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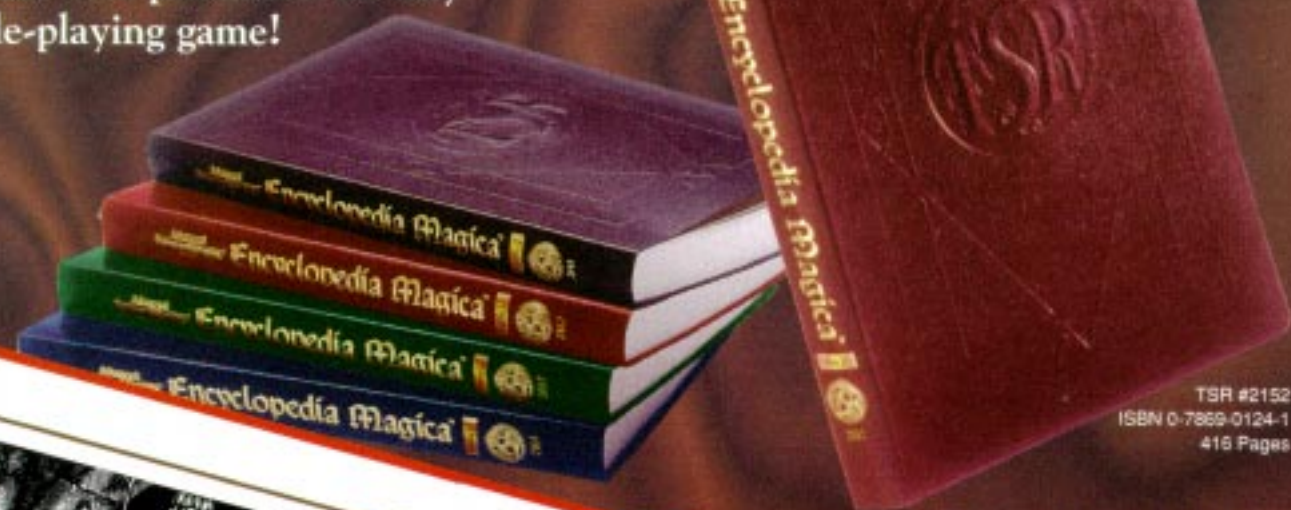
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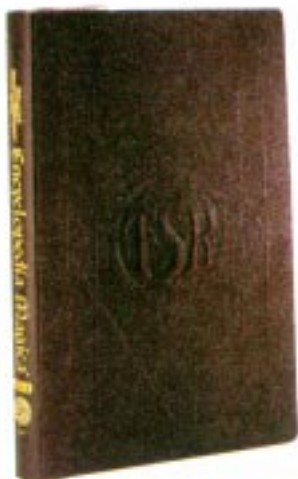
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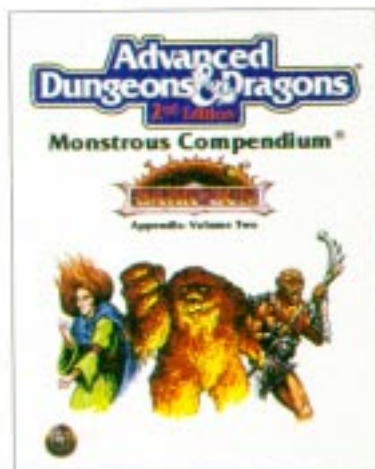
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COVER

On this month's cover is Gareth Hind's exciting cover painting which illustrates the point that it really isn't a good idea to poach the king's deer.

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What did you think of this issue? Do you have a question about an article or have an idea for a new feature you'd like to see? In the United States and Canada, write to: Letters, DRAGON® Magazine, 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva WI 53147, U.S.A. In Europe, write to: Letters, DRAGON Magazine, TSR Ltd., 120 Church End, Cherry Hinton, Cambridge CB1 3LB, United Kingdom. If you wish your letter to be published, you must sign it. We will not publish anonymous letters. We will withhold your name if you request it.

Another country heard from

Dear Dragon,

In the Editorial of DRAGON issue #210, Wolfgang Baur wrote about international gaming and RPGs in exotic languages. He mentioned that RPGs are not translated into all languages. His list of those "still not represented" languages included Finnish, Urdu, and Dutch. While I cannot speak for Urdu or Dutch, there does exist quite a good selection of RPGs in Finnish. Games translated into Finnish include the D&D® game, Chaosium's CALL OF CTHULHU*, R. Talsorian's CYBERPUNK*, FASA's SHADOWRUN* and many more games. There also exists a number of original Finnish RPGs, such as *Rapier*, *Elhendi*, *ANKH*, and *Miekka & Magia*.

Tuomas Karjalainen
Jarvenpaa, Finland

Tuomas, I'm delighted to hear that role-playing is alive and well in Finland. For no good reason, I chose Finnish as an unlikely language for RPG translation, but it occurred to me after I read your letter that Finnish legends were reasonably well represented in gaming: in the old DEITIES & REMIGORS™ book, for instance, the Finnish mythos was derailed. Some of the deities therein later became gods in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® setting. What was I thinking?

I'm glad to learn more about Finnish gaming, but so far the only Scandinavian games that have been translated into English are Swedish. I'm sure I could convince my hobby store to get a copy of Rapier, Elhendi, ANKH, or Miekka & Magia, if only someone would translate them!

—Wolfgang

A monstrous gathering

Dear Dragon,

As a player and occasional DM, I am always interested in seeing new and unusual monsters and creatures for the AD&D® game. Since DRAGON Magazine publishes monsters often, I was wondering if there are any plans to condense all of the monsters that have appeared in DRAGON issues over the years into one compendium.

Also, the RPGA® Network published four accessories for Raven's Bluff, the Living City. What are the titles of these accessories and how can I get copies?

Andrew M. Curtis
Manchester NH

Andrew, there are no plans to produce a compendium of monsters solely composed of creatures that appeared previously in DRAGON Magazine issues. However the MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM® Annual, Volume One, published late last year, does contain quite a few creatures that have appeared in issues of the magazine over the years. These beasts include the abyss ants, the banelar, the linnorm dragons, the foulwing, several types of golems, the psionic lich, and one of my all-time favorite AD&D game creatures ever to appear in the pages of DRAGON Magazine, the spell weaver. (Watch your game group freak out the first time one of these six-armed, cast-three-spells-per-round alien goobers shows up in an adventure!) The 128-page Annual also contains creatures from other sources such as DUNGEON® Adventures and numerous source books and modules.

The four Living City products are: LC1 Gateway to Raven's Bluff, The Living City; LC2 Inside Raven's Bluff, The Living City; LC3 Nightwatch in the Living City; and LC4 Port of Raven's Bluff. The RPGA Network's own Kevin Melka informs me that all four of these products are, unfortunately, out of print. Kevin recommends trying to hunt them down at game conventions and auctions, such as the huge auction at the GEN CON® Game Fair held each August in Milwaukee, Wis. Good luck!

—Dale

Goldtree uprooted

Dear Dragon,

Anyone trying to reach Goldtree Enterprises (producers of the KINGSPPOINT® city campaign software reviewed in DRAGON issue #209) should be advised that the company's address has changed. Interested parties can write to: Goldtree Enterprises, 3401 Ridgeland Dr., Suite #103, Metairie LA 70002; or you can place an order by calling the following phone number: 1-800-746-3772. The office phone number is (504)833-7678, and the fax number is (504) 833-7681.

Goldtree Enterprises

A new sun dawning?

Dear Dragon,

My friends and I would like to start a campaign in the DARK SUN® setting's world of Athas. The only problem is that we are too far behind. With the *Prism Pentad* novel series completed, the boxed set seems out of date. Also, buying all the DARK SUN products published to date is too expensive. I would like to know if there is going to be a new or revised boxed set coming out anytime soon.

Jesse Snyder

Yes, Jesse, a revised DARK SUN boxed set is planned to hit the stores in November of this year. It's being designed by DARK SUN campaign veteran Bill Slavicek, and updates the political and physical environments in the wake of the Troy Denning novels. There also will be new areas to explore, new villains to battle, and new PC races, classes, and kits to play, plus a 32-page psionics primer that offers an alternative to the system presented in the Complete Psionics Handbook. Watch these pages in upcoming months for more details on the boxed set.

—Dale

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Dragonet: A Whole New Meaning

I'm an information junkie, always have been. I listen to news radio, read the papers, and subscribe to a bunch of magazines. Ever since I got a modem (a year ago), the Internet—or, as I prefer to call it, the Infobahn—has taken over my life. I can get my gaming fix in full color over the wires. I may never see daylight again.

I've been lurking on the Internet every evening for a year, and posting messages occasionally to discussions of my favorite topics on the AD&D® game list and the PLANESCAPE™ campaign list, as well as following the Net.Product.Ratings (every TSR release rated from 1 to 10 by gamers' votes) and the sprawling Usenet FRPG groups (forgive me if I start spouting technobabble). I started seeing more of my computer than I saw of my dog. I thought I had a serious infohabit, but that was nothing.

At 11:33:18 A.M. on January 24, 1995, DRAGON® Magazine was launched onto the Net through America Online (AOL), as part of the TSR Online site. From now on, DRAGON Magazine's articles may appear on the Net even before they appear in print. The world's greatest fantasy role-playing magazine has gone electronic with a vengeance.

It wasn't easy. Remember the "Now in cyberspace" ads from back in November? Boy, were we optimistic!

That very November night, and for months afterwards, I checked to see if TSR Online was available (with no luck). I wasn't the only one eager for a TSR site in cyberspace, either; eventually, AOL put up a notice saying the online site was "under construction." Then, one cold January night, the under construction message didn't appear when I asked to enter the TSR site—instead, AOL told me it was downloading new graphics files. BIG graphics files. The beast had arrived.

So, what was TSR Online like the first few days of its existence?

Once you got past the slick log-on graphics, the atmosphere was a little giddy, informal, and very friendly. Some features were *still* under construction (like the online subscription service to renew or start a magazine subscription), but those that were up and running were lively, even crowded. It felt a little like building a frontier town: gamers showed up and set up the categories they wanted to discuss. The titles of these categories reflect the diversity of people's interests—covering

the spectrum from the GREYHAWK® and AL-QADIM® settings to "New Product Ideas" (lots of good advice from gamers). I was also glad to see discussions about the STAR FRONTIERS® game, a "SPELLFIRE™ game Trading Post," "Races and Monsters," "DM's Corner," (and, while I'm at it, there's MUCH, MUCH more, but I've only got so much space here). People shot the breeze about the original AD&D game, about the upcoming BIRTHRIGHT™ setting, and Card Games, and they shared ideas about their own homebrewed campaigns. Designers like Colin McComb and myself have answered questions about game releases we've worked on. Other designers and editors will be online regularly in the weeks to come, starting with William Connors, Bruce Nesmith, Anne Brown, and Karen Boomgarden. Just a few hours old, the online area felt more like a friendly hangout than many conventions, bars, and gaming sessions I've been to. There's people looking for players for electronic RPG sessions, and people looking to buy or sell collectable items. I love technology when it lets people gather across continents to have fun.

As of this writing, Rob Repp and the rest of the TSR Online staff are still experimenting with formats, but they seem to be responding quickly and flexibly to what gamers want: topics, databases, graphics, and a place to chat with other gamers. To name just two examples, we will try to double the number of topics for discussion, and the Macintosh version of the TSR Onsite interface will soon be upgraded to the graphics level of the Windows users.

Not that everything's perfect. I've been told that there are hidden areas where you can win prizes, but I haven't found any yet. (Obviously, the service is defective!) Space also was a problem at first. Within 18 hours of the online service's debut, the live chat area was swamped, and Rob Repp had to make an emergency request to AOL for two more chat areas to handle the volume of interest, one for live gameplay and another for celebrity appearances. It's nice to be wanted.

So what got everyone hooked (it's not just me, I assure you)? The TSR area features eight different areas: the Gallery (digitized paintings by Easley, Elmore, Parkinson, Robh, Brom, and others), Q&A (game questions, suggestions for new products, everything you want to know), New from TSR (gaming news), Download

of the Month (sneak previews of products, software, and player submissions), TSR Live (meets designers and artists), Library (software, errata, modules, and even complete gaming systems), an Online Catalog (shopping for old and new products), and—best of all—DRAGON Magazine. With AOL's ability to transfer graphic files, art and maps are no barrier, so there's even talk that DUNGEON® Magazine may eventually be added to the service.

DRAGON readers will be happy to know that part of the February issue is already available in digital form, and feature articles from each future issue (including this one) will appear online. Even better, we're looking into posting a huge, continuously-updated index of every issue of DRAGON Magazine on AOL. The sheer size of it has made it almost impossible to fit in a regular issue without cutting everything else (and who wants a whole magazine full of nothing but index entries?).

Great as the index idea is, the best feature of the TSR Online service (in my humble opinion) is that it gives everyone a chance to speak up. You can post your latest creations (spells, monsters, plots) there for others to enjoy, and you can lambast or praise whatever you see as right or wrong about your favorite games (no one ever accused Net folk of not being opinionated enough!). Better yet, you can tell us right away when you love (or hate) something you see in an issue of DRAGON Magazine; heck, you can tell us what we did wrong (or right) in line-by-line detail, because you can put the article up onscreen as you put your comments together. How can you tell us what you really think, you ask? Send letters to DRAGON Magazine via e-mail by addressing them to tsrmags@aol.com (my computer at work can't handle AOL's lush graphic interface, *sigh*—I log on at home). To reach the RPGA, send e-mail to tsr.rpga@genie.geis.com. For general information, contact tsrinc@aol.com.

Luckily, I can lurk on AOL as part of my job ("See, honey, I'm working!"), and I can feed my information habit from a new source. Happy e-gaming to all the netranners out there, and I look forward to meeting you online!



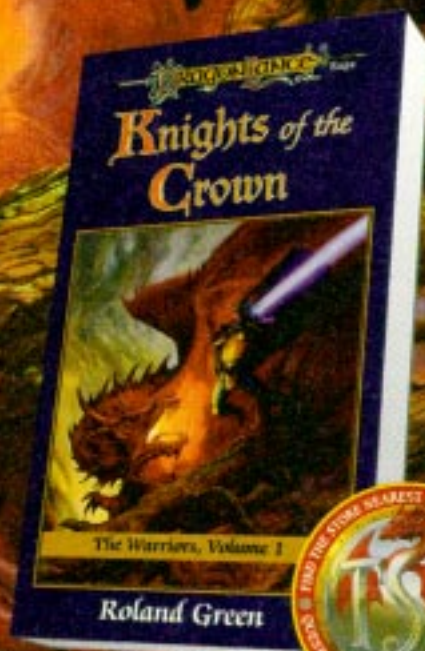
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Still the rules guy after all these years

F

First Quest™

FIRST QUEST is the title of TSR, Inc.'s Audio CD Introduction to Role-playing Game. This series is a feature where veterans of role-playing describe their first experiences in the hobby.

by Bill Slavicsek

Rules. Every game has them. They're presented in different ways—on the inside of the box top, in small, multifolded pamphlets, even in full-size, hundred-plus page hardcover books—but they all accomplish the same thing. They explain how to play the game. Every gaming group needs someone to read the rules, and it helps if the designated reader doesn't mind handling the job. That's how I started out. I was the rules guy. It was back in the '70s, when I was growing up in New York City and my gaming group (they were just called "friends" in those days) got together every weekend to roll dice, move pieces, and see who would be the one to conquer the world before it was time to go home,

Mine was a prestigious position, to be sure, full of lofty responsibilities. If I dropped the ball, we'd be stuck having to learn the newest game on the fly when Friday night rolled around or pulling out a tried-but-true favorite. In addition to the basic read-through, I had to figure out how to *really* play the game, come up with "house" rules for the things not covered by the written words, and adjudicate the disputes that would inevitably arise during play. We always had new games to try, and there were always disputes. "You can't move like that!" "How'd you do that?" "Cheater!" "No fair!" "It doesn't say that's allowed!" "Ask Bill, he's the rules guy."

See what I mean? Of course, my decisions weren't always met with docile agreement. Some of our best sessions revolved around a knockdown, drag-out fight over the implications of the fourth and sixth paragraphs of the rules that came with the game of the night.

Now, we're not talking role-playing games here. In my youngest days we gathered to play classic board games like *Risk*, *Dogfight*, *Broadside*, *Monopoly*, and *Cosmic Encounter* (We also had this neat four-player chess set, but I don't want to get into that right now.) This was before role-playing games could be found on the shelves of every book store and there were more RPGs to choose from than there were weekends in the year. This was even before home computer games, though we could head to Manhattan to play in one of those new video arcades every once in awhile. But let me get back to the topic.

We were obsessive tinkerers, always striving to make the games we played better by changing, adding, or deleting rules. Sometimes we had more fun re-

designing the games than we did playing them. Everyone participated in the process, but it always fell to me to decide whether or not a rules change would work. After all, I was the rules guy.

After a few years of weekend battles fought in my friend Curtis' basement, after downing untold gallons of soda and feasting on more bowls of pretzels and chips than I care to think about, my gaming group looked for a different challenge. Oh, the classic board games were fun, but the group needed to flex its own creativity and imagination. We found a hobby store in Manhattan, right around the corner from the Empire State Building, called Polk's Besides models and trains of all descriptions, they carried these neat little plastic soldiers imported from England, and various tanks and planes that seemed to be the right size for our soldiers. That was the beginning of our next stage of gaming—miniatures battles. Except, we had no idea it was called miniatures battles at the time, and we had no rule books to follow. Instead, it was up to me (the rules guy) to figure out what we should do with the soldiers and the vehicles. After a little thinking, "War" was born.

Everybody in the group picked a favorite country from the World War II era. Then we decided how much each country was allowed to spend on units. Another trip to the city to purchase troops and equipment, and we were ready to enact our own version of WWII. For the next couple of weekends, we got together to assemble our forces. The soldiers and vehicles were glued to one-inch squares of heavy cardboard. We determined statistics for each "unit" and wrote them right on the cardboard bases. I don't remember all the details, but there were things like how many attacks a unit got, how tough it was, its range, and stuff like that. We used six-sided dice to determine attack successes. Our battlefields were huge wooden boards covered with squares that were laid out on Curtis' basement floor. (We always played at Curtis', mostly because he always had soda and had a finished basement to play in.)

Being the rules guy was harder without some tangible book of instructions to hold up when the arguments got heated. Still, it helped prepare us for the real gaming to come by stretching our imaginations and our thinking processes. War was dirt simple, but it was ours and it was fun.

I could tell you all kinds of stories about

our games of War, such as the time my friend Charlie left his Italian troops outside the corner deli while he went in to buy chips to bring to the game, but I'm supposed to be getting to my first role-playing game experience. Oh okay, I'll tell you what happened. When Charlie came out of the store, his box of soldiers, tanks, and planes was gone. The rest of us laughed hysterically when he arrived at the game, chiding him on how his forces had decided to go AWOL on the eve of the major battle of the campaign. Of course, every battle of the campaign was major. (My gaming group found little fun in fighting minor battles.) It wasn't long after that incident, however, that we discovered the AD&D® game.

We were back at Polk's, looking for troops to replace Charlie's lost legions, when we noticed something new on one of the racks. There were these two hardcover books. You know where this is leading. We found the original AD&D game rule books. There also was a module sitting beside them. I think it was B1 *Into the Unknown*. I bought copies of all three and was deep into the *DMG* by the time the subway pulled into our station in Queens. I was still the rules guy, but it took something called the AD&D game to give me a prestigious title to go along with my position. Now I was the DM, and our weekend sessions were about to take an unexpected turn into the dungeons of a mythical place called Greyhawk.

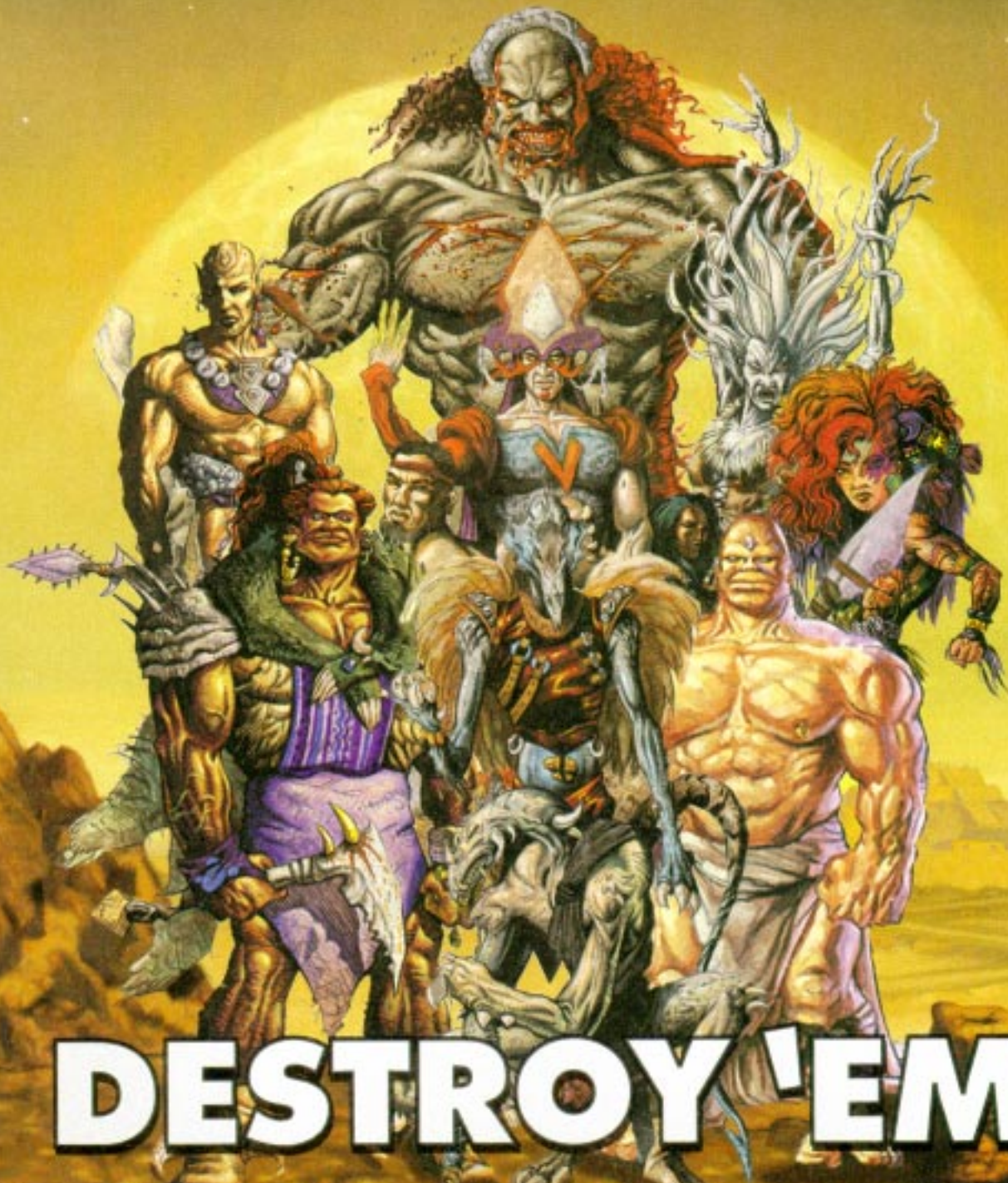
I devoured those rule books before the weekend arrived. When the group got together, I explained the basics (as I understood them), helped everyone roll up characters, and we stumbled through our first game. Over the next few months, dozens of player characters died in heroic or stupid battles as we all learned how to play. Some characters were *resurrected* multiple times, others willed their belongings to their next characters. Some characters had dumb names (I hated characters with dumb names. Elfy I, II, III, and IV, for example, all died horrible—and permanent—deaths because I thought they had the dumbest names.) One player kept playing the same cleric over and over again.

I don't remember too much of the first AD&D games we played. I do remember that I always was the DM and that everyone loved the game. We played it to the exclusion of all else, and I was cranking out my own adventures as often as I was

Continued on page 24

DARK SUN

WORLD



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PUTTING EVIL to good use



Use a little lateral thinking to get around those annoying curses

by Johnathan M. Richards

Artwork by Lissanne Lake



**The
adventure
was over,
and
the gold
had been
divided.**

All that remained was for each character to choose from the magical items in the treasure hoard. Hondo got lucky. A first-level monk on his first adventure, the "little guy" among a band of higher-level characters, he managed to roll for third pick. After Thorson the dwarf snatched up the *flame tongue*, and Blade opted for the *ring of invisibility*, Hondo was up. Those two were by far the best magical items in the cache; Hondo was left with a choice between various magical potions, or the *dagger of venom* they had taken from the assassin. . . .

"I'll take the dagger," he said—

"I wouldn't do that," interjected the Dungeon Master. "Those things are evil. Your monk is lawful good; that dagger could force him to make an alignment change. Why don't you take that *potion of gaseous form*?"

"Well, actually, I was thinking of cleaning out the dagger and filling it up with holy water," I said. "That shouldn't hurt my alignment any. And it is a +1 dagger."

"Holy water, huh? Hmmm, that's not a bad idea. Be good against vampires, I guess. Okay, who's got fourth pick?"

That was the first time I consciously had one of my characters use an evil weapon. It was a while ago (the original AD&D® game, before monks were disqualified as standard player characters), but the idea has stuck with me. After all, there are good reasons for non-evil characters to use evil magical items in non-evil ways. For example:

1. Better that it's being used by a good character than by an evil one. At least if your lawful good monk wields a *dagger of venom* (or *dagger of holy water*, as the case may be), you know it's not in the hands of some assassin. Of course, there is an inherent danger to this: if it were to be lost, nothing's going to stop some assassin from finding it and restoring it to use as an evil weapon. Wielding an evil weapon does bring a responsibility with it.

2. Waste not, want not. Sure, you could destroy every evil item you come across, but, as in the case of the *dagger of venom*, you'd be throwing away a chance at a perfectly good *dagger +1*. You never know when one of those might come in handy.

3. It drives evil NPCs crazy. Nothing makes an evil priest madder than to see a *book of vile darkness* being used as kindling, or as a target for archers wishing to hone up their skills.

4. It's a challenge. For those of you who like puzzles, there's an added fascination in figuring out good uses for these evil things. To me, Hondo's use of the *dagger of venom* was one of his greatest feats, and I still think of him that way today—he was the monk with the assassin's weapon.

So, with the above reasons in mind, let's see what we can do with some of the evil items mentioned in the DUNGEON MASTER® *Guide* and the *Tome of Magic*. Those items from the latter work are marked with an asterisk (*). Since they're sort of related, I've thrown in cursed items as well as evil ones. Also, I've taken the liberty of grouping together those evil or cursed items that might be used in similar ways, or for similar reasons.

Forget about the magic

Sometimes the best use for a cursed magical item is to use it as a non-magical item. Just forget about trying to invoke any magical powers from the thing, and use it like it was meant to be used before it was ensorcelled. For example:

Broom of Animated Attack—Just as long as you don't try to fly on the thing, it makes a perfectly usable broom. Or, soak the straw in pitch and set it on fire to make yourself a decent torch. Broom handles themselves can be used as makeshift weapons; a broom handle used as a club might be better than nothing in a brawl.

