing only RPGs. A long, hard look back (in anger hahaha) is needed to find the origins of the clichés that everyone now accepts as being a vital part of all roleplaying. It's also a sorry fact that without some kind of definitive 'history' book or article the history of the development of RPGs is going to disappear.

While enjoying the article I was surprised to see myself cast as the voice of reaction.

▲ Sorry Robbie, luvvie, but Gary Oldman wasn't available. Pray, continue...

Robbie Luvvie

I thought your musical metaphor was very badly thought through. Music has vastly more resources thrown at it than roleplaying. It is possible to 'mine out' a musical development very quickly due the vast number of clones and hangers-on that accompany any innovators. I stand by what I said (obviously the initial comment was very strongly worded but this is the *imagine* letter column we are talking about). For your analogy to work then Cabaret Voltaire would have to have picked up a guitar, played a chord and then declared 'punk is dead—we have exhausted all it has to offer'. They would then move onto the keyboards, play one note and then say 'We have completely explored the boundaries of electronic music'. That is what I see happening in published RPG material. Someone gets one good idea, that idea is then forced into countless scenarios and supplements. The idea is so thoroughly abused that it seems shallow and without worth. People then search for the next big thing. I will refine my original statement. Roleplaying writers shouldn't try to create a new genre until they have created at least one masterpiece in an existing one. I know there will always be one of a kind innovators who jump straight in and re-write the (metaphorical) rule-book but for the other writers who write *Star Wars* scenarios when a new film is released and a *Vampire* scenario when it is re-released. I ask them to spare me their bandwagonism and to try and find it within themselves to create something amazing from what is already here. I wish I could think of an amazing line to close my argument but there you go. All RPG writers are hacks?

In your terrible article ['I Must Be Mad', *imagine* 32] you asked whether the conclusion of post-modernism is that we are idiots playing with the pieces. I am merely asking the idiots to stop calling the pieces different names and get on with the demanding task of re-arranging them into a meaningful pattern.

That defence aside I loved the final analysis.

Carter Butts

It would seem (to me, at any rate) to be worth remembering that some persons actually like roleplaying games



per se. Not computerized hack 'n slash games wearing an 'RPG' label, not MUDs or MOOs or MUSHs, not diceless ruleless GMless storytelling fiestas, not tabletop wargames, not even buy-em-till-you-drop CCGs, but old-fashioned, face-to-face, pencil 'n paper role-playing games ('stupid' dice and all). While it's all well and good to talk about removing GMs, rules, dice, pencils, or player whining from the game setting, it's worth noting that these are the features which make RPGs what they are. (Though I do wonder whether the whining is necessary.) Start taking these things away and you may well have an interesting (nay, even entertaining) pastime, but it's not going to be the *same* activity... and some of us *do* like that particular activity, with all of its various trappings.

In the RPG world, as in the computer gaming world, the dominant ethos seems to be one of 'Progress(TM)' (apologies to Nightfall), wherein That Which is Not New, Is Not Worthwhile. Alas, despite my overall technophilia, I find it somewhat difficult to cheer on this particular bit of upgrade fever. Wallis, speaking for the *zeitgeist*, disparages the 'utter contentedness with a form [the RPG] which was established twenty-five years ago and which has not changed substantially since' apparently evinced by some neo-primitivists within the RPG field.

Twenty-five years! My word! Best throw the whole lot out, to make way for the New and Improved Role-Playing Experience (now with a fresh, minty scent). I hope that Wallis and his sympathizers will apply their aesthetic with equal fervour to novels, paintings, and sculpture: the libraries and art museums of the world are positively *cluttered* with archaic works just begging to be replaced by The Latest Thing. Why *do* people insist on producing that kind of garbage, anyway? Don't they *know* that these forms are *horribly* obsolete? (Why, some of them have been practised in much the same way for hundreds or even *thousands* of years!) Some of us—out of step with right-thinking persons everywhere—might suggest that there are those who (for whatever reason) *like* these particular forms, that the very *durability* of certain forms across time and culture speaks to their general utility, and that one should not conclude that a form's value or usefulness is inversely related to its age. Fortunately, we have folks like Wallis to set us straight.

Ah well. Until I finally See The Light, I shall continue to write (and play) my obsolete little role-playing games. Wake me when the next retro wave hits.

a fan boy (or 3) writes

Adrian Barber

We are spoilt being that Patrick Brady is our GM. Many of you will be aware of the thorough attention to detail, background and handouts tailored to suit our circumstances that Patrick puts efforts into. When a GM is so enthusiastic, it is hard not to feel a need to join in on this. Luckily he doesn't demand contributions; I believe a homework feel might sour the enjoyment of producing anything. There are rewards to be had for creative input other than simple pride of achievement in the form of skill points, neither are to be sniffed at.

The accoutrements of being part of a gaming group are of a high value to me. I don't so much mean figures or other table top bits and pieces, more that when a game grabs your imagination it leads players to produce things for the group as a whole or for the GM to ruminate upon.

Things I have enjoyed having a go at include a character's reflection upon their past and current circumstances; this helps both player and GM to gain insight into what dreams, goals, anxieties, etc make the character what they are and what they wish to become.

My knowledge of Tekumel lore was very vague when I joined and it is likely that some character ideals put down were out of kilter with how the people of that land perceive their existence. This was not a hindrance, over time you see how to translate ideas. Another thing that could not encapsulate precise genre setting was a compilation tape, a soundtrack to my character. I have no idea what music is like in the setting in which I find myself, but music has the ability to be emotive and express an idea without necessarily using language. This doesn't limit you to classical or theme music—10,000 Maniacs' version of 'Because the Night' helps express my character's feelings just as well as a piece of mood music can.

Other items produced by both players and GM have included drawings, clan badges, food (not always a great idea, check for allergies amongst the group first, luckily only one person suffered from my 'clan pie'), and a book of player comments kept for prosperity; well, we think they are amusing.

All these and more help you care about your character and their relationships with others in the group. And it is perhaps the very real feelings you get from being that character, caring about their survival and the like, that makes gaming all the more enjoyable and certainly essential in a long running campaign.

▲ I've been thinking about the 'accoutrements' as you call them recently. I think there may be something here worth exploring in more detail.

Robert Rees

Do you really think that there could be a revival in the fortunes of UK roleplaying without fanzines such as *imagine*? Roleplaying fanzines, particularly in the UK, are the outcasts of the cultural roleplaying world. When the 'industry' is strong, we are derided and mocked for our lack of 'sophisticated' design principles and 'quality' components. However when the business fails and the companies go it's up to the fanzine editors and all the creative fans who develop things for their own entertainment and that of their friends to tread the barren earth until a revival can be staged. If it were not for the outsiders carrying the flame in the dry years the hobby really would die out.

Pete Blanchard

Wake up Mason!

▲ Thank you—I needed that! And that's all we have for this issue, which just about leaves me enough room to mention that the deadline for next issue is September 14th.