Rope of Constriction—You still can use it as a rope. Just to be on the safe side, though, you might want to take a knife to it and cut off an inch or two from one end; this will make it permanently non-magical (see page 158 of the *DMG*).

Rug of Smothering—As long as you don't give it any commands to take you flying, you can still keep it around your house to wipe your feet on. And who knows? Some rugs are very ornate in their weaving; you might have a real work of art on your hands.

Two wrongs can make a right

One of the best uses of a cursed item is to use it to cancel out another cursed item—a kind of poetic justice, don't you think?

Ring of Affliction, * *Ring of Bureaucratic Wizardry*, * *Ring of Clumsiness*, *Ring of Contrariness*, *Ring of Delusion*, *Ring of Randomness*, * *Ring of Weakness*—Any one of the above can be used to cancel out the effects of any other cursed ring. Simply put two rings on the same hand. Actually, any ring, cursed or not, can cancel out the effects of a cursed ring in this way, but who'd want to waste a good ring in this fashion?

Bag of Transmuting—Want to get rid of that cursed ring? Try wearing one of these over your hand for a while. Before long, that nasty ring will have become non-magical. This also works on cursed weapons, if you can fit them inside the bag without ripping it. Personally, I think every party should try to get one of these "cursed" items, if only for all the grief it will save them in the future.

Take a chance

Some cursed items actually can be beneficial in nature—the problem is, you have

to try them out to see if they are, and if they're not, you're stuck with the negative results. Still, some characters might find the risk to be worth it, especially if they have a way to counter the bad effects if it turns out their item is cursed, after all.

Eyes of Petrification—25% of these eyes grant their wearers the gaze of a basilisk. It might be worth the risk, if your character has friends who can cast *stone to flesh* on him in the event of petrification.

Ring of Weakness—It might be worth the hassle to try to turn this ring into a *ring of berserk strength*. While this is still technically a cursed ring, the effects of berserk strength could definitely be an asset under certain conditions, as long as a party member could cast a *remove curse* as needed.

It makes a fine weapon

Some cursed or evil items are bad only if you don't know what they are. If you know their powers ahead of time, some make excellent weapons to use against others.

Bag of Devouring—To use this, sneak up behind your enemy (this makes a good weapon for a rogue character), open the bag, and plop it on his head. The bag gets a free meal, and you're free of an enemy.

Book of Vile Darkness—As long as you don't handle it yourself (flipping it at enemies with a shovel or other implement seems to work okay, as does dumping it from a bag on top of them), this improvised "missile weapon" will do 5d6 damage to good characters or 5d4 to non-evil neutral enemies.

Brazier of Sleep Smoke—When using this, just make sure you've lured or maneuvered your enemy closer to the brazier than you are, since only the closest character gets attacked by the fire elemental. Also, make sure you've made arrangements with party members to come rescue you afterward.

Censer of Summoning Hostile Air Elementals—A sneaky attack, this: summon the air elementals in the presence of your enemies, then immediately turn *invisible*. The air elementals will attack everyone they see.

Cloak of Poisonousness—Wrap this around your enemy and give him a quick death. Careful with this, though; it's the same as poisoning someone, and could have alignment consequences.

Dimensional Mine *—These make good "hand grenades," if they can be thrown into an enemy's extra-dimensional space. Is an NPC mage trying to evade you with the old *rope trick* spell? Toss one of these up after him and send him on a quick trip to the Astral plane.

Dust of Sneezing and Choking—Throw it on your enemies. This works well if your castle walls are being stormed; just dump it over the wall on your would-be castle-stormers.

Elixir of Madness, Philter of Stammering and Stuttering—Sure, you wouldn't want to drink either of these yourself, but what about slipping one of them into an enemy's drink?

Hat of Stupidity—Used the same way as a *bag of devouring*, above.

Helm of Opposite Alignment—If you can plop this down on your evil opponent, chances are you can get him over on your side, and make an ally out of an enemy!

Incense of Obsession—What better way to sabotage that enemy priest's prayers and meditation? Just arrange to sneak this incense into his temple room, then watch him waste all of his spells.

Mirror of Opposition, Mirror of Simple Order *—Keep these mirrors covered up, then whip off the covering at the appropriate time. Just make sure you have some way of telling which way the mirror is facing, without looking at it, before uncovering it.

Necklace of Strangulation—Another good weapon for a rogue; just sneak up behind your opponent and slip it over his neck.

Scarab of Death—The DMG even tells you how to handle this one. Keep it in a container made of hard wood, ceramic, bone, ivory, or metal. Approach your enemy, open the container, and fling it at him.

Talisman of Ultimate Evil—Non-priest characters can handle this item without causing damage to themselves, but it will cause neutral priests 7d4 damage or good priests 12d4 damage. The talisman can be thrown, or attached to the head of a weapon to form a "priest-zapper."

Vacuous Grimoire—Just open this book in front of enemies and shout, "Look!" Chances are, they'll get a glimpse, and one glimpse is all it takes. This attack works well with the priest spell *command*.

I'm such a nice guy!

Sometimes you might want to have a cursed item, if it draws attacks to your character, and therefore protects others in your party. This is especially true if your character is a high-powered warrior with plenty of hit points, accompanied by much weaker, lower-level wizards, who usually have pretty poor armor classes, and probably can't afford to take the damage as well as your character can.

Armor of Missile Attraction—Not only does this draw missile fire to your character, but when worn in melee (not missile) combat, it actually gives an armor class benefit! Think of this as a bonus for being such a nice, considerate character.

Shield -1, Missile Attractor—No armor class benefit here, but you're still helping out your party members.

Fast money

Some items can be used for their monetary value. Actually, any of the various cursed items could be sold if you neglect to mention their cursed nature, but some just practically beg to be sold. Specifically:

Bowl of Watery Death—Well, it is made of semi-precious stone (malachite, lapis lazuli, or even jade). It ought to be worth some gold, cursed nature notwithstanding.

Manual of Dogmatic Methods *—This otherwise pretty useless item is silver-bound, and studded with jewels. Your best bet probably is to remove the silver and jewels, and use the paper to start fires with.

Potion of Delusion, Ring of Delusion—These two almost beg to be sold, since you can describe them as whatever you want, and the potential buyer won't suspect a thing!

But I want the attention!

Some cursed items will make you very evident to wandering monsters and the like. This isn't always a bad thing, especially if you have been charged with clearing out a certain area of all vile creatures. In that case, the "curse" is actually making your job that much easier! Some cursed items force your character to do battle with whatever he faces; again, not always a bad thing, if that's your mission anyway.

Amulet of Inescapable Location—This is useful if you want to be seen, either by your enemies ("I'm coming for you, punk!") or your friends, who might need to keep track of your progress or whereabouts.

Armor of Rage—If you're venturing into unfriendly lands, you're not expecting to make friends there anyway—and, the armor does a +1 bonus to armor class.

Chime of Hunger—Make sure you have food ready to stuff into your mouth, and some scattered around in front of you for good measure. Then strike the chime, and while you're feeding your face, you're also causing your enemies to rush toward you and your food. A good way to flush enemies out into the open.

Jewel of Attacks, Phylactery of Monstrous Attention—Useful in getting those pesky wandering monsters you're trying to clear out of the area out in the open where you can kill them.

Sword +1, Cursed; Sword, Cursed Berserking—Both of these swords grant a plus to hit, and force you to fight opponents. Not a bad deal, if you're inclined to do so anyway.

I really need the power

Some cursed items can be used for a short while as beneficial magical items; the problem is knowing when to stop. In some situations, though, it's a toss-up whether the effect will be good or bad. Still, there are times when that chance has to be taken

Boots of Dancing—As long as you don't anticipate getting into a combat situation, it's a pretty safe bet to use these boots, which can act as one of the other types of (beneficial) magical boots.

Gauntlets of Fumbling—Similarly, these can be used as either *gauntlets of dexterity* or *gauntlets of ogre* power, just so long as you don't anticipate getting involved in a combat scenario. Sitting alone in your lab, doing some fine-detail gem-cutting, might be a good time to give these a shot, especially since they can be removed without harm as long as the curse hasn't been activated.

Ring of Affliction *, *Ring of Clumsiness*, *Ring of Contrariness*, *Ring of Randomness**—Each of these rings has a beneficial power that can be used without triggering the curse, so long as there is no combat situation involved, although the *ring of randomness* involves a 50% chance of having the opposite effect desired take place.

Spear, Cursed Backbiter—This nasty device does function as a +1, +2, or even +3 *spear*, and even with a cumulative 1 in 20 chance of having it backfire on you, it's pretty safe (statistically speaking) to use it a couple of times. For the safest bet, use it only once, to throw at an enemy. That way, you get a one-shot magical weapon with little chance of it backfiring. Think of it as a magical arrow, if that helps; you usually only get one shot with those.

One-situation wonders

Some cursed items are of very limited beneficial use; with many, there's maybe one good thing you could possibly get from it (and some of these are really stretching it, at that). Nonetheless, here goes:

Bag of Devouring—This makes a good trash receptacle.

Chime of Hunger—This can be useful as a distraction, either to give the guards something to do while a party member sneaks past, or, for those with the appropriate spell or magical boots: jump into a pit, activate the chime, and watch out as your enemies jump in after you to get to the food. After you've eaten, *levitate* out of the pit, leaving your hapless foes stuck

below. This works well against large groups of orcs or other such creatures.

Crystal Hypnosis Ball—Chances are, your wizard character doesn't want to become a slave to a powerful lich or whatnot, so your best bet here is probably to use it as either a large sling stone, or as catapult ammo. I certainly wouldn't want to be hit on the head with one.

Drums of Deafening—I know it isn't usually thought of as a good thing, but going deaf (especially on a temporary basis) can be helpful if you know you're going up against a creature that uses sound as an attack; for instance, a banshee, an androsphinx, or a harpy.

Girdle of Femininity/Masculinity—Likewise, a quick sex change isn't something most characters will be looking for, but it might be a good last-ditch method of escaping from your enemies, if they know what you look like. Of course, this shouldn't be done lightly, since undoing the magic is rather difficult. (Oddly enough, in the AD&D game it's easier to be brought back to life than to be restored to your original gender—go figure.)

Horn of Bubbles—Don't use this one alone! But, if your character fears assassination, and will be surrounded by powerful party members at all times, this item can be used as an assassination-attempt alarm: when the bubbles appear, the assassin is near.

Periap of Foul Rotting—This one involves a little "rules lawyering." The *DMG* states that the curse will occur "if any character claims it as his own." So, have your character pick it up, state in a loud voice, "I don't claim this as my own, but I will carry it for a while," and then let some thief steal it from him. Serves the little thief right.

Philter of Stammering and Stuttering—This might be a good thing to guzzle down right before being captured by the bad guys, who desperately need the information in your head. It might stall for time, if nothing else.

Pipes of Pain—It causes damage to your enemies, but to you as well—unless, of course, you happen to be deaf. (Pass me those *drums of deafening*, will you.)

Robe of Vermin—This can be used as a food source for the truly desperate.

Stone of Weight (Loadstone)—This could be useful in a situation where the extra weight would actually come in handy—like maybe crossing a narrow pass with high winds blowing in your face, or acting as a counterbalance to party members who have fallen off a ledge (provided you're all tied together by lengths of rope).

Trident of Yearning—Using this could be a good way to find water when you desperately need some—say, if you're lost in the desert. Just make sure that once you get to the water, you or a party member has some way to allow you to breathe underwater, so you don't accidentally drown yourself

Well, it looks nice

Some cursed magical items aren't of any practical use other than ornamentation.

Necklace of Strangulation—You wouldn't want to wear it, but you could display it on a statue, or you could put it on yourself once it has been drained of its magic.

Plate Mail of Vulnerability—Only a fool would willingly wear it into battle, but if you wanted to spruce up your castle, it could make an excellent addition to the foyer (and besides, who's to know that it's cursed, anyway, if you don't tell them?).

Alignment detectors

This item could be used to find out someone's alignment inclination, if not their exact alignment. Just be sure to be able to heal their damage quickly, if necessary.

Book of Vile Darkness, *Talisman of Ultimate Evil*—These will cause damage to non-evil characters, so if you see someone handling one of them effortlessly, you know he's evil of some sort. Of course, using these items this way means that the only ones you're harming are those you might want to make friends with, which isn't exactly starting out on the right foot. You might wish to tell the "victims" up front, before you zap them with the item.

Hey, look what I made!

Some cursed magical items are of such limited use that the best thing that can be done with them is to use them as raw materials to make something else. Cutting up a magical item is usually a sure way to destroy it, so you normally don't have to be concerned about creating new cursed items out of old ones. The items listed below can provide you with some raw materials:

Bag of Devouring, *Bag of Transmuting*, *Cloak of Poisonousness*, *Robe of Powerlessness*, *Robe of Vermin*—Each of these will provide you with cloth, with which you can make small bags and pouches, handkerchiefs, strips for torches, and so on.

Bracers of Defenselessness—If these happen to be made of leather, they can be used for a variety of small items—knife sheaths, scroll or map cases, and so forth.

Rug of Smothering—This provides wool or fiber, which can be cut up or unraveled and rewoven into something else.

I like it fine this way

Some evil or cursed items are perfectly usable as is, or with slight modifications.

Dagger of Venom—As seen in the beginning of this article, this evil weapon is a prime example: clean it out, fill it with holy water, and use it against corporeal undead.

Medallion of Thought Projection—Using this won't let you sneak up on anybody, but you can read the minds of and send telepathic messages to your party members. It makes for an excellent silent two-way communication device.

Poison—Your character might be able to get some "brownie points" with the local clergy by turning these in to the local temple, so that fledgling priests can practice their *detect poison*, *slow poison*, and *neutralize poison* spells.

Sword -2, Cursed; Sword, Cursed Berserking—If you're a good enough swordsman to counter the -2 of the first sword's curse, the teleportation power of the sword can come in handy. Harkon Lukas of the RAVENLOFT® setting likes to leave his sword behind, so that he appears unarmed, knowing full well that it will appear in his hand when he needs it (even

if he starts the fight). His weapon is a *sword, cursed berserking*, but the principle is the same for both swords.

Curses made good

Finally, there are actual curses themselves, of the type encountered with a *cursed scroll* or a *flask of curses*. Of the ones listed in the *DMG*, some of them could have a beneficial aspect, under the right conditions. For instance:

Character beard grows 1" per minute—This could be a quick way to earn some money, if there happens to be a wig-maker in the local area. It's also a quick and easy disguise, for those characters who don't normally wear a beard (like, say, the female ones) and desperately need to escape into a crowd.

Character polymorphed in to a mouse—This can be a good way to escape enemies, infiltrate an enemy stronghold, or scout out a location in secret.

Character blinded/deafened—This can be good preparation for a battle with a creature using a gaze or sonic attack (for example, a medusa in the first case, or a banshee in the second). The Blind-fighting proficiency is a great bonus to those characters temporarily blinded.

Character is teleported away from the party—This could be a good thing if your "party" is evil and you've infiltrated it in order to steal some object, which you've just accomplished—in this case, the faster the *teleportation*, the better. Or, sadly, there might be an instance in which your party is being wiped out by a stronger force, and it's vital that someone survives to warn the rest of civilization what's going on.

Character shrinks to half his normal size—This is a good way to escape in a crowd while being pursued. It can help you be passed off as a child or a halfling—provided you didn't start out as one in the first place.

Of course, these are only some of the curses listed in the *DMG*. Each Dungeon Master is encouraged to make up his own, just as players are invited to come up with ways to turn those curses around too. Hopefully, with this article in mind, you'll be able to find interesting ways to make the best of the curses that come your character's way.

Furthermore, the next time one of your characters comes across an evil or cursed item, give it a second thought before passing it up. You never know—you could be passing up the opportunity of a lifetime.

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GAMING

with *Style*

What style of game do you play?

By Thomas M. Kane

Artwork by Terry Dykstra

Over time, gamers have come to expect certain things from their role-playing games. We expect games to provide a fair challenge, to include interesting NPCs, to give PCs something to do, to follow consistent rules, to have an exciting background and history, and more. However, different gamers rank these values in different orders, and emphasize different ones in their games. Therefore, different styles of play have developed.

This article examines several major styles of play. It looks at how game players can take advantage of each style and also how players can design their characters to fit into varying types of game. Then, having considered these things, it considers the lessons the different styles have to teach one another. The different styles of gaming have many things in common and a few differences worthy of debate.

Styles of gaming

High-power

High-power gamers have read the lists monsters and magical items and consider it wasteful not to use them all. PCs can expect to reach high levels in multiple classes. Treasure hoards contain numerous magical items and as characters rise in level, they often begin manufacturing enchanted gear of their own. I know of one such game where the adventurers received several dozen wishes apiece, all in the course of a single adventure. This game, however, differs from the "Monty Haul" stereotype. In a true high-powered game, the villains are just as powerful as the adventurers. The DM does not hesitate to use ogre magi, rakshashas, dragons, and other potent monsters to full advantage.

The DMs of some high-powered games make a determined effort to play by all the rules. Under these circumstances, all the advice listed under the "Rules-bound" style of play applies. The game becomes a no-holds-barred contest of strategy and game knowledge. This can be extremely challenging, and it also gives everyone a chance to experiment with those high-level spells and monsters that simply do not show up in other types of scenarios.

Other high-powered game DMs take rules less seriously. Many gamers, especially less experienced ones, act on the assumption that powerful magic and monsters would not be in the rule book if they were not supposed to be in the game. Furthermore, they throw in powerful magic and monsters for the sake of dramatic effect. These sorts of games have

the same appeal of B-movies and cheap novels. They let players get away with crazy, exciting stunts, and where they are bad, they are bad enough to be funny.

Players in a high-powered style must remember that such a game belongs to the bold. As a thousand wise people have admonished us, one does not have to play a super-powerful character to have fun. However, in a high-powered game, one must play a character who can get attention. One must ham up one's personality and thrust oneself into party discussions. If one happens to have an outstanding ability or magical item, one must be sure to use it, ideally in some unusual, funny, and memorable way. One is also within one's rights to follow the old saying "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." The sad fact is that if everyone else rolls up characters with multiple ability scores over 18, the lone player who bravely plays a character with mediocre statistics is unlikely to get much credit for it.

paign, players are the ones who get to speak and gesture and act as their characters. The corresponding drawback is that results tend to be less tangible. Dice and combat systems produce a cut-and-dried result, but in a deep role-playing game, players rely on the DM to role-play NPCs' responses in a realistic way.

The secret to running a deep role-playing campaign lies in keeping the players' trust. One must weave such a compelling story with believable NPCs so that the players do not even think about questioning the outcome of a situation. If players enjoy the tale, and feel that they understand the reasons for things, they seldom question the DM's decisions. However, the moment players start to feel manipulated, the illusion of reality starts to falter.

A DM's imagination is this style's greatest strength and also its fatal flaw. The same creativity that allows a DM to spin a wonderful role-playing campaign can cause him to fall in love with a certain plot line



Over time, gamers have come to expect certain things from their role-playing games.

Deep role-playing

A deep role-playing campaign differs from other styles in both the attitude the players take and in the sort of challenges they encounter. As the name implies, these games make character development paramount. The players devote all their efforts to portraying their characters' moods and personalities. The DM does the same thing with NPCs, and with the plot itself. Furthermore, the game's outcome hinges on this role-playing and story-telling as well. Entire game sessions can pass without the use of dice. PCs can and must solve their problems by negotiation, intrigue, impassioned argument, and similar tactics.

These games unleash all the creativity of everyone involved. Since most role-players have active imaginations, it is no surprise that deep role-playing games often catch fire and turn into the most intense, memorable campaigns of all.

One feature of a deep role-playing campaign is that the players actually can do the same things as the heroes. When a combat-oriented game reaches its decisive point, gamers must break their suspension of disbelief to roll dice and compute game statistics, but in a deep role-playing cam-

or certain NPCs. Players, however, do not like to be bound by the DM's preferences. If the game always goes the way the DM plans for it to, they do not see any reason to play at all. Inevitably, players will make a serious bid to kill the DM's favorite villain, or wind up one quest in favor of another, or in some other way rebel against the plot line. This is the true test of a deep role-playing game. A superior DM allows the party to make its own choices, gives them a reasonable chance of success, and allows the story to develop in a new direction, while keeping the new plot as alive with detail as the old. DMs who cannot let the party guide the game's story line from time to time are sure to end up with frustrated players, although they may have a future writing novels.

A player in a deep role-playing game must remember, first of all, not to spoil the fun. This type of game relies entirely on mood and suspension of disbelief. A player who fails to take the game seriously or insists on playing a disruptive character can prevent the game from "coming together" for anyone. It often would be easy to pick one of these games apart logically, pointing out inconsistencies in DM decisions, rules mistakes, unlikely events in

the plot and silly character behavior, but not only is this rude, it is destructive to the entire game.

In order to make a deep role-playing game work, players should do all the things that they would ideally do in any game. Develop a detailed background for your character and make it fit into the larger history of the campaign. Give your character a distinctive voice, attitudes, likes, dislikes, and personality. Develop relationships with both PCs and NPCs. Support the DM and, when a decision goes against your character, try to work out some inventive solution that makes the entire story better.

Dr. Quizzler

The Dr. Quizzler type of game emphasizes puzzles, riddles, traps, and magical puzzles of the sort the original AD&D® game called "tricks." Puzzle games usually take place in an old-fashioned dungeon, both because of tradition and because confined tunnels offer the DM an easy way to channel the party into one such challenge after another. Players with a gift for solving puzzles can find these games delightful.

Ideally, this type of game encourages players to look beyond the obvious and consider problems in new ways. The classic dilemma of a quizzler game comes when players look at a problem in a new and coldly realistic way and decide to circumvent the puzzle altogether. For example, if a party needs to get past a door protected by a puzzle lock and knows that the puzzle contains a death-trap for those who attempt the wrong solution, the logical solution is to build a battering ram and smash the door, puzzle trap and all. If the trap is too deadly for that, tunneling through walls offers a next option.

If a game is based on riddles, the DM may see these dodges as cheating. However, they make perfect sense from the characters' point of view, and, in a way, represent exactly the problem-solving techniques this sort of play is supposed to foster. If the DM can anticipate some of these dodges and establish precautions in them in advance, it solves the problem to everyone's satisfaction. However, when DMs fail to anticipate something, they face the problem directly. A DM emphasizing realism accepts the fact that the party has thought of a new solution. A quizzler style purist simply makes up a reason on the spot why the party must fail.

If one cares to generalize a bit, the pure quizzler style of play actually encompasses an entire philosophy of gaming which views the campaign setting as strictly artificial, and the business of role-playing as strictly a game, as opposed to a form of story-telling. Although riddles and traps play a role in fantasy (witness *The Hobbit* and the riddle of the sphinx), entire adventures based on nothing else do not match any sort of realism, even in the context of

a game. This does seem to eliminate a great deal of the fun in role-playing. Therefore, DMs should consider whether they wish to run an entire campaign based on traps, or whether they prefer to introduce occasional puzzles into a campaign of another sort.

Any quizzler style DM should follow certain principles of etiquette. To begin with, the party needs a chance to solve the riddles and puzzles. If the initial problem does not contain enough clues, the DM simply is playing a guessing game with the party, and this is not fun for anyone involved. Second, tricks and traps should have a certain degree of flair. The super-elaborate (and hilariously funny) traps in the *Grimtooth* books offer one such style. Another fashion in trap design is to describe the working of traps in great detail, so that players who feel inclined can attempt to disarm them, not by simply making dice rolls but by actually figuring out the mechanism.

As a player in a quizzler game, one must learn to put clues together. A large part of this consists in being able to find things "hidden in plain sight." One also must learn to be a good sport and let other people try their ideas when you have none of your own. Finally, players who want to make the game run smoothly may voluntarily refrain from trying solutions that the DM strictly did not have in mind.

Rules-bound

In a rules-bound game, the DM and players alike attempt to run the game strictly according to the rules. The chief danger in this style of play is that the game may bog down in lawyerly arguments, or in simple confusion caused by complex game systems. One can lose the excitement of role-playing easily in such situations. The advantage to rules-based play is that the players know exactly how their world works. They can plan strategies to take advantage of their knowledge, and when these plans succeed, they know that they have earned their victory.

Combat often dominates rules-based games, because combat lends itself most readily to simulation through game mechanics. However, these games need not be simply "hack and slash." Instead, this sort of game resembles a board or war game, in which both sides must work hard to develop their tactics, and to set up a battle situation that maximizes their chances to win. Setting up the battle may involve extensive role-playing, and if the DM can support this, even a strict game of rules and combat may develop the story line and drama of more artistic game styles.

In a rules-based game, the DM is not omnipotent. DMs must play by the rules they set up, and they must expect PCs to challenge their interpretation of rules. Therefore, DMs plan their battles with the express intention of defeating the party. As long as the monsters and PCs are bal-

anced in power, the DM has every reason to take pride in winning the fight.

Obviously, both players and DMs in these games must learn the rules. Furthermore, neither side should cheat. In a game like this, players who fudge dice rolls can expect the DM to eject them without a second thought. The DM, of course, may find extenuating circumstances, such as the desire not to simply wipe out the entire party if a certain monster proves to be too strong. However, in this sort of game, the players trust the DM to play by the same rules as them, and DMs should not disappoint them.

Artistic

These role-players view themselves, not as gamers, but as creators of art. Therefore, these players cooperate with the DM to make the story better, even at the expense of their characters. The DM takes fewer precautions to keep the adventure plot secret from the players, because he does not expect them to try to "beat" the opposition, he expects them to try to explore their characters' reaction to the situation. Artistic gamers, like the modern artists they admire, often insert a theme of social awareness or artistic irony into their work.

A perfect example of the artistic style of adventure appears as an introductory scenario to Atlas Games' *OVER THE EDGE** game. The adventure is titled "Self-Referential Awareness" and subtitled "Oh my God, I'm a character in a role-playing game." As the title implies, the point of this adventure is for the PCs to discover that they are simply figments of the players' imagination. The text invites players to consider how their characters would react to this knowledge. They might refuse to believe it, being unable to accept the fact that their world does not exist. They might take advantage of it, learning the game rules, and using them to manipulate the players who rule their universe. (And what, the scenario designer inquires, is magic but the study of the rules behind the universe?)

The advantages of artistic role-playing lie in the fact that it frees the entire gaming group to develop the most dramatic story possible, without creating tension between the players and DM. Artistic role-playing also gives one a chance to experiment with artistic and social ideas that might never appear in a more traditional game. The disadvantage to this style of play lies in the fact that it tends to take the "game" out of role-playing. Players cannot take as much pride in what they, acting as their characters, have accomplished, because the game's results have as much to do with the group's artistic sensibilities as with skill and cunning. Furthermore, many gamers simply do not play games in order to make artistic statements.

To succeed in an artistic game, one must have a sense of oneself as an artist. One must be able to come up with good story

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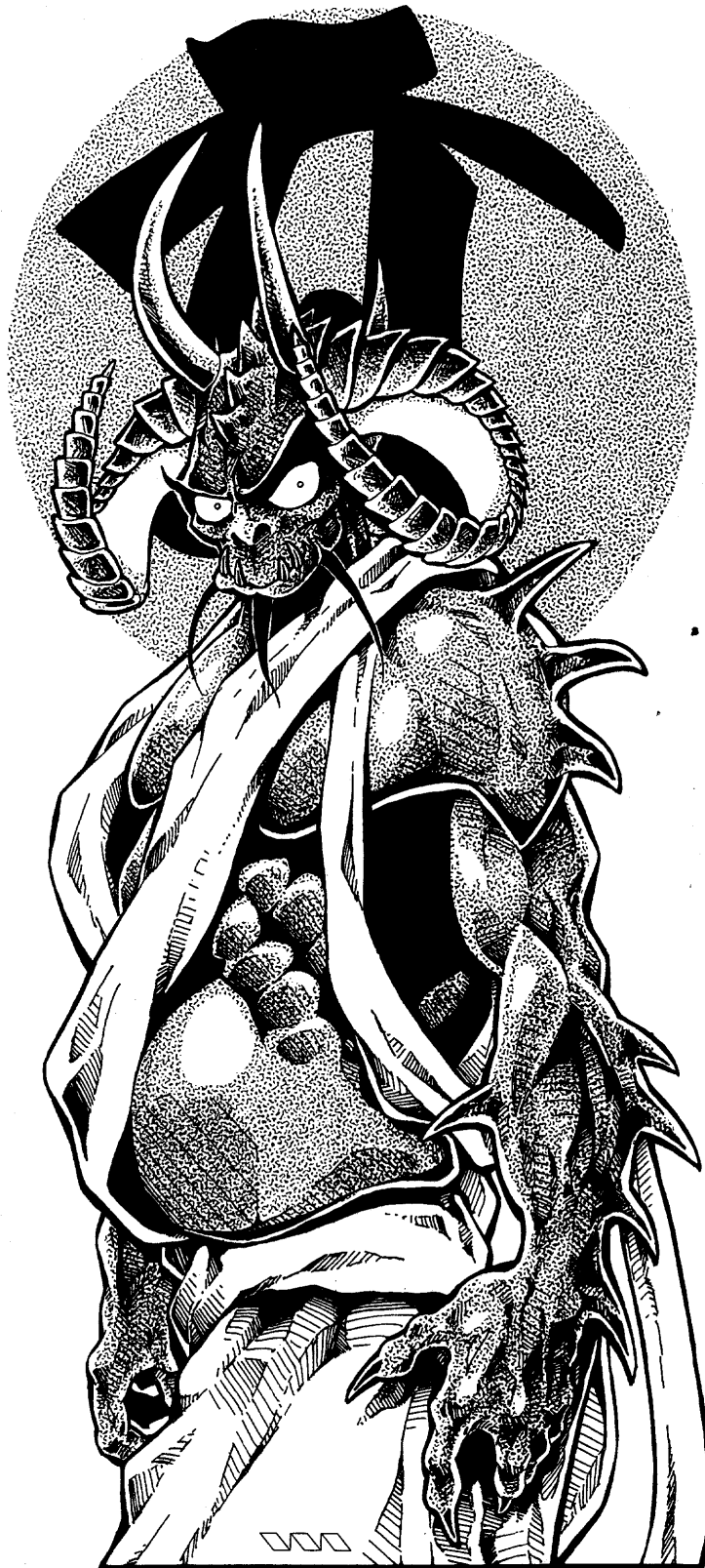
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ideas. Above all, one must enjoy detailed characters and serious role-playing. However, one also must be prepared to “step outside” one’s character in order to see what the story calls on one’s character to do, as opposed to what the character should do to maximize his chances for success. Both WotC’s ARS MAGICA* game and Chaosium’s PENDRAGON* game, for instance, call on players to make dice rolls to determine how the characters make decisions or react to happenings around them. For example, a courageous PC must pass a roll to run away from battle, even if the player thinks the odds are impossible.

Unlike the other gamers in this article, the artistic gamers have consciously defined their way of gaming as a style of play and founded game companies to promote it. The PENDRAGON, ARS MAGICA, and OVER THE EDGE games fall into this category, as do White Wolfs Storyteller RPGs: the VAMPIRE*, WEREWOLF*, MAGE*, and WRAITH* games.

The future of style

A discussion of the different styles of role-playing lead one to a perilous question. Are some styles superior to the others? The usual answer is that if the players are having fun, the game is good. This statement, of course, is inarguably true, but it leaves a great many issues to be considered. Even a great game can get better. Successful players (and DMs) usually take an interest in specifically what it is that makes their games fun.

Whether they think about it or not, most gamers already accept basic principles of adventure quality. For instance, although most DMs go through a stage of giving away too much treasure, nearly all of us eventually reject the Monty Haul style of adventure. Most of us agree that certain things make a game fun, such as vivid role-playing, and certain things hurt an otherwise exciting adventure, such as PCs “playing on information” that the players know but the characters do not. What most of us have not yet done is to examine this collection of unwritten rules in its entirety and attempt to establish general standards for role-playing games.

One can assume that each style of gaming emphasizes the qualities that its players enjoy the most. Therefore, by examining the different ways people play games, one ought to be able to deduce reasons why the different styles succeed, and the qualities one might hope to see in a game. The above list of styles in this article is far from complete. Nevertheless, it provides an overview of the directions in which gamers seem to be proceeding.

When one scans the common styles of gaming and considers the typical gamer, one begins to see that most styles of play have elements in common. Nothing prevents a campaign from having extensive role-playing, riddles, and consistent rules. Running such a game would not even require much more work than running a game that emphasized any one element

more heavily than the others. No matter what style of play one uses, one has something to learn from the players of other styles.

Styles of play become less compatible when one considers the role the DM plays. One can reduce this issue to the question of whether or not any laws exist that the DM must respect. Laws, in this case, include not simply rule books but the DM’s own self-imposed rules governing the realism of the world. In a deep role-playing game, the DM may feel tempted to interfere in the plot to produce an outcome he considers dramatic. In a quizzler game, the DM may feel tempted to rule out party decisions that he sees as “cheating.” DMs in any sort of game may interfere to keep PCs from dying, to prevent a battle within the party or to explain something the PCs failed to understand. The artistic style of play openly advises DMs to revise the plot in this sort of way, and exhorts the players to be active accomplices. However, every time the DM inserts himself into a game, the scenario loses a little of its realism, and worse yet, the players lose a little of the illusion that they are actually living their characters’ lives. Therefore, DMs must take careful thought when deciding how much to intervene in a game.

DM control is enjoying a current surge in popularity. Nobody likes rules-lawyer players who try to upstage the DM. Furthermore, DM control often seems to allow for more vivid role-playing than cold rules-realism, especially for those DMs blessed by a gift for weaving a tale. This is why the “artistic” gamers consider themselves today’s avant-garde in role-playing. However, the sophisticated role-player does have a second option. This style of play features both rules and role-playing, and although the DM retains complete creative control over the game, the players do depend on their world to remain generally consistent, and they always have the right to make their own decisions.

For the sake of a name, one can call this hybrid style of gaming a Naturalistic style. This name is appropriate, because gamers who follow this style hope to make their worlds seem real, in every sense of the word. They want the world to have natural details and they want PCs’ actions to have natural results. Naturalistic gamers attempt to know the rules and play by them, because rules allow players to feel as if their characters live in a genuine world, governed by its own natural laws, in which choices have real consequences. However, the naturalistic game does not consider rules an end in themselves. The rules exist to inspire role-playing.

Like the deep role-playing game, the naturalistic game emphasizes story line and character development. However, the naturalistic game also seeks the consistency of the rules-bound style of play. The ultimate principles of naturalistic gaming are that the characters exist in the game world. They may not be powerful on that

world’s scale, they may have to flee dangers or obey overlords, and their experiences may change them in many ways. However, the players make their own decisions, and these decisions ultimately shape their lives and the campaign world around them.

When DMs decide to give players a greater decision-making role, they occasionally assume that they no longer need to give the party something to do. This is a mistake. The party cannot make decisions unless it has something to make decisions about. Therefore, the DM always should give the PCs a “hook” to get them into an adventure—and possibly more than one. There is nothing wrong with having a patron assign the PCs a mission, even if that patron happens to be a mysterious stranger hiring people at the tavern. As PCs develop their own interests in the campaign world, such as keeps and political positions, they will come up with ideas of their own to pursue, and then the DM may wish to turn these into adventures. However, it may be worthwhile to introduce unexpected quests and challenges even then.

When properly managed, naturalistic games can create the most vivid characters and stories of all. These games are full of character and drama for the same reason that real life is full of character and drama. Great things happen in the world and the PCs must contend with them as best they can, knowing that the decisions are theirs to make. The excitement and the feelings are spontaneous, just as they would be in life.

Conclusion

This article has an ambitious goal. It aims to do for naturalistic gaming what some games and game companies have done for artistic play. Our world is full of experienced players who have never bothered to worry about the social and aesthetic implications of their games, but have done their best to run fun adventures. This article hopes to rally them and give them a voice in today’s debates on role-playing.

The naturalistic style takes advantage of the things that make gaming unique. Role-playing games are the only form of storytelling that not only encourage the audience to contribute story ideas but actually challenge them to solve the problems of the main characters. Naturalistic games emphasize this participatory nature of role-playing. When these games end, the players can feel that they have not only role-played the game’s situations—they have experienced them.

Thanks to the following players and DMs for their advice and the examples they set for different styles of play: Annette Chase, Russell Dow, Christopher Haynes and Stephanie Little.

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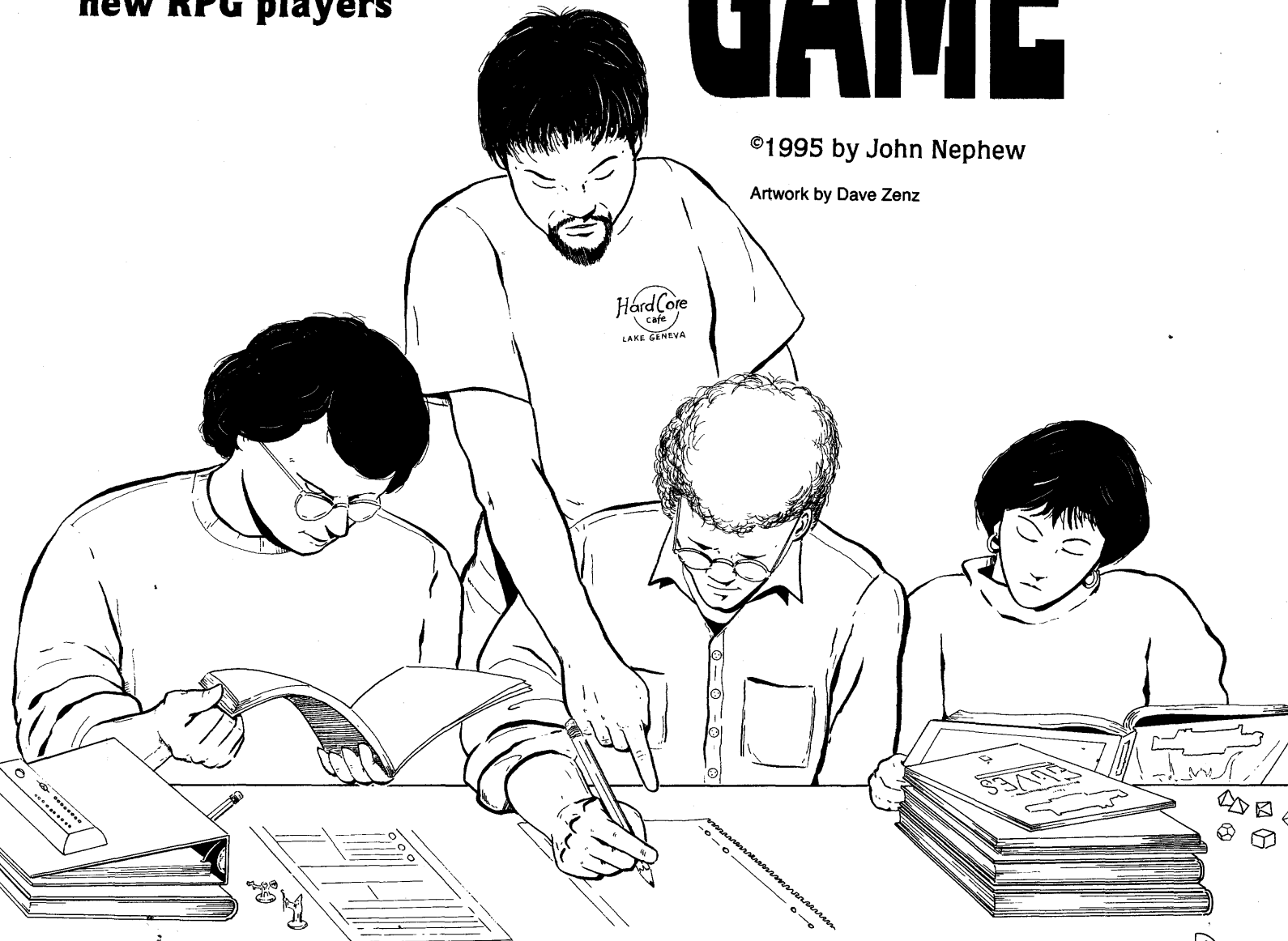
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THE Beginners GAME

**How to attract and keep
new RPG players**

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Artwork by Dave Zenz



My first role-playing experience, more than a decade ago, was with the AD&D® game. I played a daring paladin who verged on the superhuman. Only after I had some experience as a GM myself did I realize that my Game Master had manipulated the game shamelessly. The proof was the published modules he had sent me through; they were very different in print from my experiences in play! But I didn't know that at the time. What I did know was how much fun I had. It led me to start playing the D&D® game, and eventually to become a professional game writer.

Based on my experience of joining the role-playing community, and my own successes and failures of drawing in more members, I have some ideas to answer the perennial question that GMs in every system inevitably face: What is the best way to get new players involved?

To answer this question, let's set out the goals we want to achieve. I suggest the following, in order of importance:

- **To entertain the player:** A Game Master wants to entertain her players. If the players don't enjoy themselves, the game session safely can be labeled a failure. This is especially true for new players; if their "first impression" role-playing experiences are negative or boring, it is difficult to cajole would-be gamers into another go. Veteran players, on the other hand, tend to accept ups and downs, because they know such are inevitable over the course of months and years of playing. What constitutes satisfying entertainment, of course, is up for discussion.

- **To make the player want to play again:** Role-playing isn't a one-time experience, like a movie or play; it's not enough to please the audience with a single performance. A successful first game not only entertains, but intrigues, and makes the neophyte long to play again.

- **To introduce the player to the rules of the game:** At the end of the first game, a new player should have some idea of the basic elements of game mechanics. This doesn't mean a comprehensive, or even working, knowledge; but a player of Chaosium's CALL OF CTHULHU* game as an example, ought to understand the "Sanity" character trait after the first session.

- **To assimilate the neophyte with the other players:** Achieving all of the above goals can be complicated when the Game Master is working within an established campaign, and the interests (and even jealousies) of other players enter the equation.

These four goals are intertwined. The best beginner's experience, I believe, incorporates them all. In this article, I am focusing chiefly on the first two goals.

The approach I suggest is liberality. Be nice to new players; in fact, give their characters special advantages. "Cheat," if you must, because for the GM with a new player, the end does justify the means. Make "the beginner's game" just that.

A lot of gamers will be aghast at this suggestion, so let me provide my rationale. Perhaps from their war game heritage, RPGs often carry a half-guilty feeling that nothing can be unless the dice and the strict letter of the rule book says so. In war gaming, where player is pitted against player, this is an essential meta-rule, without which the game would dissolve. For role-playing games, the situation is vastly different. The goal is not fairness, or even (except in special cases, like tournaments) a test or competition of playing skill and ingenuity. Rather, it is an event in which the joy and success of one is ideally shared, and multiplied, into the pleasure of all. The question is not, "How can I get the most out of the rules?" or "How can I do better than so-and-so?" but, "How can we make this more fun for everyone?" In a long-term campaign outlook, rules and strictness may be important, but for the beginner's game the world should be different.

Let's examine, point-by-point, the application of the "liberal approach" across various stages of the beginner's game.

Note: I am assuming that neophyte gamers have not read the rule book of the system in question. This may be a wise decision on the GM's part—not wanting to inundate the beginner with too much data. ("Here, read all the AD&D 2nd Edition game rules and player supplements, then we'll schedule your first game sometime next year".) Or, it may just be circumstance: a new player probably has never read the rules, in fact, he might never before have heard of role-playing, and we'll hope he is eager to play without delay. Players who have read the rules may have different expectations than those who haven't. The GM must be sensitive to their different perceptions.

Character generation

This first step is perhaps the most perilous. How a GM helps her player create his first character may indelibly mark the gamer's entire career. Approach with caution!

The main consideration here is this: The neophyte doesn't know what things mean. This makes it of little use to pile up the possibilities of, say, all the AD&D game races multiplied by the classes multiplied by the character kits from the supplementary player manuals. The neophyte may be confused, even intimidated, by the wealth of data.

A second consideration is this: The character should be playable. This means it should be able to survive the challenges it will face; and it should be a fun character to play. A 300 hit point tank is high on survival, but low on personality—and little fun for a neophyte being inducted into role-playing. Conversely, a delightfully quirky character may be great fun to play, but without a little resistance to the elements of the game world, the beginner's first game will be woefully short. The two

aspects need to be balanced. Here are some approaches:

Pregenerated PCs

In this simple option, the GM makes several characters before the start of the game, and offers the neophyte the choice among them. The GM then explains to the player what the different aspects of the character are—statistics, skills, and so forth.

The downside is that pregenerated characters may offer too little room for the new player's self-expression. It is vital that the player be as wholly engaged in the game as possible. That's what makes role-playing different from reading books and watching movies.

Fudging & manipulation

I think this is the least preferable choice, because it sets the neophyte in the wrong mind-frame: tampering directly with the "reality" of the game. For an experienced GM, discreet tampering is fine—the GM is supposed to be in control, and with greater knowledge of what lies ahead, it's her prerogative to manipulate circumstances (without the players' knowledge) to bring forth a satisfying game. Players' tampering is destabilizing, both because it may hamper the GM, and because it erodes the shared faith in the "reality" of the game world.

As the dice may fall . . .

The opposite extreme is to go by the letter of the law in character design. Roll the dice, and accept what they tell you. An advantage of this approach is that it helps establish the "impartiality," and thus the believability, of the game world. The disadvantage is that the player may get stuck with a lousy character. Don't worry too much about that, though: It's easy enough to ease the player's rite of passage, even if he is burdened with a below-average adventurer (see "The First Adventures," below).

In some games, characters are not dictated by the roll of dice. Instead, players receive a number of points to "spend" among abilities and skills. This can be tricky for the beginner, who doesn't necessarily know the subtleties of the system. The GM should lend a helping hand, trying to discern what sort of character the player would enjoy, and suggesting how to allocate resources to maximize the character's suitability for the role.

Limited options

With point-allocation systems, limiting the player's options can be important. Indeed, for all neophyte character-generation approaches, limiting may be a good thing. A new player may not be ready to deal with all the complex alternatives available to an experienced one.

Some games limit automatically: e.g., a first-time D&D game wizard only has one spell to worry about; and no starting char-

acter in Chaosium's PRINCE VALIANT* game is too difficult for a beginner. Others don't: A starting magus in WotC's ARS MAGICA* game will have a formidable repertoire of formulaic spells (each of which the player needs to understand to use effectively), plus the capability of spontaneous magic (the subtleties of which can be a game unto itself).

The GM knows more than the neophyte; she should take advantage of her knowledge to present an abbreviated list of options from which the player can then choose.

First adventures

With character readied, the GM and player have past their first hurdle, and are ready for the second, the adventure. What elements should a beginning adventure contain?

First, start small. The disinherited peasant lad (or lass), out to find his fortune, is perfect. Everyone feels like the bottom of the heap in the real world sometimes, so the "peasant" is personally identifiable. Moreover, the provincial ignorance of a peasant perfectly suits the neophyte's ignorance of the game and world. In a modern game like Atlas Games' OVER THE EDGE* rules, foreigners and tourists are good beginning characters for the same reason.

Second, go big. In short, hand them the world. Why not? It's glorious, it's heroic. Don't do it right away, of course . . . but be generous in the awarding of experience, wealth, magic, or technology. Then provide foes worthy of the characters' growing stature.

Is the character actually worthy of this progress? Probably not. Most games are balanced so that progress is moderate, requiring months or years of play to achieve high levels. Experienced role-players often like this approach. If this is so with the rules of your game, ignore the rules! Set a more aggressive pace, fudging rules and rolls (without the player's knowledge, if possible), as expedient. (If you're willing to do this, then it won't matter so much if the dice produced a lackluster character at the start.)

In a fantasy game, this may mean that the characters soon rule the Empire (whichever empire your world sports, or whichever one the PCs forge), by conquest or discovery of a secret heritage. Remember the fairy tales and myths in which the nameless orphan turns out to be heir to the throne? It's a winning theme. It's hooked audiences for millennia, and it'll work on the new player, too.

Does this make for nasty "power gaming?" Maybe. But that wasn't the point—remember, this is a beginners' campaign. The GM doesn't want to run the game like this forever. But generosity at the start will entertain, engross, and "hook" the new player. That means the GM's goals have been reached.

A great outline for the ideal beginner's

campaign progressing is contained in the *Star Wars* movie trilogy: glory, thrills, narrow escapes, and unbelievable coincidences. It's no mistake that the movies were such a broad-based success; the themes and plot direction are instantly attractive. If you can pull people into your game like *Star Wars* pulled them into the theaters, you're on the road to success.

Continuing the game

Eventually, a player will tire of the "power gaming" approach suggested above. It will become apparent that ruling empires is not the only path in life, and indeed may not be the most interesting. After the player's character has established the Mighty Empire, the GM can cajole the player into trying something different.

The great thing about an RPG is the variety of perspectives it affords. With a living game world, players can look down from the palatial towers of the emperor, mighty conqueror of distant lands. Then they can take on the vantage of the mercenary warrior in the emperor's army, the daring thief in the Imperial Capital, or whatever.

A shift in perspective occurs. The neophyte begins with an inward view: His character, making his way against the strange world. Given that perspective, the GM needs to cater to it, by ultimately granting glorious success, filling the player's need for dramatic and personal satisfaction: the happy ending.

In seeing the game world, the player matures, and appreciates dynamics that go beyond personal tribulations. A player in a campaign using R. Talsorian's CYBER-PUNK* game rules may realize that blowing away corporate armies has a global impact; the star-faring captain in GDW's TRAVELLER* game may glimpse the diversity of alien worlds; the fantasy Emperor may see the fascinating lives unfolding outside his palace walls. And the player will want to follow through that impact; visit those worlds, and experience those lives. A role-playing game makes that possible.

When the now-experienced player becomes a wily thief in the Imperial Capital for example, it is no longer necessary that success comes so easily. The mature player has seen the world, and understands that the new character is but a small part of the greater imagined reality. Pleasure can be garnered from more subtle rewards than gross personal success. After all, the thief may fall prey to the laws and watchmen of the Emperor the same player once played!

Rules & assimilation

The third and fourth goals from the opening of this article—introducing game mechanics, and assimilating new and old players—I will treat only in passing.

How a GM chooses to introduce the game's rules depends on the GM. Some GMs I've known like to keep all the rules

and all the dice to themselves. Others, possibly the majority, like to have their players fully involved. For beginners, I think the middle course works best.

Assimilation is a touchy matter. If you have a mixed group, the trick is to use your experienced players to make the neophyte's experience more pleasurable. Talk with the old pros beforehand—let them know that you may be giving the new player some preferential treatment, in light of his inexperience.

The experienced players don't need to resent this; after all, it's in their interest to have a thriving game group, and encouraging new players is essential to that goal. Talented role-players will take advantage of the situation by encouraging "in character" interaction with the new player, at once introducing and developing their own characters while helping the neophyte do the same.

If the old players don't sit well with this, it's always possible to run the new player (or better yet, a group of neophytes) separately. Give him some one-on-one adventures, possibly even a whole campaign, before introducing his character to the rest of the group. Separate play also may help the new character "catch up" in game statistics terms with the veteran PCs.

Conclusion

A lot of people complain of trouble finding people to play with. Some view this as the consequence of a limited pool of gamers—there are only so many role-players to go around, they say. I think the key to vitality, both for the individual and for our entire hobby, is to seek out new converts, people who have never gamed before, and show them what fun it can be. I hope this article has helped suggest ways to make those new players' first experiences the best possible, and keep 'em coming back for more. Ω

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First Quest

Continued from page 8

buying new modules. The best thing I remember, for me as the rules guy, was the message in those wonderful, badly organized tomes: The DM's decisions were final. Those words, printed in black and white, gave meaning to the lives of all rules guys everywhere. It was good to be the rules guy.

Now, after eight years as a professional, when I go home to New York I still get the same questions thrown at me by my friends. "What're you running for us this time?" "Can I bring my 23rd-level cleric out of retirement?" "Do we have to play-test something or can we just have fun?" Unfortunately, they never accept my bill for services rendered. I guess to them I'm not a professional—I'm just the rules guy. Ω

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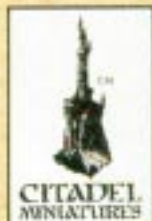


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Convention Calendar

Convention Calendar Policies

This column is a service to our readers worldwide. Anyone may place a free listing for a game convention here, but the following guidelines **must** be observed.

In order to ensure that all convention listings contain accurate and timely information, all material should be either typed double-spaced or printed legibly on standard manuscript paper. The contents of each listing must be short and succinct.

The information given in the listing **must** include the following, in this order:

1. Convention title and dates held;
2. Site and location;
3. Guests of honor (if applicable);
4. Special events offered;
5. Registration fees or attendance requirements; and,
6. Address(es) where additional information and confirmation can be obtained.

Convention flyers, newsletters, and other mass-mailed announcements will not be considered for use in this column; we prefer to see a cover letter with the announcement as well. No call-in listings are accepted. Unless stated otherwise, all dollar values given for U.S. and Canadian conventions are in U.S. currency.

WARNING: We are not responsible for incorrect information sent to us by convention staff members. Please check your convention listing carefully! Our wide circulation ensures that over a quarter of a million readers worldwide see each issue. Accurate information is your responsibility.

Copy deadlines are the last Monday of each month, two months prior to the on-sale date of an issue. Thus, the copy deadline for the December issue is the last Monday of October. Announcements for North American and Pacific conventions must be mailed to: Convention Calendar, DRAGON® Magazine, 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva WI 53147, U.S.A. Announcements for Europe must be posted an additional month before the deadline to: Convention Calendar, DRAGON® Magazine, TSR Limited, 120 Church End, Cherry Hinton, Cambridge CB1 3LB, United Kingdom.

If a convention listing must be changed because the convention has been cancelled, the dates have changed, or incorrect information has been printed, please contact us immediately. Most questions or changes should be directed to the magazine editors at TSR, Inc., (414) 248-3625 (U.S.A.). Questions or changes concerning European conventions should be directed to TSR Limited, (0223) 212517 (U.K.).

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Important: DRAGON® Magazine no longer publishes phone numbers for conventions. Publishing incorrect numbers is always possible and is a nuisance to both the caller and those receiving the misdirected call. Be certain that any address given is complete and correct.

To ensure that your convention listing makes it into our files, enclose a self-addressed stamped postcard with your first convention notice; we will return the card to show that your notice was received. You also might send a second notice one week after mailing the first. Mail your listing as early as possible, and always keep us informed of any changes. Please avoid sending convention notices by fax, as this method has not proved to be reliable.

CONCENTRIC '95, March 3-5 IL

This convention will be held at Ramada Hotel O'Hare in Chicago, Ill. Guests include Lynn Abbey and Larry Elmore. Events include role-playing, board, computer, and miniatures games. Other activities include an art show, seminars, anime, the blood drive, and at masquerade ball. Registration: \$17 on site. Write to: Concentric Circle Inc., 114 Euclid, Box 287, Park Ridge IL 60068.

EGYPTIAN CAMPAIGN '95 March 3-5 IL

This convention will be held at Southern Illinois University's Student Center in Carbondale, Ill. Guests include David Gross. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include a game auction, and miniatures-painting and art contests. Registration: \$10 preregistered: \$12 on site. Single-day and visitor passes are available. Write to: EGYPTIAN CAMPAIGN, c/o SIUC Strategic Games Society, Office of Student Development, 3rd Floor Student Center, Carbondale IL 62901-4425.

TENN CON '95, March 4-5 TN

This convention will be held at the Knoxville Convention Center in Knoxville, Tenn. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card-game events. Registration: \$25 (plus tax) on site. Write to: TENN CON '95, c/o Gameboard, 3018 B Mall Rd. N., Suite #161, Knoxville, TN 37924.

WARP'DCON V, Mar. 4 NJ

This convention originally was scheduled to take place Dec. 3, 1994. It be held at Drew University in Madison, N.J. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include a miniatures-painting contest, a raffle, an auction, and door prizes. Registration: \$5. Write to: Richard Ditullio, PO. Box 802, C.M. Box 1405, Madison NJ 07940.

CON OF THE NORTH '95 March 10-12 MN

This convention will be held at the Landmark Center in St. Paul, Minn. Events include role-playing, board, computer, and miniatures games. Registration fees vary. Write to: CON OF THE NORTH, PO. Box 18096, Minneapolis, MN 55418.

COSCON '95, March 10-12 PA

This convention will be held at the Days Inn Conference Center in Butler, Pa. Guests include Jean Rabe. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events, dealers, and demos. Registration: \$20 thereafter. Send an SASE to: Circle of Swords, PO. Box 2126, Butler PA 16003.

PRINCECON XX, March 10-12 NJ

This convention will be held at Whig Hall on the Princeton University campus in Princeton, N.J. All players must be 17 years of age or older. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an AD&D® game variant that lets you play one character all weekend. Registration: \$15. Write to: Aaron Mulder, 46 Holder Hall, Princeton Univ., Princeton NJ 08554; or e-mail: ammulder@princeton.edu.

EX UNICON II, March 11-12

This convention will be held at Reed Hall on the Exeter University campus in Devon, England. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include a charity auction. Write to: Exeter Univ. Games Society, c/o Mr. R. Stewart, 25, Victoria St., Exeter, Devon, ENGLAND EX4 6JQ.

GAMER'S CON II, March 17-19 NJ

This convention will be held at the Sheraton Hotel in Cherry Hill, N.J. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games, dealers, a game auction, seminars, and demos. Registration: \$20/weekend on site. Single-day rates vary. Write to: Multigenre Inc., 142 South St., Unit 9C, Red Bank NJ 07701-2502; or e-mail: acd@hotld.att.com.

SIMCON XVII, March 23-26 NY

This convention will be held at Wilson Commons on the University of Rochester campus in Rochester, N.Y. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments, dealers, and open gaming. Registration: \$8 before March 15; \$10 thereafter. Tournaments fees are \$3; most other event fees are \$2. Write to: SIMCON XVII, c/o URSGA, CPU 277146-River Station, Rochester NY 14627-7146.

ARGACON '95, March 24-26 MI

This convention will be held at the Adrian Tobias Room on the Adrian College campus in Adrian, Mich. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers, contests, a Euchre tournament, and experimental game testing. Registration: \$5 on site. Write to: ARGACON, Adrian College, Adrian MI 49221.

- ◆ indicates an Australian convention.
- ✱ indicates a Canadian convention.
- indicates a European convention.

- CONNCON '95, March 24-26 CT
This convention will be held at the Danbury Hilton & Towers in Danbury, Conn. Guests include Jean Rabe and Sam Lewis. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events, miniatures-painting, costume, and art contests, and an awards banquet. Write to: CONNCON, PO. Box 444, Sherman CT 06784-0444.
- MAGE CON NORTH I, March 24-26 SD
This convention will be held at the Howard Johnson Hotel in Sioux Falls, S.D. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers and a silent auction. Registration: \$15/weekend or \$8/day on site. Write to: MAGE CON NORTH I, PO. Box 114, Sioux Center IA 51250.
- MIDSOUTHCON 14, March 24-26 TN
This SF convention will be held at the Best Western Airport Hotel in Memphis, Tenn. Guests include Timothy Zahn and Alan Gutierrez. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Registration: \$25 before March 1; \$30 thereafter. Write to: MIDSOUTHCON, PO. Box 22749, Memphis TN 38122.
- NEOVENTION XIV, March 24-26 OH
This convention will be held at the Student Center of the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games and videos. Registration: \$15 preregistered; \$17 on site. Write to: University Gaming Society, Gardner Student Center, Office #6, Univ. of Akron, Akron OH 44325.
- SCOTCON '95, March 24-26 OH
This convention will be held at Lowry Center on the College of Wooster campus in Wooster, Ohio. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games. Registration fees vary. Write to: Avery Leckrone, Box C-1706 COW, Wooster OH 44691.
- MILCON '95, March 26-27 *
This convention will be held at the College Militaire Royal de St-Jean, in St-Jean-sur-le-Richelieu, Quebec. Events include role-playing and card games. Other activities include prizes for best players and game masters. Registration: \$5 on site, dungeon masters get in free. Write to: Milton '95, c/o Eric Cloutier, 5 Sqn CMR St-Jean, Richelain Qc, JOJ-IRO CANADA; or e-mail: cloutier@cmr.ca.
- COASTCON XVIII, March 31-April2 MS
This convention will be held at the Miss. Gulf Coast Coliseum/Convention Center in Biloxi, Miss. Guests include Mike Stackpole, Steve Perry, Jennifer Roberson, and George Alec Effinger. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an art show and auction, a charity auction, dealers, videos, and writing and costume contests. Registration: \$25 before March 1; \$30 thereafter. Write to: COASTCON XVII, PO. Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533-1423.
- I-CON 14, March 31-April2 NY
This not-for-profit convention will be held at the SUNY campus in Stony Brook, N.Y. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include SF&F, comics, and anime. Write to: I-CON, PO. Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790-0550.
- PENTECON VII, March 31-April 2 NY
This convention will be held at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers and movies. Write to: Pentagonal Committee, c/o Kris Mayo, 219 Willard Way, Ithaca NY 14850; or e-mail: pentecon@cornell.edu.
- TECHNICON 12, March 31-April 1 VA
This is a revised, updated listing. This convention will be held at the Best Western Red Lion Inn in Blacksburg, Va. Guests include Christie Golden, Melissa Scott, Don Sakers, and Tom Atkinson. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games, panels, an art show and auction, filking, videos and anime, computer games, and dealers. Write to: TECHNICON 12, c/o VTSFFC, PO. Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063-0356; or e-mail via the Internet: Technicon@VTCC1.cc.vt.edu.
- UBCON '95, March 31-April 2 NY
This convention will be held at North campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo in Amherst, N.Y. Guests include Sam Chupp. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games, an auction, dealers, anime, and SCA demos. Registration fees range from \$5-10. Write to: UB-SARPA, 363 Student Union, SUNY at Buffalo, Buffalo NY 14260-2100; or e-mail: SARPA@ubvms.cc.buffalo.edu.
- FUZZY FEST '95, April 1 MI
This convention will be held at the President's Inn, Grand Rapids, Mich. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games and a card-game tournament. Registration: \$4 preregistered; \$6 on site. Send an SASE to: West Michigan Gamers, 112 Gold Ave. NW, Grand Rapids MI 49504.
- RAWACON '95, April 1 PA
This convention will be held at the gymnasium on the campus of Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include a miniatures-painting contest, dealers, and artists. Registration: \$2.50 preregistered; \$5 on site. Write to: RAWACON '95, 33-B N Railroad St., Palmyra PA 17078; or e-mail: D-PADDOCK@ACAD.LVC.EDU.
- MADICON 4, April 7-9 VA
This convention will be held in Taylor Hall at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games in addition to guest speakers and discussion panels. Other activities include art displays, a dance, a computer and video game room, a large screen anime room, costume call, and con suite. Registration: \$7 before March 18; \$10 thereafter. Write to: Jennifer Grob, Madicon 4, SFFG, JMU Box 7202, Harrisonburg VA; or e-mail at: STU-JAGROB@VAX1.ACS.JMU.EDU.
- CLARE-VOYANCE II, April 8 CA
This convention will be held at Claremont Colleges in Claremont, Calif. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card games and a card-game tournament. Registration: \$5 preregistered; \$15 on site. Write to: Thomas M. Kane, 150 Annapolis Dr., Claremont CA 91711.
- OPCON '95, April 8 IL
This convention will be held at Oak Park & River Forest High School in Oak Park, Ill. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include card-game tournaments. Registration: \$4 preregistered; \$6 on site. Write to: Oak Park & River Forest HS, c/o Sandy Price, 201 N. Scoville Ave., Oak Park IL 60302.
- GAME FAIRE '95, April 21-23 WA
This convention will be held at the Student Union of Spokane Falls Community College in board, and miniatures games. Other activities include a used-game auction, anime, a miniatures-painting contest, tournaments, and open gaming. Registration: \$18 before April 11; \$20 on site. Write to: Merlyn's, N. 1 Browne, Spokane WA 99201.
- FRANKCONSTEIN '95, April 21-23 MO
This convention will be held at the Radisson Hotel Clayton in St. Louis, Mo. Guests include Glen Cook, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Wilson "Bob" Tucker. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include panels, a masquerade, a dance, videos, dealers, and filking. Registration: \$15 before March 1; \$22 thereafter. Write to: Name That Con, PO. Box 575, St. Charles MO 63302.
- KETTERING GAME CON XII April 22-23 OH
This convention will be held at the Charles I. Lathrem Senior Center in Kettering, Ohio. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network tournaments, computer games, card games, and a game auction. Registration: \$2/day. Write to: Bob Von Gruenigen, 804 Willowdale Ave., Kettering OH 45429.
- CRUISE CON '95, April 27-30 ***
This convention will be held on Carnival's Cruise Ship, the Fantasy sailing to the Bahamas. Guests include Richard Garfield, Jean Rabe, and Darwin Bromley. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events, and tournaments. Registration: \$849 (for an inside cabin). Write to: Andon Unlimited, Cruise Con, PO. Box 3100, Kent OH 44240.
- MAGIC CARPET CON 3, April 28-30 GA
This convention will be held at the North Georgia Convention and Trade Center in Dalton, Ga. Guests include Elizabeth Moon, Tom Deitz, and Mark Poole. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include a masquerade, an art show and auction, and a con suite. Registration: \$25 before March 15; \$30 on site. Write to: MAGIC CARPET CON 3, P.O. Box 678, Rocky Face GA 30740; or SusanB14 on America On-line.
- SPRINGCON '95, April 28-30 NE
This gaming convention will be held at the ReUnion Building in Lincoln, Nebr. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Registration: Free to the public. Novices and interested nongamers are encouraged to attend. Write to: SPRINGCON Committee, Box 1126, 905 N. 16th St., Lincoln NE 68508.

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GENERAL CON '95, April 29-30 PA
This convention will be held at the Carlisle Army War College in Carlisle, Pa. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers and tournaments. Registration fees vary. Write to: M. Foner's Games Only Emporium, 200 3rd St., New Cumberland PA 17070.

EAST COAST HOBBY SHOW '95 PA
May 19-21
This convention will be held at the Fort Washington Expo Center in Philadelphia, Penn. Events include model railroading, radio control games, models, die-casts, kites, miniatures, collectibles, slot cars, and rocketry. Friday, May 19, is for the trade only. Saturday and Sunday, May 20th and 21st are open to the public. Write to: Scott Pressman, East Coast Hobby Show, 4400 North Federal Highway, Suite 210, Boca Raton FL 33431.

ECLIPSE '95 May, 26-28 MO
This convention will be held at the Holiday Inn Expo Center in Columbia, Mo. Guests include Margaret Weis, Tom Dowd, and John Tibbits. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an art show, costume contest, figure painting contest, masquerade show, and charity auction. Registration: \$18 (RPGA® Network members \$15) preregistered: \$20 (RPGA members \$18) on site: One day pass is \$8. Write to: The Cheshire Cat, 27 N. 10th, Columbia MO 65201.

STRATEGICON '95, May 26-29 CA
This convention will be held at the LAX Hyatt in Los Angeles California. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include flea markets, dealers, an auction, seminars, and demonstrations. Registration: \$25 preregistered: \$30 on site. Write to: STRATEGICON, PO. Box 3849, Torrance CA 90510-3849.

GAMESCAUCUS II '95, May 26-29 CA
This convention will be held at the Oakland Airport Hilton in Oakland, Calif. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers, costume contest, painting contests, a flea market, and movies. Registration: \$25 before May 15; \$30 thereafter. Game Master registration is \$10 before May 15. Write to: TriGaming Associates, PO. Box 27634, Concord CA 94527-0634.

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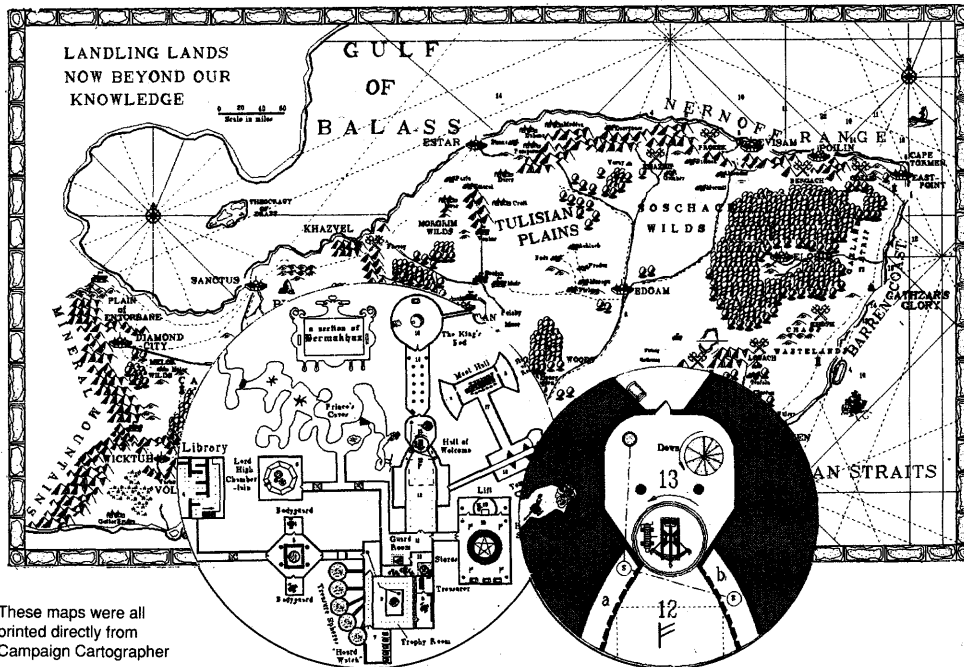


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Stephan Lee

A case when two heads are definitely worse than one

*My Lady Jessica,
Enclosed you will find several sheets of parchment, detailing the strange two-headed snake occasionally found in these parts. My patrol came across the parchments in an old tin box hidden in a cave up in the Crumbling Mountains. I know of your passions for both history and biology, and thought it might be of interest to you.*

*Very Respectfully,
Captain Gharn Armstrong*

To Whomever Should Find This,

My name is Sigard of Escillon, a sage of some small note. I am being held as a slave to a band of kobolds. I was captured several weeks ago, while I was wandering in search of the fabled two-headed snake, the mis-named amphisbaena.¹

I was wearing my magical *ring of serpent control*, as was my usual habit when doing field research, when I was taken by surprise by a band of kobolds. They overpowered me, a not too difficult task, for I fear my younger days are far behind me. For a while, I feared they would kill me, but I was fortunate. While I could make no sense of their strange language, I still remembered a smidgen of the goblin tongue, enough to communicate with my captors.

There was a heated argument among the larger of the kobolds, but in the end, I was allowed to live, after convincing the kobold "king" that I could write. It seems the band has no written language, and I am now the official scribe of the Band of the Twisted Horn. The "king," whose name sounds like the "Yipyip" of a small dog, and whom I call simply "King," is having me chronicle the adventures of his life for posterity. As none of them can read, I am instead devoting my time to this record of my captivity, and to the study of the amphisbaena, as I originally intended when I set off in these mountains.

In a way, my situation here is ironic indeed. I had hoped to find an amphisbaena, and use my ring to keep it from attacking me as I studied its behavior. Now, I am living with one of the creatures, much closer than I had ever expected. It seems only fitting that I should use the opportunity to document all I can about this marvelous being.

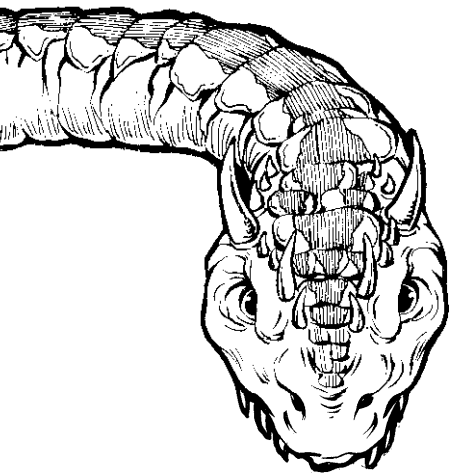
I should start by saying that this kobold band of mine makes their lair in a cave network deep in the side of a mountain. The kobolds seem to see just fine in the dark, but I am allowed to keep a light in one of the back caverns to allow me to

AMPHISBAENA

THE ECOLOGY OF THE

by Johnathan M. Richards

Artwork by Scott Rosema



write of King's exploits. However, I am no pampered slave; I am forced to do my share and more of the menial work.

Last week, I and three kobolds were assigned the task of bringing water to the cave in rusty old buckets. As we neared the cave entrance, there was a flurry of movement, and the lead kobold was struck by something large. Though my eyes were still adjusting to the light from the entrance, I recognized the form as that of a giant snake. Furthermore, although only one head was visible at the time, it was recognizable as that of an amphisbaena, by the small horns above each eye.²

Instantly I froze, and called out for the others to do so. The snake had bitten the lead kobold,³ and it was clear that the poison was taking effect immediately. The poor creature dropped to the cave floor and started convulsing. Meanwhile, the two other kobolds and I began to back away slowly from the giant snake. Out of force of habit, I attempted to control the snake with my ring, but had forgotten that it had been taken from me when I was first captured. Once we were out of range of the amphisbaena, I sent the kobolds to fetch King.

I was left alone with the creature I had come to study. In the dim light, I watched as it approached its meal.⁴ The kobold had stopped twitching by then, and as the closest head opened its jaws to swallow its prey, the snake swung its body around so its other head could watch me. Even in the darkness of the cave, there was no doubt in my mind that the amphisbaena knew exactly where I was.⁵

The creature's jaws distended and surrounded the kobold, and slowly, the little humanoid was swallowed whole, head-first. The process took about two minutes, and afterward, I could still see the bulge in the amphisbaena's body where the kobold was being digested. By that time, I could hear the pounding of little footsteps behind me. The amphisbaena raised its head and flicked its tongue in the air, trying to gather information about the new threat.⁶

King and four of the bigger kobolds approached, armed with their spears, and

seemed ready to destroy the threat to their lair. It took some doing, but, in my broken goblin, I managed to convey the idea that the amphisbaena was worth more to the tribe alive than it was dead. I think it was the concept, once I explained the power of the ring, that King could bend the creature to his will that sold him on the idea.

It took some practice, but King was finally able to exert his will on the snake. We started with simple things, like making the snake move from one side of the chamber to the other. The amphisbaena did so by sidewinding, which seemed strange to me, until I took into account its unusual anatomy.⁷ Had it been up to him, I'm sure King would have played with his new "toy" all day, but I convinced him to let the creature digest, by warning him that the ring's power was limited, and would wear off with too much use at any one time.

My knowledge of snakes has served me well in my captivity. No longer am I a mere scribe of the Twisted Horn; now I am closer to a military advisor to King. The little kobold leader sees the amphisbaena as his master weapon, and has used it in numerous attacks against the band's enemies (chiefly goblins, it seems). I view my captivity as a chance to study the amphisbaena, and have perhaps learned more about the creature through my close proximity than any other before me. As for the battles between the kobolds and goblins, I care little whether they all kill each other, so long as my own safety and that of the serpent is assured.

I am constantly amazed by this creature. When last I left off this journal, the snake had finished eating its kobold meal, and was digesting. It digested the little kobold in little less than a week, breaking down all parts of its body except the small horns. During the entire time, the serpent barely moved. Indeed, a great deal of that time might have been spent in sleep, but as snakes have no eyelids, it is of course difficult to say.⁸

The first time King took the amphisbaena on a raid, we attacked a band of goblins that laired in a cave farther down the mountain. I accompanied the kobold war band, as always, but stayed near King, away from the front lines. King had his troops position themselves on a ledge above the goblin's cave entrance, with the amphisbaena behind the kobolds as a backup. We were stationed by the serpent, where we could see all of the mountain-side battlefield.

The goblins were summoned out of their hideout by a war-challenge from King; apparently these races have a long-standing hatred toward each other. Within moments, a small horde of goblins appeared, ready for battle. Instantly, King's band leapt upon them, and the small humanoids joined in violent battle.

There were losses on both sides, but the kobolds had the high ground, and seemed to be overtaking the goblin forces, even though the goblins had started with slightly greater numbers. Finally, King pointed to a goblin figure in the rear, apparently the tribal leader (it seems that these goblins were led from the rear, as were the kobolds—neither race seems particularly noted for their bravery). Summoning the power of the ring, he commanded the amphisbaena to attack.

This was the first time I saw the amphisbaena's unusual surprise attack—the serpent grasped one of its necks with its opposite mouth, forming a hoop of its body.⁹ Then, with a push of its body, it rolled down the side of the mountain, like some great serpentine wheel.

Amazingly, as the creature rolled down the side of the mountain, it seemed aware of its surroundings. Twice on its journey it managed to swing around obstacles—goblin and kobold combatants in each case. At the last moment, the goblin leader saw the snake speeding toward him, but by then it was too late, for the amphisbaena was upon him, uncoiling at the last instant in order to strike at its prey with its venomous fangs. The goblin chief was dead before he even knew what hit him.

The death of their leader had an adverse effect on the remaining goblins—those able to do so dropped their weapons and took off at top speed in all directions. King mobilized his troops and explored their new conquest, a cave network as filthy and foul-smelling as our own. There were squalls and yips of delight as they came upon the goblins' pitiful treasure, which primarily consisted of copper coins and hunks of rotting meat of unknown origin.

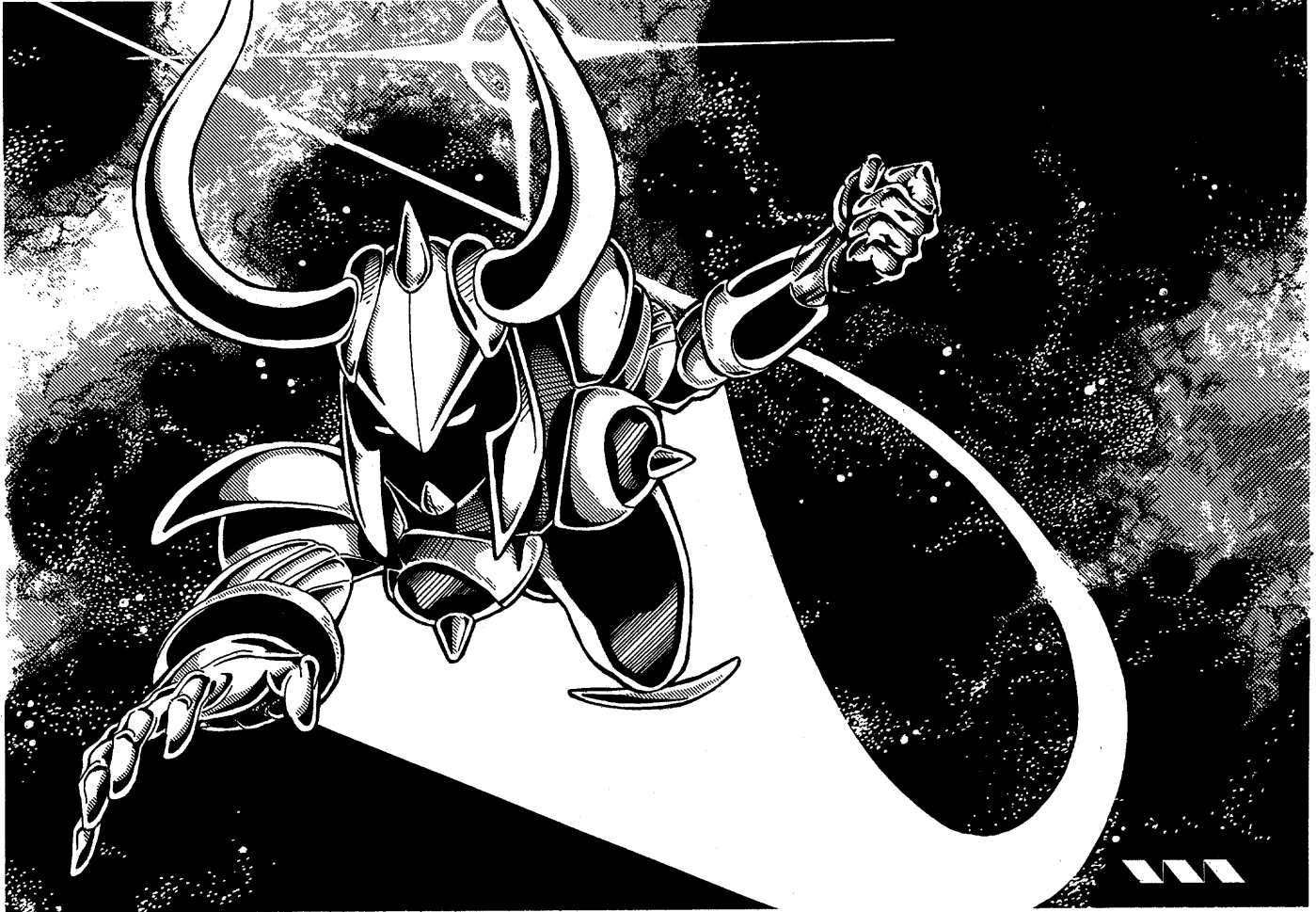
I have just learned of another strange ability of this strange two-headed snake. It is now close to winter, and our band has been preparing for the coming season. After some discussion, it was decided to remain in the old cave system instead of moving into the goblins', as our own was more easily defensible, and had easier



Rifts® Dimension Book Two™: Phase World™

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access to a water supply. However, the contents of the goblins' larder was transported to our own cave system, and while it smells half-rancid already, I prefer it to the bodies of the goblins themselves, which the kobolds are using as a source of meat. The snake surprised me by eating one of the dead goblins. Apparently, the amphisbaena is not averse to eating carrion.

But back to the new ability I have discovered. Our band was attacked by a lone ogre mage, seeking a dwelling for the winter. Apparently he thought he could simply walk in and take over the band, but King's dominance over the amphisbaena has given him rather a big head. Instead of complying to the ogre mage's demands, he had the Twisted Horn attack en masse.

I could tell that the ogre mage was surprised at this turn of events, but he quickly switched to battle mode and attacked his diminutive foes. He cast a darkness spell, which turned the dim area of the cave opening into pitch blackness, and I could make out the occasional squeal of pain as the kobolds met up with the ogre mage's blade in the darkness.

While this was occurring, King summoned forth the amphisbaena, and ordered it to attack. It went sidwinding down the cave tunnel, and sight of it apparently boosted the kobolds' morale, for they cried out a battle roar and rushed into the darkness behind the snake.

Presumably, the ogre mage saw this mass attack, and decided to cast one of its more powerful spells, hoping to take out a large chunk of its foes at once. From somewhere in the globe of darkness a cone of cold burst forth, freezing the little kobolds where they stood. There was almost immediately a cry of surprise and pain, then complete and total silence. When the darkness spell wore off, the results of the battle were plain to see. In the center of the cavern lay the ogre mage, dead, with a look of surprise on his face. Surrounding him were several dead kobolds, their frozen bodies covered in frost, as was a strip of cavern floor leading from the spell-caster's body. And there, on the ogre mage's chest, curled the amphisbaena, unhurt, even though one head and three feet of body also were covered in frost.

Apparently, somehow, the creature's scales make it immune to cold. How this can be I am at a loss to explain.¹⁰

Another surprise. It is now spring time; the cold mountain winter passed pretty quietly after the ogre mage attack. The amphisbaena spent most of the winter in a hibernation-like state. King worried that it was sick, since it didn't move or eat, but I assured him that its state was perfectly natural, and that snakes can often go for over a year between meals.

Once it warmed up, though, the snake revived, and was fed a goat the kobolds had caught among the rocks. I must say the kobolds treat the amphisbaena better than a pet; to them it is a cross between a war animal and a demigod. Several of them have taken to wearing crude representations of a two-headed snake on their shields, and there is talk of changing the name of the band to that of the Band of the Serpent. King seems unsure; on the one hand, his is the twisted horn after which the band is presently named, and he does have an ego big enough to want to remain in the spotlight, yet he realizes that the snake is becoming universally seen as a symbol of power, and his mastery over the snake makes him seem all the more powerful.

Soon after the spring temperatures started to remain constant, the amphisbaena gave birth. This was somewhat of a shock, as the snake has not been in contact with others of its species in over half a year, when we first encountered it.¹¹

King is concerned, and rightly so. It is unlikely he will be able to control all of them with the ring, and there are bound to be problems with so many venomous creatures living with us in our cave complex. On my advice he has decided to gather them together in a metal box and carry them close to the site of one of his enemies, where they will be released. I have assured them that the creatures cannot be raised as "pets," or commanded by another without use of a control device like my ring. King definitely wants to be the only one with such a powerful ally. He and his strongest kobold advisors are busy now making plans on which of their enemies is to receive the "surprise."

It is many months later now. King has gotten even more power hungry than before. I overheard him talking to one of his kobold advisors about my limited usefulness. He has long ago given up on his dreams of having me chronicle his life, as my continued attempts to teach him, or any of his band, to read have all met with failure. Thus, a written history of his life will be useless once I am no longer around to read it to them. King also realizes that the life span of a kobold is greater than that of a human, and that while he is in his prime, I am an old man, with few years left. While I was able to provide him with knowledge about the care of the amphis-

baena, I was still a valuable asset to the band, but now I fear there is nothing left for me to tell King that he doesn't already know. He has become quite adept at commanding the amphisbaena, and has already expanded the tribe by absorbing several other kobold bands into his own. I plan to make a break for it as soon as the next opportunity presents itself. I will leave this record behind me, hidden in a small box in a crevice of my cave room. If I survive, I will not need the notes on the amphisbaena, for I have it all in my head, where it cannot be taken from me. If I am caught, I am sure I will be killed, and then at least there is a chance this record will survive me.

Sigard of Escillon

My Dear Captain,

My deepest thanks for the parchments detailing the amphisbaena. I have searched the library records, and have found several works on serpents by Sigard of Escillon, written well over one hundred years ago, but none of them on this particular subject. I am afraid we must conclude that Sigard did not escape from the kobold band.

In any case, I have made the parchments available to the scribes at the library, and they in turn send their heartfelt thanks for the information made available on the ecology of the amphisbaena.

*With Fond Affection,
Lady Jessica Heartcross*

Notes

The amphisbaena can be found in the MONSTROUS MANUAL™ book on page 320, under the "Snake" heading.

1. Actually, the true members of the family amphisbaenidae, while snakelike in appearance, are legless lizards. They are often called "worm lizards" because the rings of ridges around their bodies give them a segmented appearance, like a worm. Amphisbaenidae are non-poisonous, living on insects and worms, and pose no threat to man.

The two-headed snake known as the amphisbaena, on the other hand, appears to be a member of the Viperidae family of snakes, a pit viper.

2. The amphisbaena's horns are too small to be effective in combat. Instead, they are used when the snake molts. As the creature grows in size, it periodically sheds the outer layer of its skin. Normal snakes rub their snouts against a rough surface, until the old skin is ripped open, then proceed to work the skin backward over their head and along their body, leaving behind an inside-out husk. Amphisbaena go through the same process, but since they have a head at each end of their body, the dead skin bunches up in the middle of their body. This is where the horns come in: the creature uses them to cut the dead skin open, and free itself from its husk.

3. Actually, the amphisbaena doesn't bite

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so much as stab. Like other vipers, the amphisbaena has two fangs on its upper jaw. These fangs can assume two positions: when the mouth is closed, the fangs fold back along the palate, but when the mouth is open, the fangs are extended forward until they point at the snake's prey. When the creature strikes out at its victim, it punctures its skin and injects it with a toxic venom (the victim must save vs. poison or die immediately). The amphisbaena will then wait until its victim dies of the venom before attempting to eat it.

4. Since the amphisbaena has two heads, it has an advantage over other snakes in being able to feed and keep guard for threats at the same time. Most other snakes will only feed when they are alone.

5. The amphisbaena is a form of pit viper; thus it has the characteristic "pits" in the sides of its heads (one between each eye and nostril). These pits are extremely sensitive to variations of heat, and can discern temperature changes as small as 0.2 degrees Celsius. By comparing the heat images received by the two pits, the amphisbaena can target the exact location of its prey, even in complete darkness.

6. Snakes are deaf, but can pick up vibrations from the ground. Their deafness makes them immune to most sound-based attacks, such as those made by the androsphinx and dragonne. While their eyesight tends to be weak (their eyes are

fixed in position, and cannot move, so they are unable to make out details very well), they have a keen sense of smell. Their tongues pick up particles of scent in the air, and transfer them to an organ in their mouths that in turn transmits information about the scents to the brain.

7. Most snakes are made up of three body parts: the head, body, and tail. The amphisbaena essentially has two heads and two bodies, which meet at a common vent, or cloaca (the reproductive and excretory opening), and no tail. While normal snakes can slither forward on their ventral (belly) scales, the amphisbaena cannot, as its scales are going in two different directions, meeting in the middle. The creature therefore uses a sidwinding technique as its primary form of movement; basically, it raises one head and throws it forward, then follows with the rest of its body, and continues the process.

Each half of the amphisbaena's body seems to have a complete set of internal organs: two sets of lungs, two hearts, two stomachs, and so on. While snakes usually go into a state of torpor after feeding, and are therefore vulnerable, the amphisbaena avoids such vulnerability by only feeding one stomach at a time. While the nourishment provided by the food affects both "halves" of the creature, only the "half" that ate is sluggish while it digests; the other head is alert and ready for danger.

8. Snakes do have transparent scales that cover their eyes, protecting them. When the snake molts, and the outer layer of skin begins to separate, the eye scales get milky in color, and the snake's already weak sense of vision becomes almost nonexistent. Unfortunately for the amphisbaena, the entire body molts at the same time, so it cannot use one head to stay alert at all times during molting as it does during digestion.

9. The amphisbaena is able to keep its fangs retracted during this procedure. The powerful jaws of the snake are strong enough to keep a firm grasp on its neck without danger of inflicting damage on itself with its fangs. In any case, the amphisbaena is immune to its own poison.

When the amphisbaena uses its rolling ability to attack its prey, the victim of the attack suffers a -2 modifier to his surprise roll. This penalty is negated if the victim is aware of the amphisbaena's strange ability.

10. The amphisbaena, while definitely an extraordinary specimen, is nonetheless a snake, and therefore cold-blooded. As such, it is unable to generate its own body heat, and is instead reliant on external heat sources to keep warm enough to function. Snakes often will bask in the sun or bury themselves in sand for this reason, and the amphisbaena is no exception.

Oddly enough, the scales of the amphisbaena have developed a magical resistance to all forms of cold-based attacks. While this prevents the snake from taking damage, the cold attack does prevent the snake from gathering heat. In the situation described, the amphisbaena took a direct hit from the *cone of cold*, yet took no damage. However, the attack did cause frost to cover part of the serpent's body, and until this frost melts, the snake will be unable to store heat naturally. This has no effect on the snake in combat, but will possibly affect it in the long run, forcing it to bask longer later on to restore heat.

Wizards often use amphisbaena scales as ingredients in the manufacture of spells and items providing protection from cold-based attacks.

11. Many female snakes can store sperm cells from previous matings. This is quite an advantage, as snakes mate infrequently; this allows the female to "time" its pregnancy during its winter hibernation. The snake is therefore not inconvenienced by its pregnant state, for it spends the whole time immobile any way, and the young are born in the spring time, when they have the most time to feed during the year in order to "stock up" for the winter season.

Some snakes lay eggs, and others give birth to live young. The amphisbaena gives birth to from seven to twelve living young. The newborn snakes immediately go their own ways, to live their own lives. There is no concept of "family" among amphisbaena, and young that hang around too long are liable to become food for the mother.

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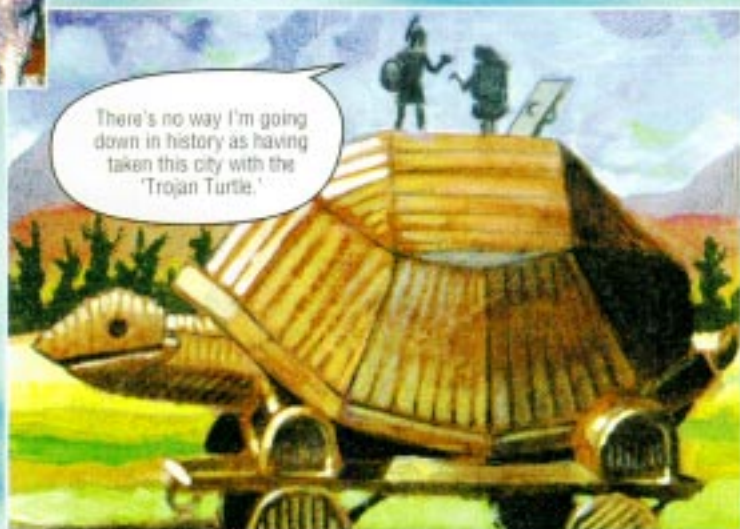
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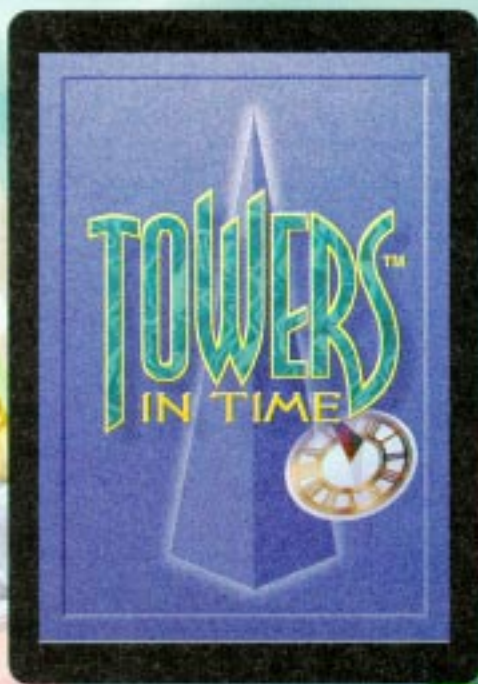
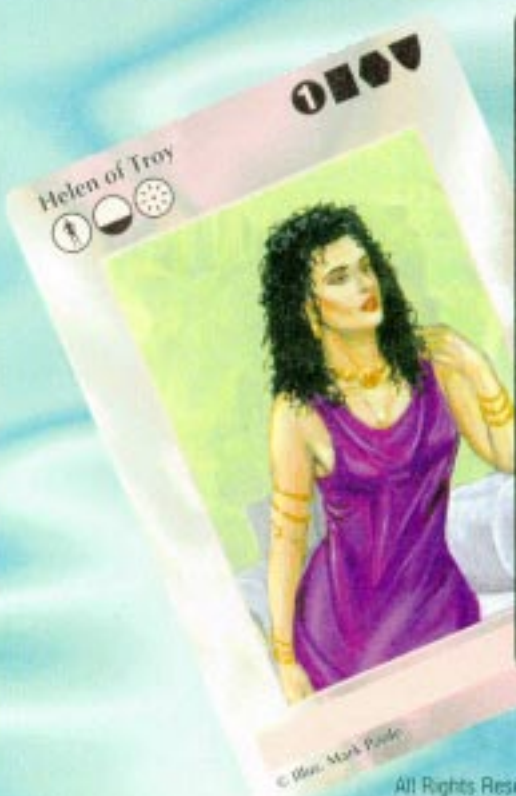
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There's no way I'm going
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So often has it been said that a place is defined by the people who dwell there. So is this true of a time as well. The character of the fledgling colonies of North America was dictated by the fires that burned in the oh-so-proud patriot-hearts of their people, not by the geography, climate, or meteorology of that untamed land.

The same also is true of our own time. Even as the terrible shadow of that darkest of evils strives to smother the light of faith and hope, the heroes of the world stand tall. You, my beloved friends, and those who join with us, are the mark of our time. If we be good and true and right, then ours will be a generation of glory and triumph. If not, then better by far that we should die now and live not to see the end.

Donning a New Masque

Kits and a character
sheet for Masque
of the Red Death
campaigns

by Williams W. Connors

Abraham Van Helsing
From an address to *Die Wachtern*
31 October 1892



In October of 1994, TSR, Inc., released the *Masque of the Red Death* boxed set. This variant RAVENLOFT® campaign product provides players and Dungeon Masters with a rules expansion allowing them to set adventures in the 1890s. The game includes complete rules for gunfire, revised magic and character-generation systems, and an atlas describing the most horrific locations on Gothic Earth in the Victorian Era.

Although the *Masque of the Red Death* set includes 16 character kits, players have been asking me to write new ones ever since *Masque* first hit the stands. Bowing to this pressure, and eager to collect a check for some freelance writing, I have taken pen in hand and detailed four more professions.

In addition to these kits, I've created a character record sheet designed specifically for use in *Masque* game campaigns. It's not unlike the sheets printed for some of TSR's other game worlds, and should prove very useful for DMs and players. Permission is granted for the photocopying of this form for personal use only. Other uses of this character sheet require a RAVENLOFT Powers Check.

Scientist

Class:	Tradesman
Ability Req:	Int 14
Prime Req:	Intelligence
Hit Die:	d6
Attack as:	Tradesman
Save as:	Tradesman
Advance as:	Tradesman
Spell Ability?	NO
Exe Str?	NO
Exe Con?	NO
Starting Cash:	4d6

Proficiencies

Weapon Slots:	3
Additional Slot:	4
Nonproficiency Penalty:	-3
Nonweapon Slots:	6
Additional Slot:	3
Available Categories:	General, Educational
Bonus Profs:	Any 1 Educational
Recommended Profs:	Academician

Overview

The 1890s is a period of wondrous advancement in many fields of science. While the most well-known of these is certainly electricity, significant advances are being made in chemistry, astronomy, optics, medicine, and countless other fields. Gothic Earth's scientists are pioneers who seek to eradicate disease and create technological wonders undreamt of

Description

The exact nature of a scientist's work often dictates his garb and equipment. Still, a few generalities can be noted that cross the lines of specialty that divide the world's scientists.

For the most part, these folk are neat and orderly in their habits and dress. If they do not come from an upper-class background, they have received a great deal of formal training that imparts upon them a professional and distinguished air.

Many such individuals are prone to eccentricities and affectations. Any player running a scientist should specify an unusual characteristic that sets his character apart from others.

Role-playing

Gothic Earth's scientists are often considered to be introverted and cold. To be sure, most would rather be hard at work in their laboratories than enjoying a night on the town. The latter criticism, however, is often untrue. Most scientists pursue their work with the dream of making everyone's life better.

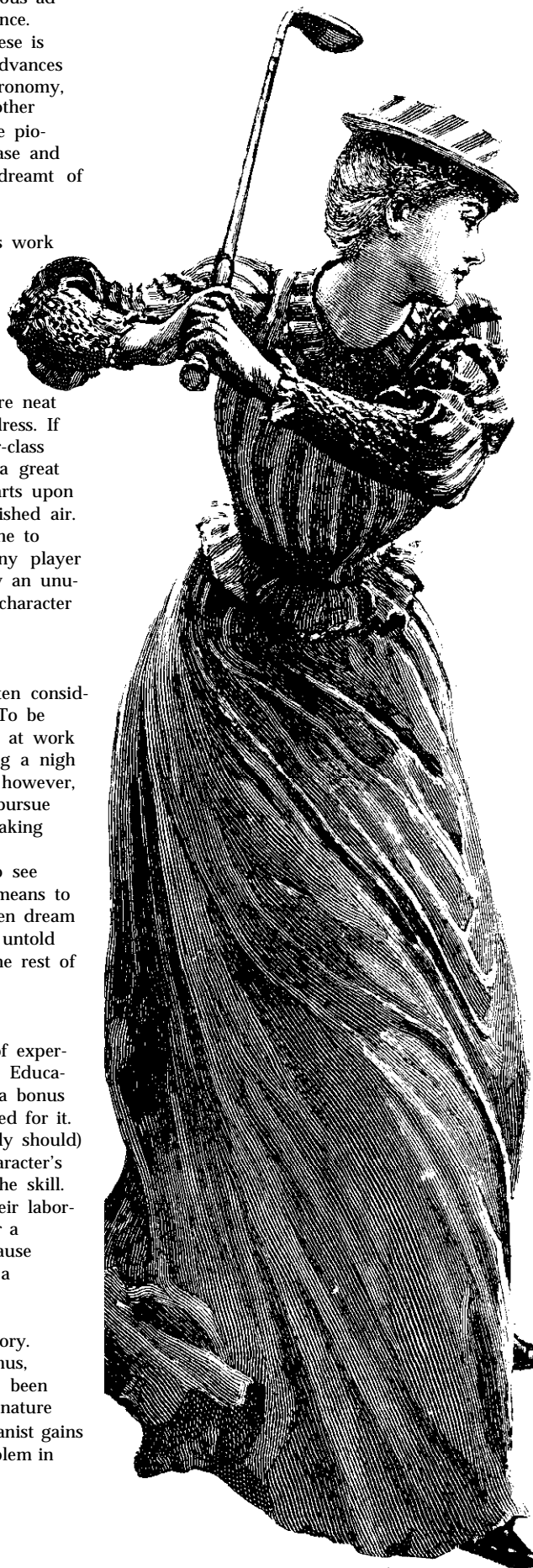
Of course, there are those who see science as nothing more than a means to acquire personal power. Some even dream of a day when they can harness untold powers and use them to bring the rest of the world to its knees.

Special benefits

Each scientist selects an area of expertise from the proficiencies of the Educational group. This is considered a bonus skill and no slots need be allocated for it. Additional slots can (and probably should) be expended to increase the character's chances of success when using the skill.

Scientists are as at home in their laboratories as a sailor is on his ship or a cavalryman is in his saddle. Because of this, these characters receive a +2 bonus on any Educational proficiency checks made when in a well-equipped laboratory.

In order to qualify for this bonus, the laboratory in use must have been designed for research similar in nature to the area being explored. A botanist gains no benefit from researching a problem in an optics laboratory.



All scientists are assumed to begin play with access to a laboratory sufficient to meet their research needs. This facility is not theirs to do with as they please, however, and presumably is part of a school, museum, or similar institution. If a player wishes to outfit a private laboratory for his character, the cost to do so is assumed to be \$1,000 per level of the scientist. As the character advances to each new level, an additional \$1,000 must be expended to keep the facility stocked and up to date.

Special hindrances

Not only are scientists at home in their laboratories, they also are very dependant upon them. Because of this, checks made for Educational proficiencies suffer a -2 penalty if they are not made in a well-equipped laboratory of the appropriate type. This penalty may be waived under special circumstances, as dictated by the Dungeon Master.

Athlete

Class:	Tradesman
Ability Reqs:	Str 14 Dex 14 Con 14
Prime Req:	Dexterity
Hit Die:	d6
Attack as:	Tradesman
Save as:	Tradesman
Advance as:	Tradesman
Spell Ability?:	No
Exe Str?	Yes
Exe Con?	Yes
Starting Cash:	3d6

Proficiencies

Weapon Slots:	3
Additional Slot:	4
Nonproficiency Penalty:	-3
Nonweapon Slots:	6
Additional Slot:	3
Available Categories:	General, Military, or Wilderness
Bonus Profs:	Athletics
Recommended Profs:	Endurance

Overview

The year 1896 saw the rebirth of an ancient tradition. For the first time in centuries, the Olympic Games were held in Athens, Greece. The men and women who competed there, as well as those who play baseball in the United States, tennis at courts in the English countryside, or ice hockey in Canada, are all dedicated to pushing the human body to its limits.

Description

Athletes run the gamut of Gothic Earth's social classes. Some, like baseball's Christy Mathewson or Honus Wagner, are simple, unassuming folk at heart. Others, like tennis's Lottie Dod or Joshua Pim, are more sophisticated members of the upper class. As a rule, the nature of a given sport dictates the dress and mannerisms of its athletes.

Role-playing

Athletes are, by their very nature, fierce competitors. They feel a constant need to push themselves farther than ever before each time they begin play. While there are those who allow their fame (such as it is) to go to their head, most pursue their chosen career simply out of a love for the game they play.

Special benefits

Just as different sports attract different individuals as athletes and appeal to different classes of spectators, so too do they impart upon their participants unique skills and talents. The following is a list of possible sports and their advantages:

Baseball: If the player is a pitcher, he receives a +2 bonus to his attack and damage rolls when employing thrown weapons. Players best known for their batting gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls with Medium-sized blunt weapons.

Soccer: Few sports are as demanding as this one. Athletes who play soccer receive both the Endurance and Running skills as free bonus proficiencies.

Tennis: Quick reflexes and agility dominate this sport. To reflect this, tennis players gain a +1 bonus to their Dexterity score.

Hockey: Whether the traditional game of field hockey or its recently introduced winter cousin, this game demands much from its players. Goal tenders are rugged folk who gain a +1 hit-point bonus to every Hit Die they roll. Other players must be quick and agile, giving them a +1 bonus to Initiative rolls.

Special hindrances

At the start of each game session, all athletes must make an Athletics proficiency check. Failure indicates that the athlete has some minor, nagging injury received during a recent game. The exact nature of the injury is up to the player (subject to the DM's approval.) As a general rule, an injured character suffers a -2 penalty to all saving throws made during the game. If the roll was an unmodified 20, however, the injury is more severe. In this case, the penalty is a -4.

Thespian

Class:	Tradesman
Ability Req:	Cha 14
Prime Req:	Charisma
Hit Die:	d6
Attack as:	Tradesman
Save as:	Tradesman
Advance as:	Tradesman
Spell Ability?:	No
Exe Str?:	No
Exe Con?:	No
Starting Cash	1d6

Proficiencies

Weapon Slots:	3
Additional Slot:	4
Nonproficiency Penalty:	-3
Nonweapon Slots:	6
Additional Slot:	3
Available Categories:	General, Professional
Bonus Profs:	Thespian (see below)
Recommended Profs:	Disguise



Overview

The 1890s finds many people looking upon theater as a craft for those of weak character or insufficient moral fiber. Of course, this is not true of actors presenting Hamlet for the pleasure of Queen Victoria or performing the works of Mozart and Wagner. On the whole, however, acting is not thought of as a career for honest, hard-working folk.

Description

An actor lives and dies by his reviews and his popularity. Those who are well known get top billing, higher pay, and better roles. Because of this, less well-known actors tend to be flamboyant people. They often dress very conspicuously and act in a pompous or otherwise singular fashion.

Once an actor attains fame and fortune, he will often assume more elegant trappings. Of course, this doesn't mean that the character will be any less flamboyant, only that he'll probably be a good deal less garish about it.

Role-playing

Many of Gothic Earth's least talented thespians gladly will spend hours telling anyone who will listen just how famous they are destined to become. An evening with someone like this tends to be only slightly less annoying than an unanesthetized surgical procedure.

At the other end of the spectrum, one will encounter great actors who are quite happy to unfurl a list of their accomplishments. While there can be no doubt as to the talent of these people, some do tend to be full of themselves.

Finally, somewhere in the middle of the two, one will run across talented theater folk who are in the midst of building their careers and reputations. Often, these are the most interesting thespians to spend time with.

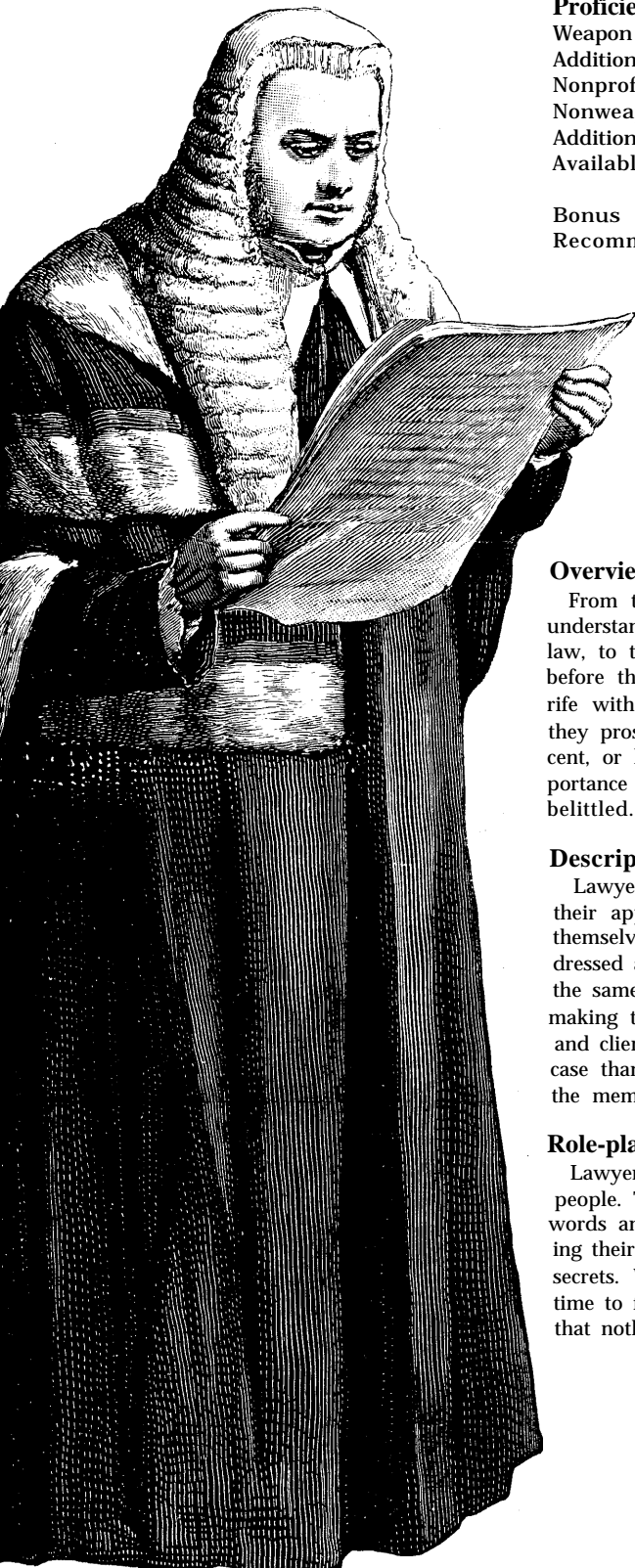
Special benefits

The ability to assume roles and impersonate others is part and parcel of the Thespian's career. The training and experience that these people have had in their lives allows them use a number of proficiencies with better than average ability.

Whenever a Thespian must make a Proficiency Check on his Dancing, Singing, Disguise, or Ventriloquism checks, he receives a +2 bonus. This bonus also might apply to various Special Interest skills (Oration, for example), at the discretion of the Dungeon Master.

Special hindrances

Actors have a natural flair for the dramatic that, although essential to their success in the theater, cannot help but spill over into the other aspects of their lives. In game terms, this results in a natural -1 initiative penalty that is applied whenever such a roll is made. The time lost by this handicap is assumed to be filled with banter, posturing, and similar dramatic elements.



Lawyer

Class: Tradesman
Ability Reqs: Int 12
Wis 12
Intelligence d6
Tradesman
Tradesman
Tradesman
NO
NO
NO
3d6

Proficiencies

Weapon Slots: 3
Additional Slot:
Nonproficiency Penalty: -3
Nonweapon Slots:
Additional Slot:
Available Categories: General,
Educational
Bonus Profs: Law
Recommended Profs: Academician

Overview

From the solicitors with their thorough understanding of business and financial law, to the barristers who argue cases before the criminal courts, Gothic Earth is rife with lawyers and attorneys. Whether they prosecute the guilty, defend the innocent, or litigate trade disputes, their importance in the western world cannot be belittled.

Description

Lawyers must be constantly aware of their appearance. They must present themselves as talented professionals, well dressed and possessed of a fine mind. At the same time, however, they must avoid making too strong an impression on judges and clients. There is no surer way to lose a case than offending the court or alienating the members of the jury.

Role-playing

Lawyers tend to be methodical, careful people. They pay constant attention to the words and actions of others, while guarding their own to avoid giving away any secrets. Whenever possible, they take the time to formulate a plan and make sure that nothing is left to chance.

Special benefits

With the practice of law comes an understanding of public speaking and audience reaction. A skilled lawyer can use this to his advantage, whether he is speaking privately with a client, addressing a jury, or responding to a question from the bench.

In order to reflect this aspect of their personalities, all lawyer characters are able to temporarily increase their Charisma when the opportunity for oratory presents itself. In such setting, the exact nature of which must be determined by the DM, a lawyer is entitled to make a Proficiency Check on his Law skill. If he passes this check, he gains a +2 bonus to his Charisma for the duration of the encounter.

Special hindrances

While a lawyer's eloquence can be of great value during the course of an adventure, it is not an unmixed blessing. Whenever a lawyer fails in his Proficiency Check, his intended audience senses his intent and believes him to be insincere. The result of this is a -2 modifier to the character's Charisma for the duration of the encounter.

New proficiencies

Law (1slot/Int/O)

Characters with this skill have a good understanding of the law, court systems, and related subjects. If a player wishes to spend an extra slot when purchasing this proficiency, his character is assumed to have been admitted to the bar and may practice law. A slot expended in this does not increase the character's chance of success when making a Proficiency Check.

A player selecting this skill may decide that his character has studied a specific type of law. If such is the case, the character gains a +2 bonus to Proficiency Checks made within his area of expertise, but suffers a -2 penalty on all other Law Proficiency Checks. Possible areas of specialization include: business, civil, criminal, and international law

Thespian (1slot/Cha/O)

Characters with this proficiency are skilled performers with experience on the stage. Whether this represents a past in the so-called legitimate theater or experience in the far less respected venues of vaudeville or burlesque. A skilled thespian is able to adopt the mannerisms and speech patterns of those he's impersonating with great efficacy. A character who successfully combines this skill with the Disguise talent can withstand even the closest scrutiny by critics or audiences.

Many players will want to combine this skill with others such as Singing or Dancing, to reflect backgrounds in specific types of theater such as opera or ballet.



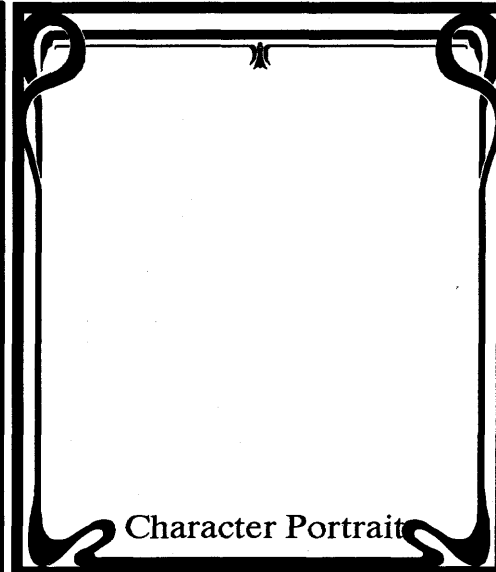
Masque OF THE Red Death

Character Record Sheet



Character Name

Class	Age	Sex
Kit	Hair	Eyes
XP Level	Height	Weight
Alignment	Features	
Nationality		



Character Portrait

Attack Table

THACO

-1	1
-2	2
-3	3
-4	4
-5	5
-6	6
-7	7
-8	8
-9	9
-10	10

Roll number or higher on 1d20 to hit listed AC

Strength
Dexterity
Constitution
Intelligence
Wisdom
Charisma

	Melee Attack	Melee Damage	Weight Allow.	Maximum Press	Open Doors	Bend / Lift
	Surprise Adjust.	Missile Attack	Defensive Adjust.			
	Hit Point Adjust.	System Shock	Resurrect. Survival	Poison Save	Regen. Rate	
	Add'l Profs	Maximum Spell Lvl	Learn Spells	Maximum Spl / Lvl	Spell Immunity	
	Magical Defense	Spell Failure	Spell Immunity			
	Maximum Henchmen	Loyalty Adjust	Reaction Adjust.			

Armor Class

Armor Worn

Base AC Rear AC Surprise AC

Hit Points

Base Hits

Saving Throws

Roll Number or higher on 1d20 to succeed

Paralysis, Poison, & Death Magic

Rods, Staves, & Wands

Petrify & Polymorph

Breath Weapons

Magical Spells

Fear Check

Horror Check

Madness Check

Experience Points

XP Goal XP Adj.

Weapon Proficiencies

Initial Slots

Add'l Slots

Nonprof. Penalty

Weapon Type	Rounds	Type	Speed	No. Attacks	Attack Adj.	Ranges (Att. Adj.) S / M (-2) / L (-4)	Damage Adj.	Damage v. S/M	Damage v. L

Experience Point Total



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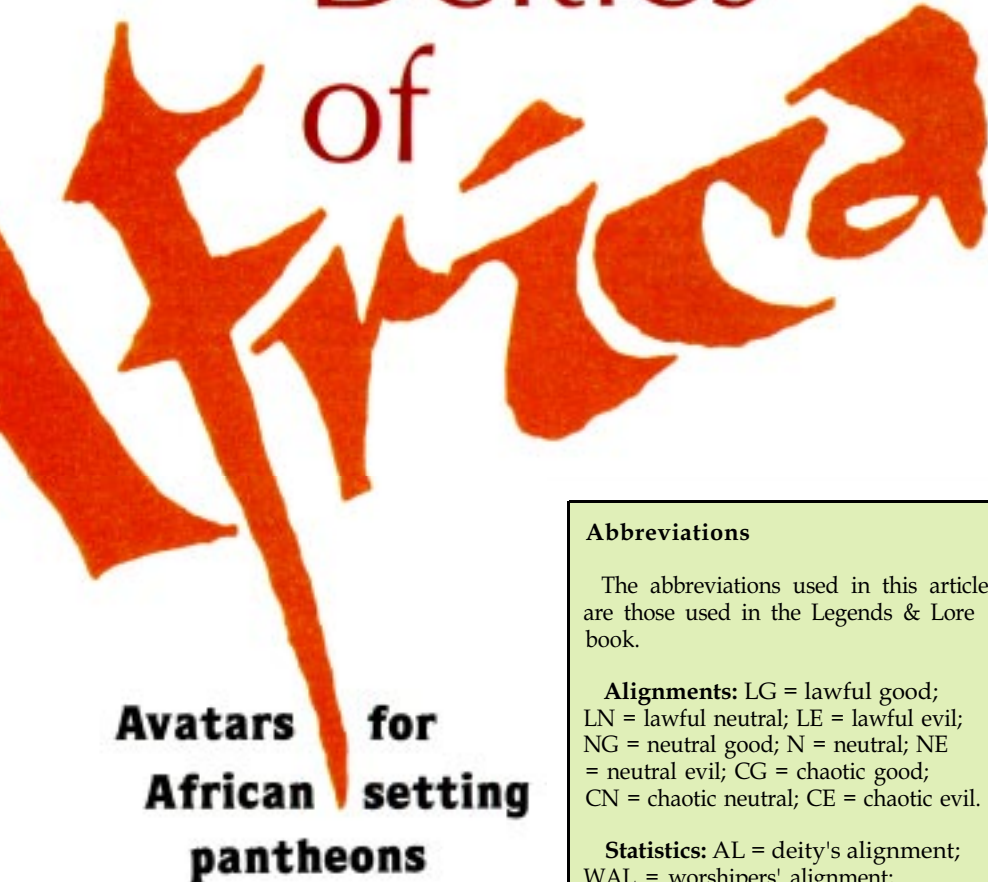
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The Deities of



The deities of the Ashante

Ananse

Ananse's avatar (mage 20) is a great spider who spun the forms of humans that were given life by Nyame (see below). Ananse is the messenger who spins a web to heaven and brings the complaints of men to the gods. Although considered ugly by man's standards, he commands the love of Nyame's only daughter.

Statistics: AL: LG; WAL: Any; AoC: spider people, Ashante warriors, spiders, messengers, craftsman, ugly people; SY: large black spider.

Str 20 Wis 25 Con 19
 Int 18 Dex 25 Cha 3
 MV 18 MR 100% SZ 12' long
 AC4 HD 20 HP 180
 #ATK 6 THACO 14 Dmg: d12(X6)
 + poison

Special attack/defense: Poison claws; saving throw to avoid instant death, web spell that requires no anchoring walls and can be cast at will.

Role-playing notes: Ananse is a benevolent god, but will not hesitate to use poison and spells to punish transgressors. His soft underbelly is easily pierced (AC6), so he guards it well.

Duties of the priesthood: Ananse's witch doctors must listen to the complaints of men and later convey them to Nyame. They protect ugly people and are often great seamstresses or tailors.

Requirements: AB: Dex and Wis 9+; AL: any neutral to good; WP: nets, whips, blowguns with poison darts; Armor: none; Spheres: all, animal, charm, combat, divination, healing, necromantic, protection, summoning; PW: at level 1, immune to poisons, identify and make any poisons or poison antidotes, speak with spiders at will; at level 5, *shapechange* into giant spider 1 use/day, web spell as above 3 uses/day, *spider climb* 1/day, 8) *insect plague* (all spiders) 1/day.

Abbreviations

The abbreviations used in this article are those used in the Legends & Lore book.

Alignments: LG = lawful good; LN = lawful neutral; LE = lawful evil; NG = neutral good; N = neutral; NE = neutral evil; CG = chaotic good; CN = chaotic neutral; CE = chaotic evil.

Statistics: AL = deity's alignment; WAL = worshipers' alignment; AoC = area of control, the deity's special interests; SY = the deity's symbol.

Avatar's statistics: Str = Strength; Wis = Wisdom; Con = Constitution; Int = Intelligence; Dex = Dexterity; Cha = Charisma; MV = movement rate (Fl = flying speed, MC = maneuverability class); SZ = size; MR = magic resistance; AC = armor class; HD = hit dice; HP = hit points; #ATK = number of attacks per round; THACO = to hit armor class 0; DMG = damage done per attack.

Requirements: AB = ability score requirements; AL = acceptable alignments for priests of this deity; WP = weapon proficiencies priests of this deity are allowed to take; Armor = armor that may be worn by priests of this deity; Spheres = clerical spell spheres priests of this deity have access to; PW = special powers granted by the deity to his priests.

Avatars for African setting pantheons

The first thing to do when describing a culture is to define the system of religious beliefs on which that culture is founded. Doing otherwise would be like building a house without its foundation. In Africa, there are so many sects and gods that one begins to wonder if the warm sun and pleasant people did not entice the deities of other cultures to take up residence in Africa. The specialty priests of the various African races in the AD&D® game are known as witch doctors, and they are the one constant in the lives of people torn by war, famine, plague, and pestilence.

The following brief descriptions of deities and their avatars are presented for use in African game settings, whether such environments are the normal campaign base or are used as a "foreign land" the PCs travel to. Interested readers should also seek out the article, "An African Genesis" by Brady English in DRAGON® Magazine issue #191, and my article "The Priests of Africa" in DRAGON issue #209.

Asase Ya

Asase Ya's avatar (druid 20, mage 20, ranger 20) appears as a beautiful woman of blackest skin, deepest doe brown eyes, and full, lovely lips. Asase Ya is the goddess of the earth and mother of the Abosoms, tree and water spirits.

Statistics: AL N, WAL: any, AoC: earth, tree, and water spirits, beauty, childbirth, nature, fidelity, SY: lone tree on savannah.

Str 14	Wis 20	Con 18
Int 16	Dex 18	Cha 20
MV 12	SZ 5' 8"	MR 100%
AC 6	HD 20	HP 248
#ATK 1	THACO 1	Dmg: by form or spell

Special attack/defense: *Shapechange* into any wilderness creature at will.

Role-playing notes: Asase Ya is the faithful wife of Nyame (see below). Her role as mother of spirits makes her protective of them and vulnerable creatures like children and small animals.

Duties of the priesthood: Priestesses of Asase Ya are always female. They care for orphans and wounded animals. They appease the tree and water spirits that live near their village, thus preventing them from taking men from the village.

Requirements: AB: standard plus Cha 12; AL: any neutral to good; WP: club, staff, spear; Armor: none; Spheres: all, animal, charm, combat, creation, divination, elemental, guardian, healing, necromantic, plant, protection, summoning, sun, weather; PW: at level 1, immune to woodland charms, never attacked by natural animals, *speak with animals* at will; at level 9, *shapechange* as druid 3 uses/day.

Nyame

Nyame's avatar (mage 20, fighter 20) appears as a three-sided beholder. One side appears as the moon, the second as the sun, and the third as a human head. It is said that when Nyame turns his face to contemplate the world, lunar or solar eclipses occur as his moon or sun face is covered by his human face. Nyame created the earth, the sky, and the underworld and is the god of healing and rain.

Statistics: AL: LG; WAL: any; AoC: moon, sun, sky, rain, eclipses, healing, beholders; SY: mortar and pestle.

Str n/a	Wis 24	Con 24
Int 24	Dex n/a	Cha 18
MV 24	SZ 4' diameter	MR 100%
AC 0	HD 20	HP 340
#ATK N/A	THACO 1	Dmg by power or spell

Special attack/defense: Nyame's avatar (and all African beholders) have

these abilities: They have four eyes that each can use one power/round. The first is a fire ray that inflicts 1d6 hp of damage per HD of the beholder and necessitates a saving throw vs. spells to take half damage and avoid being blinded for d6 turns. The second is a ray that sends a *darkness* 15' radius spell that drains 1 level/5 HD of the beholder. The third and fourth eyes are the human face's eyes; they send out a green ray that *charms* any being struck unless a saving throw vs. spells is made. All creatures of less than 8 HD who come within sight of these beholders must make saving throws or run in fear for 1d6 rounds. Typical beholders have 10 HD, no magic resistance, and THACO and HP appropriate to their hit dice. Many beholders have rebelled against Nyame, and their alignments vary accordingly.

Role-playing notes: Nyame is very slow to react to stimuli and is apathetic to the world, so his avatar is seldom seen. It takes him hours to turn his face toward the earth. He grants spells and places beholders upon the earth so these followers can act in his name.

Duties of the priesthood: Nyame's priests are healers. They are charged with hunting down renegade beholders and bringing relief from suffering to the world, whether from tyranny, drought, injury, sickness, or famine. They pray for rain, cure the sick, and hunt down oppressors. Nyame's priests are sworn enemies of both bokor and Zande witches (see issue #209) and as such are the archetypical "witch doctors."

Requirements: AB: standard; AL: any good or neutral; WP: club, staff, spear, bows; Armor: none; Spheres: all, astral, charm, combat, divination, elemental fire, air, water, healing, necromantic, protection, summoning, sun, wards, weather; PW: at level 1, immune to beholder's *fear* aura, +4 saving throws vs. beholder attacks, see in magical and mundane darkness; at level 5, lay on hands (as a paladin), dispel witch's curses, and perform a *rain dance*. The rain dance ceremony takes three days to complete and requires a Constitution check at the end of each day to see if the witch doctor has collapsed. If so, he must rest for three days. If not, rain will come at the end of the third day.

The deities of the Bushmen

Animal spirits

Animal spirit avatars (typically mage 20 or fighter 20) are the spirits of animal archetypes. These spirits include but are not limited to lion man, antelope man, porcupine man and chameleon man. They are humanoid animals with the characteristics of their animal aspects.

Statistics: AL: lion man LN, antelope

man CG, porcupine man N, chameleon man NG; WAL: any; AoC: animal with which they are associated; SY: animal with which they are associated.

Str 14-18	Wis 3-18	Con 18
Int 3-18	Dex 14-18	Cha 14-18
MV 18"	SZ 4' to 6'	MR 40%
AC 6-10	HD 20	HP 160
#ATK 5/2	THACO 1	DMG by weapon

Special attack/defense: Porcupine man fires three darts/round at will in addition to other attacks, grapplers suffer damage from 1d6 darts; Antelope man has antlers that do 1d20 damage in a charge; Chameleon man's skin acts as a *cloak of elvenkind*, he surprises 50% of the time, and he can backstab as a thief; lion man may use weapons or may claw/claw/bite as a lion with Strength bonuses.

Role-playing notes: The animal spirits are heroes in Bushman mythology. They are sometimes given jobs by the gods. One story explains how the gods sent a chameleon man with a message that humans would be immortal, but he took his time delivering the message. So the gods sent a lizard man with the message that humans would be mortal. The lizard delivered the message immediately, and therefore man was mortal thereafter.

Duties of the priesthood: The Bushmen is the only tribe that has animal priests as well as animal priestesses. (The priestesses are described in issue #209.) The animal spirits also are worshipped by the animal-men associated with them and many other tribes throughout Africa.

Cagn (or Mantis, or Kaggen)

Cagn's avatar (fighter 20, druid 20) is a thri-kreen. He is one of the animal spirits who achieved lesser god status by helping the supreme god create insects and flying things. In his mischief, however, he also created tsetse flies, locusts, and mosquitoes. His messengers are the birds. His daughter married a snake man, and now many snake men also worship Cagn.

Statistics: AL: CN; WAL: any; AoC: birds, insects, mischief, mantis men, snake men (nagas); SY: praying mantis.

Str 17	Wis 14	Con 18
Int 16	Dex 18	Cha 12
MV 18	SZ 7'	MR 80%
AC 6	HD 20	HP 280
#ATK 5/2	THACO 1	DMG by weapon or as thri-kreen

Special attack/defense: As thri-kreen (MONSTROUS MANUAL™ book, page 342).

Role-playing notes: Cagn is mischievous to the point of near cruelty. It is a cold and unfeeling cruelty that is neutral in outlook.

Duties of the priesthood: Priests of Cagn are human, snake men, or thri-kreen. They seek to bring locusts, mosquitoes, or tsetse flies to plague the world or to avert the attention of Cagn and thus avoid the ravages of those insects. Priests of Cagn sacrifice birds to the god but will never eat birds themselves.

Requirements: AB: standard; AL: any neutral to evil; WP: any allowed by culture; Armor: none; Spheres: all, animal, combat, divination, healing, necromantic, protection, summoning; PW: at level 1, speak with insects, snakes, thri-kreens or nagas at will; at level 9, summon d8 thri-kreen to perform one task, cast insect plague or dispel one plague of natural or magical insects per day.

Gauna (or Gawa or Gamab or Gaunab)

Gauna's avatar (necromancer 20, assassin 20) is the leader of the death spirits, or gamab (female death spirits are called gamagi). He lives in the upper sky and sends bad weather. He appears as a gamagu, an old withered human male with vampiric aspect. He carries a bow and arrows with which he shoots down certain humans who wind their way to the netherworld and become gamagu or gamagi instead of remaining on earth as ancestral spirits. The avatar, like all death spirits, eats human flesh. Sometimes Gauna will send death spirits to earth to plague the living.

Statistics: AL: CE; WAL: any; AoC: death, assassination, cannibalism, evil, chaos, bad weather, disease; SY: bow and arrow with human skull at tip.

Str 20	Wis 16	Con 20
Int 14	Dex 20	Cha -3
MV 18	SZ 6'	MR 100%
AC 6	HD 20	HP 220
#ATK 1 or 2	THACO 11	DMG weapon or d8

Special attack/defense: Gauna carries all manner of bladed weapons of obsidian or black stone that are coated with poison (failure to save means instant death). He backstabs as a 20th-level thief with an attack roll of 19 or 20 bringing instant death. He surprises on a roll of 1-4 on a d10. He has a bow +5 that allows all bonuses for Gauna's Strength and Dexterity. The arrows are sheaf arrows and are poisoned as described above, but those who fail to make saving throws against the bow's poison become gamagu or gamagi. These are vampires who also secrete a poison with their bite that is identical with that on Gauna's bow. They have no *shape-change* powers, magic resistance, or *charm* abilities, but they do possess the above abilities of Strength et al. They appear as aged versions of themselves, attack as in life with weapons, and eat the

bodies of their victims (which are reformed in the netherworld).

Role-playing notes: Gauna is completely chaotic and will fire his arrows at good and evil people with equal probability. Sometimes his avatar appears with several gamagu in the midst of a raging storm, a dust storm, or a terrible drought. He will hunt an entire village for sport and then disappear as quickly as he appeared.

Duties of the priesthood: Priests of Gauna are assassins; they worship Gauna as a means to acquiring the power to carry out assassinations. Some kill for money, some from a misguided sense of justice, and some for the sheer joy of doing it. They are almost universally hated and feared, although they keep their true nature hidden to all but their intended victims.

Requirements: AB: standard plus Dex 14; AL: any neutral to evil; WP: bows, any edged weapon of obsidian or stone allowed to the society of the priest; Armor: none; Spheres: all, chaos, combat, divination, guardian, necromantic, protection, time, weather; PW: at level 1, open locks, find/remove traps, move silently, hide in shadows, and backstab at base ability plus 20 discretionary points/level, become

gamagu or gamagi upon death and may be allowed to stay to plague the living, but are NPC's at this point, all weapons wielded become poisoned, *change self* at will.

The deities of the Pygmies

Bumba

Bumba's avatar (mage 20, fighter 20) is the god of law, government, the set nature of the stars and planets, and the set nature of animal spirits. He taught the first man, Keri Keri, to make fire. Bumba's Avatar appears as a pygmy man with a torch in one hand and a tablet with the laws of the gods in the other. He has deep black skin, piercing eyes and a lean and muscular but slightly stooped frame.


Statistics: AL: LN; WAL: any; AoC: law, animal spirits, stars, planets, fire, teaching; SY: tablet and torch.

Str 20	Wis 20	Con 20
Int 18	Dex 16	Cha 14
MV 12	SZ 4'	MR 100%
AC 8	HD 20	HP 300
#ATK 5/2	THACO 1	DMG up to 20d6

Special attack/defense: Bumba has complete control over fire and may cause his torch to flare causing up to 20d6 damage.

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Role-playing notes: Bumba is an extremely lawful god and takes his office very seriously. Chaotic creatures and those who are disrespectful to the gods are in for a rough time with Bumba. He is one of the patrons of the Zande witches (see issue #209).

Duties of the priesthood: Priests of Bumba are judges, bounty hunters, keepers of the law, and sometimes executioners. They will drive Bokor (see issue #209) from their presence and will aid Zande witches in finding them. In return Zande witches seldom curse a village protected by a witch doctor of Bumba. They educate the young in the laws of the gods.

Requirements: AB: standard; AL: any lawful; WP: torch, bow and flaming arrow, greek fire; Armor: none; Spheres: all, animal, astral, charm, combat, creation, divination, elemental fire, guardian, law, protection, sun, wards; PW: at level 1, cast mage spells from the school of elemental fire (see *Tome of Magic*) as if they were priest spells of the same level, *affect normal fires* at will; at level 9, immune to magical and mundane fire.

Khonvum

Khonvum's avatar (ranger 20, druid 20, mage 20) is the great hunter who rules the sky, birds, the forest, and wild animals of the land. He slew the ogre Ngoogunogumbar, swallower of children, and the dwarf Ogrigwabibikwa, who could change into a giant, fire-breathing lizard. He wields a rainbow strung with two welded serpents. He is sometimes accompanied by his messenger, a chameleon man, and by the thunder elephant Gor.

Statistics: AL: NG; WAL: any; AoC: hunters, the sky, birds and animals, thunder elephants and chameleon men, rainbows; SY: rainbow.

Str 20	Wis 14	Con 20
Int 16	Dex 20	Cha 18
MV 12	SZ 4'	MR 100%
AC 6	HD 20	HP 273
#ATK 5/2	THACO 1	DMG by weapon or 2

Special attack/defense: Khonvum's bow has three different arrow types. One is a paralyzed serpent who strikes for 1d8 damage and then becomes alive (poison snake statistics) and attacks the victim. The second is an arrow of lightning that does damage as a *javelin of lightning* but remains solid, doing an additional 1d8 damage. The third turns into a hawk in flight and attacks the target (use normal falcon or hawk statistics). The animals have attack and damage bonuses as if they had a 20 Strength. He is +6 to attack and +8 to damage with his bow due to Strength and Dexterity, and he is considered a specialist with the bow.

Role-playing notes: Khonvum is lord of the hunt and enjoys the fellowship of the hunting party. He will often join such a party in disguise and reward the hunters with plentiful game. He will punish those who hunt for trophies, use cruel methods, or waste the hunt's bounty.

Duties of the priesthood: Priests of Khonvum are huntsmen themselves and help the village through lean periods when game is sparse.

Requirements: AB: standard plus Dex of 14 and Str of 12; AL: neutral; WP: any allowed by culture and campaign; Armor: none; Spheres: all, animal, creation, divination, healing, necromantic, plant, summoning; PW: at level 1, immune to magical and mundane electricity, hide in shadows, move silently, tracking as ranger; at level 9, *speak with animals* and *charm animals* at will (save negates).

The deities of the Benin of Nigeria

So

So's avatar (fighter 20, mage 20) is a muscular man who carries a huge stone axe and is often accompanied by a raman. He is the god of lightning, thunder, and Zande witches. He punishes those who do not respect the gods and sends lightning to the earth to warn of his displeasure. Trees struck by lightning are gathered by Zande witches to make *wands of lightning*.

Statistics: AL: LG; WAL: any; AoC: lightning, retribution, thunder, Zande witches, ram-men; SY: ram or stone axe.

Str 20	Wis 14	Con 20
Int 16	Dex 18	Cha 14
MV 12	SZ 6'	MR 100%
AC 6	HD 20	HP 300
#ATK 5/2	THACO 1	DMG d8
or 1		or up to 20d6

Special attack/defense: So's axe causes a clap of thunder on every successful hit; all within earshot must save twice, first to avoid being stunned for 1d6 rounds and then to avoid being struck deaf permanently. If thrown, the axe transforms into a *lightning bolt* doing 20d6 damage (save for half damage). It turns back into a hammer just as it hits to do an additional 1d8 damage plus Strength and Dexterity bonuses.

Role-playing notes: So is a vindictive god. He never lets the merest slight to himself or other gods go unpunished. He has no sense of humor, but enjoys the company of warriors.

Duties of the priesthood: Females who worship So are always Zande witches, males who worship So are always

paladins. Both hunt down and kill bokor wherever they find them. The paladins are charged with the second slaying of a bokor in his undead form; they usually leave the first slaying to the Zande witches. Zande witches and paladins of So are often found in paired groupings.

Requirements of the paladins: AB: standard for paladins; AL: LG; WP: any allowed by culture and campaign; Armor: any allowed by culture and campaign; Spheres: all, combat, divination, elemental air, guardian, healing, necromantic, protection, war, weather; PW: at level 1, gain spells and turn undead as priests not paladins, can destroy a bokor with a successful turning (but only one attempt per bokor for an individual paladin), no *lay on hands* ability or paladin's warhorse; at level 5, gain *blessed weapon* that does double damage against bokor and has attack and damage bonuses of +1 to +5 based on the status of the paladin as a slayer of bokor and devout worshipper of So—and those who have been especially devout may gain a special *axe of thunderbolts* that acts as the hammer of the same name but gains its bonuses against bokor instead of giants; at level 9, *lightning bolt* 3 uses/day.

The deities of Kanem-Bornu

Leza

Leza's avatar (fighter 20) is an ancient winged dwarf with a bald head who carries a heavy lead rattle. He wears multi-colored pants and shirt and is the god of birds, the sky, and the wind. He is hearing impaired and for this reason often mistakes the wording of prayers.

Statistics: AL: CG; WAL: any; AoC: birds, bird men, sky, wind, dwarves; SY: lead rattle.

Str 18/00	Wis 20	Con 20
Int 16	Dex 16	Cha 14
MV 9, Fl 18	MC: A SZ 4'	MR 100%
AC 8	HD 20	HP 300
#ATK 5/2	THACO 1	DMG d6+1

Special attack/defense: Lead rattle strikes as mace, can charge by diving for double damage and AC 4.

Role-playing notes: Leza acts as a befuddled old man who is constantly forgetful and very close to being completely deaf. It is unproven whether the senility is just an act.

Duties of the priesthood: Priests of Leza protect the nesting and mating grounds of birds. They send messages to Leza by chanting and dancing around a fire of green wood while shaking rattles. They have to chant very loudly, because their god will not hear them if they do not, and so there are no silent prayers to Leza.

Requirements: AB: standard; AL: any; WP: lead rattle mace only; Armor: none; Spheres: all, animal, combat, divination, elemental air, guardian, healing, necromantic, protection, summoning, weather; PW: at level 1, use wizard spells of elemental air as if they were priest spells of equal level; at level 9, gain wings that now sprout, can carry half encumbrance while in flight, take half damage from falls. If priest was already winged, may now hide wings at will.

Other deities

Due to the sheer number of gods in African religions, it is impossible to describe them all in one article. Many of the gods listed here have counterparts in other's societies. The gods listed below are similar to various extents to the deities described above.

Ananse: Yi Yi to the Ewe tribe of West Africa (neighbors to the Ashante), Legba in Dahomey, Kaang, Khu, or Thora to the bushmen, Kururumany in Guyana, Akongo to the pygmy.

Asase Ya: Lissa to the Dahomey of West Africa (neighbors to the Ashante), Ododua to the Yoruba of West Africa (also neighbors to the Ashante), Ala or Aka to the Benin of Nigeria, Wamara in Uganda, Ataokoloinona in Madagascar.

Nyame: Juok or Juck to the Shilluk,

Gou in Dahomey, Iruwa to the Chaga of Southwest Africa (neighbors to the Ganda), Mawu-Lisa to the Ewe tribe of West Africa, Tsui Goab to the Hottentots, Murungu in East Africa, Nzambi to the Bantu, Ndrionhary in Madagascar, Myambe to the Zembezi, Tilo in Mozambique, Orishale or Orishala to the Yoruba of West Africa, and Gulu elsewhere.

Gauna: Sakpata or Shokpona in Dahomey, Odomonkoma to the Ashante, Azazel to the Phoenicians of North Africa, and Leprosy to the Hottentots.

Bumba: Muluku in Mozambique, Abore in Guyana, and Unkulunkulu to the Bantu and the Zulu.

Zhonvum: Ogun to the Yoruba of West Africa, Rabefiaza in Madagascar, Hochigan to the Bushmen, and Anyiewo to the Ewe.

So: Gua to the Ga of West Africa.

Leza: Buku in parts of West Africa.

In addition to the DRAGON issues listed above, other African campaign articles can be found in issues #189, 195, 200, and 202.

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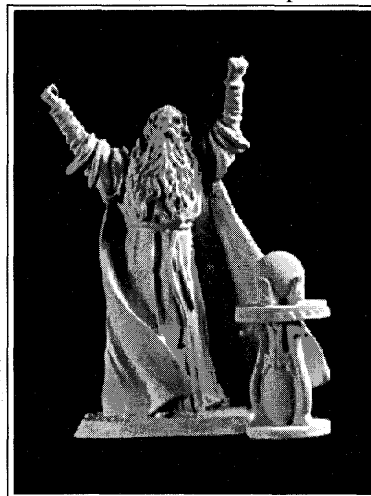
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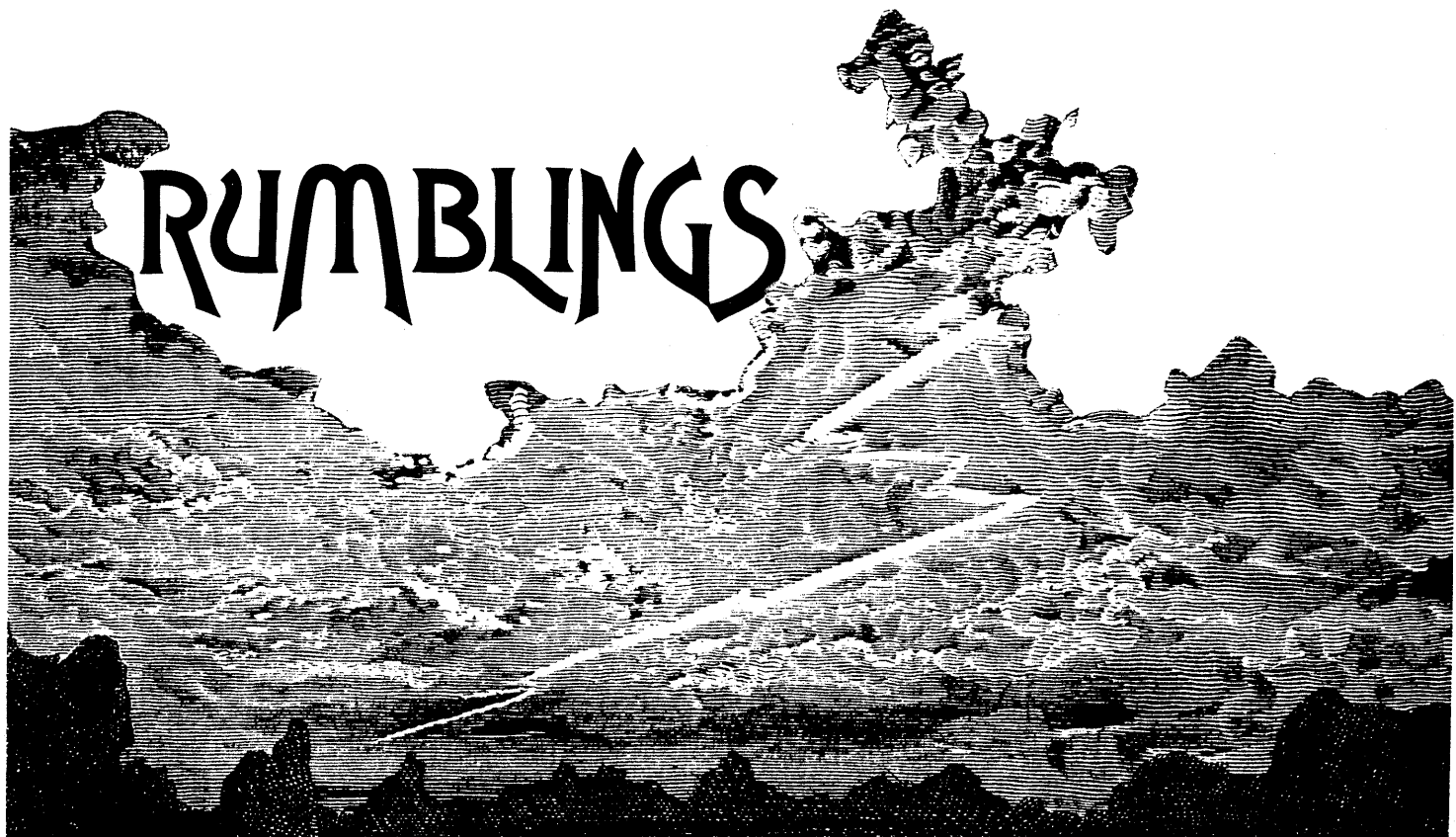
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MC17 Saruman and the palantir





News of people & events in the gaming industry

You can send us news, press releases, and announcements using the Internet at TSR.mags@genie.geis.com. We also welcome your comments at *Rumblings*, DRAGON® Magazine, 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva WI 53147, USA.

Lead Story:

Jeff Grubb Joins Mag Force 7

Jeff Grubb, TSR, Inc.'s senior game designer and author of the award-winning AL-QADIM® game setting, is leaving his full-time position at TSR to pursue freelance opportunities. Grubb is the author of classics such as the *Manual of the Planes*, the *Marvel Super Heroes* game, the BUCK ROGERS® HIGH ADVENTURES™ game, the MYSTARA™ rules, and the SPELLJAMMER® campaign setting. He was one of the founding fathers of the DRAGONLANCE® world and co-creator of the FORGOTTEN REALMS® campaign setting (with Ed Greenwood). He also has written a number of successful novels, including the recent *Lord Toede* and the *Finder's Stone* trilogy (with Kate Novak).

Grubb will be working closely with Mag Force 7 on a new collectible card game and will pursue novel opportunities; his Harpers novel *Masquerades* (with cowriter Kate Novak) is due out in July and features the triumphant return of Alias, Dragonbait, and Olive Ruskettle (heroine and role model to millions, including us). Good luck, Jeff; the road leads ever on and all that.

We guess you won't need to figure out where that safety is, after all.

The revolving door of industry

Ken Whitman, formerly of Whit Publications (known for the WORLD WRESTLING FEDERATION*, MUTAZOIDS*, and Ralph Bakshi's WIZARDS* role-playing games), briefly worked on the HIGHLANDER* role-playing game for Thunder Castle Games (due to be released in August). He has moved on once again. He has joined TSR as the new Convention Coordinator. The man has Big Plans: A TSR presence at least 80 conventions in 1995. Convention organizers should contact him at least 120 days in advance to plan a TSR presence at their convention; new sponsorship programs are available.

Carl Sargent, famous both for his work on the GREYHAWK® campaign setting and on FASA's SHADOWRUN* game, has accepted a position with FASA Corp. to take over the position of SHADOWRUN line developer from Tom Dowd. Barring problems with immigration, he will relocate from Nottingham, England, to Chicago this April. Welcome to the colonies, Carl!

Tom Baxa joins the FASA art studio, effective immediately. His previous freelance work for TSR includes extensive work for the DARK SUN® world, and covers for DRAGON Magazine issues #186, 192, and 210. His first staff project with FASA is *Bug City*, already at the printer. He

will work on both interior (color and B&W) and color covers for *The Adept's Way*, an EARTHDAWN* source book.

Last month, *Rumblings* reported that Mark Copplestone, Grenadier's number one sculptor, accepted a position with Heartbreaker Miniatures late in December. More details are now available. Copplestone's first molds for Heartbreaker figures should be hitting the stores in July; his first project is resculpting Heartbreaker's MUTANT CHRONICLES* line for a July relaunch to coincide with the release of the MC WARZONE* game—thereafter he will work on fantasy figures. WARZONE is a tabletop system designed by Bill King. Kev Adams is sculpting all the monsters for the game.

BLOOD WARS™ card game—going, going, gone!

The first edition of the BLOOD WARS card game wasn't enough to go around. It seems that there were more orders for the product after TSR went to press than were anticipated and some orders didn't get filled. According to well-placed industry experts, the BLOOD WARS game was underordered to begin with, and this will make it harder for anyone to get the cards they want. A second edition printing is in the works. Look elsewhere in this issue for a complete card list of all the cards in the core game plus Escalation Pack I and the first 34 chase cards.

TSR Announces New Customer Service Lines

TSR, Inc., proudly announces its new Consumer Services and Store Locator phone lines. If you have a brief question about TSR's products, call: 1 (4 14) 248-2902. To find the store nearest you that carries TSR products, call: 1 (800) 384-4TSR. Hours for these services are: Weekdays, 9A.M. to 5P.M. Central time.

The first lasers of Spring

West End Games will release the PARANOIA: 5th EDITION* game (they skipped two editions to get there) in April; the designer of the new edition is West End staffer Ed Stark. The basic premise is still "classic Paranoia": Commie mutant traitors are still the enemy, the Computer is your friend. Really. Honest. The game's sections on mutant powers and secret societies are expanded. The fundamentals of funny haven't changed, according to Stark: "The PARANOIA game is a game with one joke: the new edition adds to that joke, there are different ways of telling that joke, but it's still one joke." Of course, since it's a new edition, there are new optional rules for character generation, service group

basic training, how to keep campaigns (not characters) alive, and player actions. It's funnier. The Computer says so. The computer is your friend.

Rollin', rollin', rollin'

It appears that several game companies are rolling down the dice game road, after TSR announced the DRAGON DICE® expandable dice game. The game's designer is DRAGON Magazine's own Lester Smith. The oft-quoted "insider in the industry" claims that a bunch of companies have put forward inquiries to dice companies about doing similar type games. (Can you say WotC?)

Selling it twice

You can call it the game so nice they sold it twice: JYHAD*, the collectable card game from White Wolf and Garfield Games, is being renamed and reissued this summer. The new title, VAMPIRE: THE ETERNAL STRUGGLE* game, is meant to attract new customers unaware that JYHAD is a game about vampires, according to WotC spokesman Matt Burke. In addition, the game's rules will change. "We've rewritten and simplified the instructions, as well as added new rules to cut down on playing time," says Burke. Despite the changes, the game is supposed to be 100%

playable with existing JYHAD cards. Of course, only the cynical would call this a bloodsucking move to drain more cash from wallets.

Changes for the GEN CON® Game Fair

The 1995 GEN CON Game Fair has signed a special guest, both a "fan favorite" and a "industry insider" in the comics industry. No further details are available at this time, but watch this space. (Do I smell cheese dip in the air?)

Finally, this year the Game Fair will include an expanded computer concourse in the West Hall. A rumored match-up between TSR and WotC staffers in the BATTLETECH* simulators is entirely erroneous, false, and completely untrue. Surely, it's a plot by FASA Corp. to dispose of its competitors.

Book signing

TSR book editor and author Robert King will sign his new light-fantasy novel, Rogues to Riches, at Waldenbooks in the Griffith Park Plaza, 224 W. Ridge Rd., in Griffith, Indiana, on Saturday, March 18. The signing is free and open to the public. Ask him about the meat woman.

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There's more to science fiction than just the science

EYE OF THE MONITOR

©1995 by Jay & Dee

Dee: This month's feature reviews include *Inferno* from Ocean Software, *Wyatt Earp's Old West*, published by Grolier Multimedia, *SpaceKids* from MicroProse, and *Dreamweb*, by Empire Interactive. We'll also take a quick look at *Wing Commander III* from Origin Systems.

Jay: Except for *Old West*, most of our titles this month are science fiction. This is because everyone is publishing this stuff. I think science fiction has entered the mainstream.

Dee: Absolutely. It started a long time ago, with the breakthrough appeal of *Star Wars*, but it's been building ever since.

Jay: Used to be that SF had a special audience—a cult readership. But advances in special effects, the coming turn of the millennium (in less than six years, now), and rapid advances in mass technology have made many once-outrageous predictions into reality. You've seen those "Ever done this? You will." commercials. Trouble is, not everyone who is jumping on the science-fiction bandwagon has taken the time to see (and read) what's already been done.

Dee: That's right—for some publishers, "science fiction" means "rip-off something I saw on TV three years ago." Hardly cutting edge. Are the games we're looking at this month merely retreads of done-to-death themes, or is there a new vision of the future here? Let's take a look.

Our first game is a space-combat flight



Inferno (Ocean Software)

simulator called *Inferno*. It was developed by Digital Image Design and is published by Ocean of America. It seems to be a sequel, since the subtitle is "The Odyssey Continues," and the rule book calls it the "next chapter in the Epic saga."

Jay: What epic, we're not sure. I'd hazard a guess the game's a foreign import, since all the digitized voices have English accents.

Dee: Well, the opening screens are stunning, clearly designed to hook the buyer with a really socko in-store demo. There's lots of animated 3-D, and it looks good. The voice acting also is fairly professional, if a bit melodramatic.

Jay: Of course, if you're a role-player (you are reading this magazine, after all), you might find it a little off-putting that your lines are pre-recorded. You don't even get the option of choosing which clever reply to make.

Dee: Not only that, but the intro goes on forever!

Jay: Loved that vacuuming 3-D robot.

Dee: Both views of it. Now for the game itself: I didn't know what to expect, after all the fancy graphics, but *Inferno* turns out to be a fairly standard flight sim, with the emphasis on fairly. There are some nice, new touches to explore though.

Jay: Being slightly dyslexic makes it

Jay & Dee's ratings at a glance

Game	Jay	Dee
<i>Inferno</i>	2½	3½
<i>Old West</i>	2½	2½
<i>SpaceKids</i>	2½	4
<i>Dream web</i>	1½	1½

really hard to play games like this one, so I just watched Dee play. I found it dreadfully confusing. It didn't help that we couldn't sit down and study the manual in-depth before playing, so Dee flew while I read. I'd look away to ferret out the location of some control, look back, and not be able to tell the enemy ships from our own space station,

Dee: Heck, I couldn't do that, and I was watching the screen the whole time! But that's common: flight simulators can be overwhelming. For one thing, you have a limited field of view (the pilot's), and often you can't tell where anything is. You find yourself flying in circles just to see what's happening behind you. Then you get lost and end up flying out of the battlefield.

Jay: Which could just be pilot error, eh, Dee? But *Inferno* has some really slick ways to limit the confusion. For example, you can choose from several different configurations of radar.

Dee: Nice touch. One setting is a depth-column radar similar to *Elite* or *Hyper-speed*. Instead of just a blip, your scope registers a vertical line. This line shows how high above or far below your position the enemy is. It helps orient your ship and get right to where you want to go.

Jay: It also toggles to "normal" blip mode, which the manual claims is more useful once combat is joined. Another helpful feature is the combat grid, a sandwich of two lighted squares that look something like the projected grids that Luke and Han used for shooting TIE fighters in *Star Wars*. The farther apart the two grids are, the closer you are to the battlefield.

Dee: That's a really cool-looking effect, my favorite so far in the whole game. It feels so "space opera" (as does the tracking gunsight that helps you lock on with your torpedoes and lasers). There are plenty of other gauges and dials to ogle, though trying to pay attention to all of them is mindboggling at first.

Jay: I'll say! Reminds me of learning to drive a stick shift. I finally made it from first through second to third, and my brother said, "Now you have to watch the traffic instead of the gearshift." Oh, yeah, there are other vehicles out there. . . . There are other vehicles in the game as well—the ones you're assigned to shoot down. That makes this game's virtual-cockpit feature, where you can turn your "head" from side to side and get a much wider field of vision, pretty important: how else would you get that feel of being a pilot?

Dee: In fact, the virtual cockpit idea—which seems to rely on raw computer power (perhaps why it hasn't been used until recently)—is the most powerful innovation in flight sims in years. Finally, you're no longer confined to an eleven-inch field of view! As is becoming the norm in complicated flight sims like this one, you can press a wide variety of func-



Inferno (Ocean Software)

tion keys to get all sorts of interesting camera angles. Some are more useful than others, but all are quite cinematic.

Jay: I liked the Missile View, which follows torpedoes to see if they hit their target.

Dee: The rest is standard flight-sim stuff, including a large variety of weapons choices. We experimented with guided torpedoes, which are good for beginners, and lasers, which turn out to be fairly useful in a thick melee. In some flight sims, you can hardly get a bead on a fast-moving opponent.

Jay: I have to admit, you seemed a lot more able to blow things up in this game than you could in *Privateer*. I suppose that's gratifying.

Dee: No question! The more powerful and in-control I feel when flying, the better—at least until I get used to the game and start wishing for a greater challenge.

Jay: I also never noticed that you were in danger of being blown up by the enemy. That's another great improvement over the constant restarting of *Privateer*. Were you playing an easy mode, or is it always like that?

Dee: Of course we haven't played enough to be sure, but I suspect I was at the beginning of the power curve. We were using what the designers call Evolutionary Gameplay mode, which allows you to select your own targets. I chose the easiest targets first, so I assume it gets much harder later on.

Jay: *Inferno* features three modes: Arcade, for a mini-campaign allowing plenty of fighting; Evolutionary, where you choose your own targets and things heat up as you go; and Director's Cut, which is the full-blown "story" campaign. Presumably, if you play a long Director's Cut campaign, you'll eventually get to use all the planetary statistics packed into the

manual—although what difference the presence of any one corporation on a planet makes is a mystery to me. Perhaps you can re-arm only certain weapons, or purchase certain upgrades when the corporation that makes them is present.

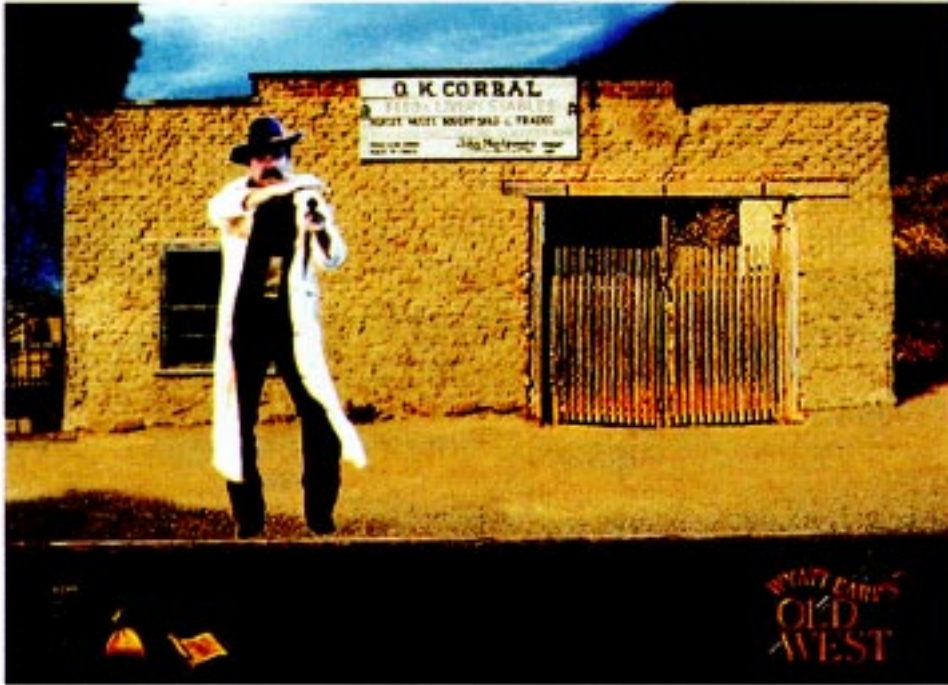
Dee: That's possible. However, my laser isn't a Dyna-CORP laser. It's just a laser. Those corporate names are an attempt at science-fiction texture that falls flat (pun intended). Pointless detail doesn't make a world come to life.

The manual is a slim 50 pages or so, about half of which are just mood-setting comic-book story (interspersed with the rules, which makes it a little tough to find what you're looking for). The comic art is good, but the story is silly.

Jay: Speaking of interspersed, the manual also gives you little tips within the rules—and I do mean within! Tips are printed in a light-colored ink and very small type—and tip text alternates with type lines of the rules themselves. Very strange, graphically cool, and nearly illegible. I'm all for innovative packaging, but let's not lose sight of the customer's goal: in this case, learning to play.

Dee: A true definition of reading between the lines! So, to summarize, *Inferno* gave me a good fix of fast action and shooting, and made me feel I was a pretty good pilot (even though it took a long time to shoot everything down, I did finally succeed in my mission). The grids and cockpit aids are cool-looking and sophisticated, and overcome some of the difficulties inherent in other flight Sims. Some off-notes include not much to do between missions (no story elements to speak of), and no allies flying with you (as there are in *Wing Commander*). I give it * * * 1/2.

Jay: We forgot to mention that *Inferno* includes a completely original soundtrack by the British group Alien Sex Fiends (ASF



Wyatt Earp's Old West (Grolier Multimedia)

for short), which the publishers want you to find so irresistible that you'll fill out your warranty registration card in hopes of winning an audio CD. You'll hear plenty of this music as you're flying missions, including a tongue-in-cheek death march if you're not so successful.

Dee: I enjoyed the music, but it certainly was no standout.

Jay: I only flew long enough to bump into the hangar wall (repeatedly) and explore the death sequence (actually, you get regenerated, a dressing-down by your superior and a warning to be more careful next time), but for innovative science fiction, *Inferno* seemed a bit thin. There's not enough interaction for role-players, and only a gloss of science fiction wrapped around a decent flight simulator. Smooth 3-D and pleasant music aren't enough to keep this reviewer glued to the screen. I give it * * ½.

Dee: I think you have to ask yourself if flight sims are your bag. If they're not, *Inferno* won't change anything. If they are, *Inferno* is a good addition to your library.

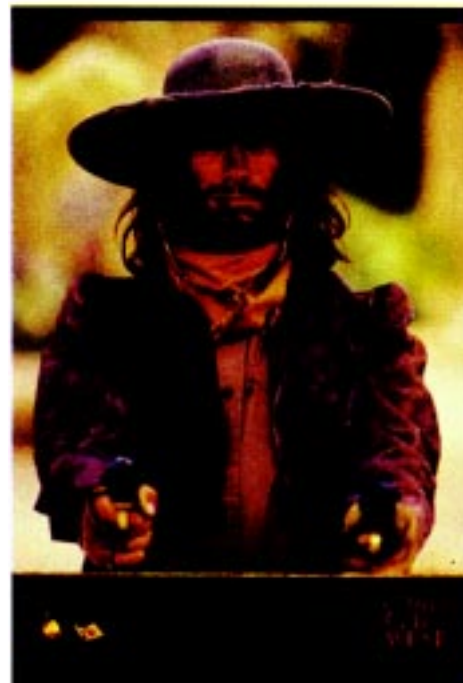
Jay: Next is a game about as far from *Inferno* as you could possibly get: Wyatt **Earp's Old West**, designed by Amazing Media, and part of Grolier Electronic Publishing's line of "games" set in historical periods. I say "games" in quotes because, though the back cover copy says there's plenty of gun-slingin' action, the product is really a multimedia encyclopedia.

Dee: Which is to be expected from Grolier, I guess. Unfortunately, a lot of software companies today think "multimedia" mixed with "clicking on things with a mouse" equals "game." You read what our alternate game reviewers, Zeb Cook, Ken

Rolston, and Paul Murphy, had to say about all that in *DRAGON*® issue #212. Well, we may not be multimedia mavens, but we are interested in the expanding frontiers of games,

Jay: But, did you notice? Nowhere on the hype-filled back cover, which extols the action and shootout potential and just briefly mentions learning about life in the Old West, does it ever use the word "game"!

Dee: Oh my gosh, you're right! How clever, and truthful, because *WEOW* truly isn't a game. There's nothing inherently wrong with an amusingly presented ency-



Wyatt Earp's Old West (Grolier Multimedia)

clopedia with some leisure-time activities, but the cover copy easily could mislead a consumer. It mentions shootouts, bandits, and gunfire three separate times, and only exploring and learning twice.

Jay: The actual product ratio is more like nine to one in favor of exploration.

Dee: Yup, unless you play the "Shootout" game included in the package. This is a little throwaway arcade shooter similar to the stand-up game *Mad-Dog McCree* (without the infrared guns).

Jay: The Shootout option wouldn't hold anyone's interest for very long, though, and it's clearly not meant to. The bulk of your entertainment is supposed to be in wandering through the town, looking at things and listening to the slow-drawlin' narrator explain about life in the Old West.

Dee: So, the burning question: balancing the idea of "having fun" with "learning," and realizing that *WEOW* is meant more for learning but intends it to be fun, How well did they do?

Jay: First let's just mention that we played the game for a while without super VGA, which this game requires. Things sure look ugly when they're in the wrong palette! We thought there was something wrong until a text box came up—then we knew something was wrong.

Dee: We could hardly read the text! You can fix this problem if you have a super VGA-capable monitor by getting a VESA driver from a fine computer store near you. This is where smaller, knowledgeable stores are useful—the clerks in a big super-store probably wouldn't know a VESA driver from a nine-iron.

Jay: Was that a golf joke?

Dee: Yes. Sorry. Won't happen again.

Jay: (Imagine a silent glare here.) Anyway, once we got a look at the true graphics, we were a little more impressed. Everything is photo-realistic, and the animation is good quality, though crammed into less-than-full-screen boxes.

Dee: That's to keep the speed up—bigger pictures chomp up lots more memory. The animation consists mostly of that narrator, standing around and scratching his head, and little snippets of motion-video like a train chugging along, obviously animated from many still shots.

Jay: These are nice touches, especially if you haven't explored this period of history before, but repetitious. Every now and then we would click to rush through the narration and get on with the wandering around.

Dee: Which is sort of like your own self-guided historic park tour. There are no other people in any of the buildings, though you can hear singing and piano-playing in the saloons—it's a ghost town. Once you're inside a structure, turn sideways and scan slowly around the room. Just like a historic park, all the tools and decorative fixtures from a typical building of the type (saloon, school, church, etc.) are there.

Jay: You'll notice as you're scanning that the cursor turns into a little eye over many items. Click on the object, and you'll get a new clip describing it, same as in animated graphic adventures like King's Quest.

Dee: Only here, the description is spoken (it never appears as text, so if you're hard of hearing, you're out of luck), and there are no real puzzles to solve.

Jay: There are toys to find, and things you can do, but not what we expected.

Dee: For instance, the minimalist rules suggest that if you find the chalk, you can use it where you'd expect to be able to use it. We were all excited when we looked in the schoolhouse, because we knew we'd solved half the "puzzle."

Jay: So we tried to think where, logically, chalk might be. We looked in a few places, waited through the narration to see if chalk was mentioned, then looked around some more. If you hate it when reviewers give away secrets, don't read the rest of this sentence: We found the chalk in the dry goods store.

Dee: I thought, all right! We rushed back to the schoolhouse—

Jay: **WEOW** provides a nifty little map to avoid tediously walking. Just click on the place you want to go and you're there.

Dee: —and I started to "use" the chalk. I figured, once my cursor turned into a piece of chalk, I could rub up and down over the chalkboard and a secret message of some kind would appear, or even a piece of a treasure map or something!

Jay: But no. It was just a draw/paint program that allowed you to freehand lines on that part of the screen. We wrote our initials. No treasure. No secret clue. It was kind of a disappointment.

Dee: Especially since the eraser didn't work, so what I scribbled randomly, rubbing all over the board to look for clues, was still there. Oops.

Jay mentioned listening through the narration earlier. Apparently the designers found other people clicking through it and, in general, ignoring the "purpose" of the game.

Jay: So they created a mechanism to reward you for listening to the tour guide's whole spiel, and for exploring every item and cranny that's explorable. When you leave a building, the narrator asks you a question whose answer you've heard somewhere in the room—if you were listening.

Dee: Some answers we knew because they were given in the first part of the narration. Others, we got lucky because we'd clicked on that particular item, and heard that particular factoid. Some we remembered from grade school, and one we got wrong because we were moving too fast and didn't hear the answer.

Jay: You get money for correct responses, essentially your score for the game—if you're into keeping score. And, of course, if you're willing to label this kind of entertainment a game.



Wyatt Earp's Old West (Grolier Multimedia)

Dee: In this case, you're making it into a game: if you gave yourself that goal, you could have fun amassing the highest dollar total. The old prospector asks different questions the second time you go back to a room, so it's not completely repetitious to play again, though he certainly gives the same tour each time.

Jay: Money has other uses than simply keeping score. You can spend it in a few places in the game, notably to make more money in the slot machine. There are other "treasures" such as keys, the combination to the safe, and the telegram, but they're all window dressing.

Dee: So, though it may seem unfair to judge an educational experience by game standards, I think it's high time that manufacturers of such software realized that 85% education and 15% fun isn't enough to keep people interested. I give **Wyatt Earp's Old West Adventure** * *1/2.

Jay: At least the narrator talks specifically about Wyatt Earp in several places. I agree about learning and fun. "Edutainment" hybrids try to convince parents that their children need the scholastic boost extra study can give them. But I'd rather play a good tabletop RPG session, and let everyone act out the Old West. There are higher cognitive functions involved in decision-making than in point-and-click and recall of facts. Of course, if you'd rather read a computer screen than an encyclopedia, **WEOW** is a pretty package. But I don't think the technology has caught up with the promise. I also give it * *1/2.

Dee: If you're a Western buff, it might be more interesting for you.

Jay: Or if your kid is. Although there's no age range specified, someone in the 8 to 12 year-old range might enjoy this product more than we did. She also is less likely to know the answers already, as an adult buff would. But even most "kid-level"

games have a faster pace.

Jay: Speaking of education and kids, our next game is a children's entertainment/educational product called **SpaceKids**, produced by Evryware Software and published by MicroProse.

Dee: Evryware? Aren't they the ones who did the **Ancient Art of War** series?

Jay: Yup. And of course MicroProse is known for flight simulators and strategy games—quite a unique combination of influences here for producing children's software!

Dee: **So**, does **SpaceKids** use the word "game" anywhere on its packaging?

Jay: Funny you should mention packaging. Most computer games come in a plain box. Some have weird-shaped pyramids and zig-zag boxes, and other eye-catching, hard-to-shelve configurations. **SpaceKids** comes shrinkwrapped with what looks like a wide picture frame. MicroProse calls this accessory a Screenie, and you can attach it with Velcro to give your monitor a facelift. When you get tired of Zeedle and Deet waving at you from the front of your Screenie, you can turn it over and draw a new scene. MicroProse has thoughtfully provided a page of character stickers to enhance your homemade composition, or decorate your lunchbox, notebook, or any other surface on which you (or your child) use stickers.

To answer your question, yes, it's a game—

Dee: —and it's a learning experience—

Jay: —and it's an interactive cartoon—

Dee: —it's three products in one!

Jay: If you sense a small bit of irony here, I think it's because we're both tired of box hype that makes every children's game into an uplifting experience worthy of college credit. Why can't there be such a thing as a game for children?

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Dee: Because parents do the buying, and publishers play on their guilt over buying such "trash."

Jay: Nonsense. Barbie is educational? Mutant turtles are educational? Some things are just toys, and play in and of itself is normal and good.

Dee: With that in mind, I found *SpaceKids* to be a fine bit of entertainment, with hardly an educational moment in sight. This was quite a switch, since most children's software I've seen bored me to tears—which I guess is only natural, *SpaceKids* was fun.

Jay: For you. You definitely enjoyed it, but I was a little mystified. The game contains no text (except for the title, "The End," and those adult-oriented final credits), and very little speaking—the characters make one- or two-word comments like "doodlezip!" and "ice cream!" As a player, you're left almost entirely on your own to figure out what the heck is going on. I suppose it's like looking for a plot in a Richard Scarry book. The fun is in describing the pictures aloud: "Here's a rabbit, and here's another rabbit, and look, this rabbit is making bricks!"

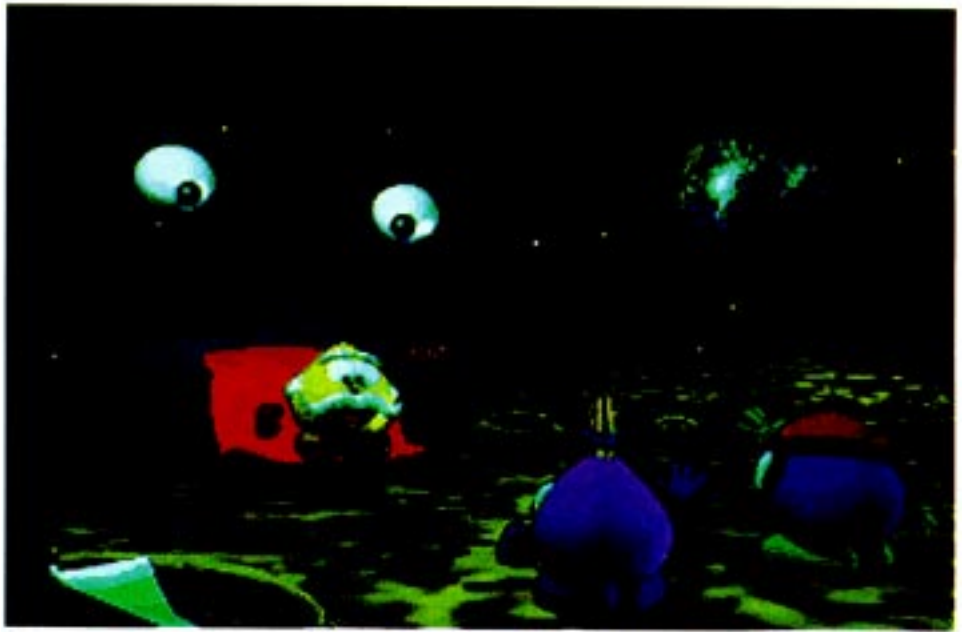
Dee: But there's more to *SpaceKids* than an interesting scene that you have to describe to yourself. I don't know . . . I just seemed to "get it." Before you play, there's a nice little rules manual of twenty pages. The first fourteen are a beautifully illustrated story book about how the Kids, Zeedle and Deet, go from the moon to Earth to look for their lost Grandpa. Grandpa is a famous space explorer who hasn't come home in too long, and the Kids are taking their saucer to go find him.

Jay: Beautiful is on the money. The illustrations are full color, hi-res computer art, and are printed on glossy paper. The text is simple without being condescending, a major plus in kid-lit, and a benefit for all the parents who will have to read it over four billion times with their children. Even if your child knows the story set-up, I'm betting she'll want you to read the book each time she plays.

Dee: Or maybe even before bedtime! It would be ironic if the story set-up turned out to be as useful as the game! There are two pages of actual instructions. To play the game, you watch the cartoon unfold until a small character icon appears in the corner of the screen. That icon is surrounded by one or more arrows pointing in different directions. If you hit the numeric keypad key corresponding to the arrow, something happens.

Jay: If you have an UP arrow on the screen, press the "8" key for action. The icon shows you which character is affected. I got that much.

Dee: You can use the mouse too, but it hardly seems necessary. Our borrowed kid-testers picked up the keyboard interface with no problem. Sometimes you're just playing—hitting the key makes the character in question jump up and down, or do a flip. Other times you control the



Spacekids (MicroProse)

direction the character goes if there's a choice, which can lead to entire paths of the cartoon that you would otherwise not see. And sometimes, when the arrows are accompanied by a question mark, you are playing a Puzzle Challenge, which requires you to figure out what to do to go on to the next scene.

Jay: That's where I ran into problems. Many times I couldn't even figure out what the challenge was, much less how to solve it. Swat the little bug, follow it, catch it under the hat, or help it? Huh? Sometimes everyone on screen got excited and I realized I'd solved . . . something. Other times I gave up and hit the "S" key, a handy feature that skips to the next scene.

Dee: This occasionally skips some animation, too, and can be a little abrupt, but in general it's a nice feature for those who are stumped or who've seen a particular scene already. I just didn't have that problem. In fact, I felt quite proud of myself for solving a couple of the puzzles. That's quite a feat for the designers, when you consider that there are only eight different keys you can press to solve a particular puzzle.

Jay: It's not that I wasn't enjoying Deet's little slurping noises as she licked strawberry off her fingers. I just didn't see how it helped Gramps. Maybe I'm too goal-oriented.

Dee: I think the point is that you have these characters, and they have a goal and there's a story and everything—but as a player, you're outside the computer watching and having fun. It's like a combination cartoon (whose plot you can change), busy-box, and game show.

Jay: You're just a kid at heart.

Dee: Aren't we all? This game reminded me of nothing so much as a huge episode of the old *Gumby* TV show. I loved that show—its stark surrealism, the weird characters doing weird things, and the

fanciful settings and unlimited possibilities. *SpaceKids* is very much like that, entertaining without being too much like anything you've ever seen before.

Jay: Some people might consider that a bad thing. If there's not enough anchor in reality, you're lost at sea.

Dee: I suppose. Or maybe it's like abstract art. Some people let their minds float . . . others find it insulting to call those three dots on the canvas "art," I found enough I could identify with in *SpaceKids* to follow and enjoy it. I loved the art—it looks like 3-D, but it's hard to say for sure—and the characters' expressions and motions. The way Zeedle's little round space-kid body hunches up its "shoulders" as he determinedly marches forward to try the tonsil-puzzle again was priceless (each time you fail, he reacts a different way). I loved the humor and even the puzzles. And I loved that an adult can enjoy playing or watching a child play without thinking "educational and boring" all the time. I give it * * * * *

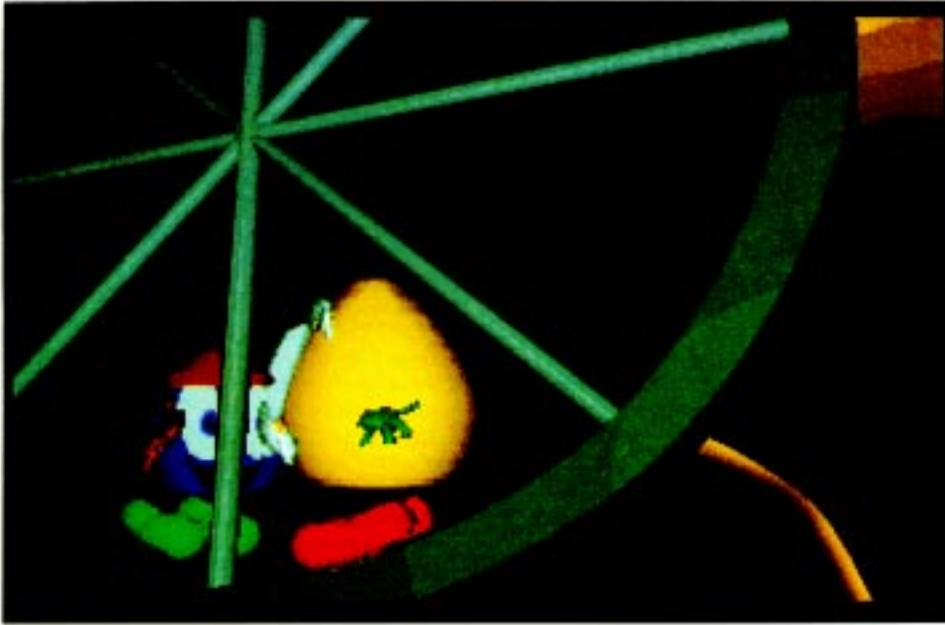
Jay: The art was good and the characters cute, but that's not enough to make adult-me play it over again. I'll go **1/2.

Dee: Have our opinions ever been this divided on a game before?

Jay: Not as much as this. I guess maybe it means that *SpaceKids* won't have that broad, breakthrough appeal, but it could be a cult favorite.

Dee: Like *Blade Runner* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Only time will tell. Speaking of *Blade Runner*, imagine that rainy, dark, *film noir* atmosphere, and you'll have a good idea of what the designers of our next game, *Dreamweb*, were trying to accomplish.

Jay: *Dreamweb* is an interactive graphic adventure, like the *King's Quest* games or *Day of the Tentacle*. It's set in the not-too-distant future, a sort of cyberpunk alter-



Spacekids (MicroProse)

nate reality, in which there's a worldwide infonet and a very few other futuristic trappings.

Dee: This comes back to what you were saying about science fiction: By not setting the story in the present day, the designers get away with a few odd pieces of machinery, but in general *Dreamweb* has no feel for science or the future. The main line of the plot involves the concept that when we dream, we actually enter an alternate world.

Jay: And that's fantasy, disconnected from whatever era the game takes place in. In the story, some Evil Guy has taken over the Dreamweb, which means that soon we'll all have nightmares every time we fall asleep. "Only one man on Earth can save us."

Dee: Though it wasn't explained very well why our particular hero was The Guy, other than the old prophecy business of "he's the chosen one."

Jay: Maybe it's explained later on in the story—we didn't play it all the way through, after all.

Dee: It's difficult to play a game like this to conclusion for review; typically, graphic adventures take upwards of 20 hours to play. But you can get a clear idea of how much fun the game is in the first three or so hours.

Jay: And it took us about that long to realize that *Dreamweb* just wasn't going to be any fun.

Dee: Our first clue was the interface: the part that allows a player to interact with the game. This game's is frustratingly clumsy. In a game that relies heavily on using the interface, that's nail number one in the coffin.

Jay: Yup, You start the game looking top-down at an apartment. Your character walks around on screen, depending on where you click. The blow-up window to the left shows a close-up of whatever your

mouse is poised over.

Dee: Only trouble is, since the art is done to look good in that long, above-ground view, the close-ups are little more than an unidentifiable mass of pixels.

Jay: At least you can tell something is there, which is a big improvement over *King's Quest VI* with its three-pixel-wide treasures.

Dee: True, though you were much better at spotting items of interest. I could imagine playing the game alone and getting stymied because I didn't realize there was an important item in the room.

Jay: That's a bad thing. The next problem is the way you interact with objects. If you click to examine something, an interim screen shows the object along with a brief description, USE sometimes appears at the top of the screen; if so, you can . . . USE the item. Sometimes you know how you expect it to work, and sometimes you have to USE it with some other item or location. Other times, something unexpected happens.

Dee: The generic USE verb is old-fashioned. A lot of games give you the choice of several different verbs that are more specific (and more challenging, since you have to know what you want to happen in order to choose the right verb).

Jay: You click on an item to take it into your inventory. This brings you to the 30-slot inventory screen, which is a royal pain-and-a-half to use.

Dee: Again, primitive stuff. Limited inventory brings us back to the bad old days of picking up, putting down, going back for the thing you need, etc.

Jay: What makes *Dreamweb* worse is that five of your inventory slots hold such idiotic mundanes as your left shoe, your right shoe, your pants, your shirt, and your sunglasses.

Dee: Yes, and the only way to "put on" your sunglasses is to drop them, find them

amidst the pixel wash, and USE them, since the USE verb doesn't appear directly from the inventory slots.

Jay: Argh. It was amusing, in a sick way, when we discovered you could drop the sunglasses again and still be "wearing" them.

Dee: Maybe that's the designers' way of getting stuff out of your inventory. Maybe you're supposed to drop them after wearing them.

Jay: It sure looked like a bug to me. How could you be wearing them and leave them lying on the floor like that?

Dee: Chalk up another one to poor interface. A final example is the data cartridges. To get information in the game, you must put a cartridge into the infonet machine, then go through a laborious boot-up and password system.

Jay: Once you're booted up, you have to drop a cartridge, pick it up to USE, and USE it with the machine. This requires going in and out of several layers of interface—and there are a half-dozen cartridges with "clues" on them scattered around your own room! Your girlfriend has a stash, too. . . .

Dee: Tedium replacing gameplay is a common theme, both in this kind of game and in "role-playing adventures" like *Bard's Tale* and the *Ultimas*.

Jay: Then there were problems with the story. The little diary that comes with the game is supposed to help you understand what's going on, and include clues. Instead, it's long on atmosphere, and short on usefulness. Sure, there's a code number on the last page, and the rock star's name is mentioned. But there's little to connect with those monks in the intro animation.

Dee: So here we are, wandering around various locations in the city with no real purpose, struggling with the interface. After almost three hours of play, we finally came across a puzzle.

Jay: We needed to get to the inaccessible penthouse floor of a hotel—though I'm still not quite sure why.

Dee: It was to see some guy mentioned in our data cartridges. Our own floor-key wouldn't take us up that high, so we needed to jimmy open the locking mechanism. The clues pointed to a slim, sharp tool.

Jay: We knew there was a screwdriver elsewhere, but we hadn't taken it since we didn't have room in our inventory. So we went and got it, discarding one of the many Coke cans you can pick up, and brought it back to the hotel.

Dee: At which point we were able to open the access panel! At last, after three hours of playing, a feeling of triumph!

Jay: Except that there was more to the puzzle, and we needed some combination to enter the penthouse floor.

Dee: That was the point at which my spirit broke. The story was muddy, the character had no reason to be doing anything he was doing, the interface was poor—

Jay: —and to get any more information

we needed to slog through piles of data cartridges and sift through red-herring junk for something of real value.

Dee: I get the feeling that Ken from issue #212's review column would have liked this game. Despite the clumsiness and the lack of play value, the one thing this product wasn't short on was atmosphere. I give it *½.

Jay: Okay, I'll grant it atmosphere. When you travel between locations, it's dark and rainy. The bar you work at is squalid and dirty, as is your apartment. Your girlfriend's apartment is cleaner, but still shows that everyone is oppressed and unhappy. But grim atmosphere does not make a good game. I'll say *½ also.

Dee: We had trouble with the compatibility of our sound card, but I'm told that the music is very moody and fun to listen to.

Jay: That pretty much defines the theme of this column, dovetailing with what I was saying earlier: the makers of these games have decided that science fiction is defined by the science. Taking a broad definition, that includes setting, music, atmosphere, and situation.

Dee: Ditto the Western product: you're

supposed to steep yourself in the atmosphere of the setting and situations.

Jay: But they've forgotten two-thirds of the label: "science fiction games" also should have the fiction part—the story, the continuity, the characters, and the drama—and the **game**.

Dee: That's something that eludes plenty of publishers. But in some of these products, the designers seem to be hoping that you won't notice the lack of a game because of the amount of atmosphere that's poured into the product.

Jay: I'd say in all these cases.

Dee: I disagree, in that **Inferno** was a decent game with some true innovations, and I really enjoyed the many nice touches of **SpaceKids**.

Jay: Proving that, for some people, atmosphere really can be mistaken for gameplay.

Dee: That's your interpretation. I say both those products were good games.

Jay: Speaking of science-fiction games with plenty of atmosphere, what about **Wing Commander III**?

Dee: This is just a brief commentary, because we didn't play the game, we just looked at the demo disk and saw someone

else playing for a few minutes. I thought I'd mention the product because of its amazing cinematic qualities.

Jay: And cinematic stars! I saw Malcolm McDowell, John Rhys-Davies . . .

Dee: And a host of others! The intro "animations" and scenes between missions are a real **tour de force**, and on a reasonably fast machine, they don't have the jumpiness that most full-motion video has . . . and the windows are bigger than postage stamps!

Jay: How exactly did they do it?

Dee: I don't know, but the rumor is that a three- or four-million-dollar development budget doesn't hurt.

Jay: Wow! That's more than some movie budgets! Considering most computer games are developed for between \$50,000 and \$500,000, that's an amazing amount of money to spend.

Dee: Maybe they'll make it back . . . maybe they won't. But it sure enhances Origin Systems' reputation, and leads the way for future add-ons, movie deals, and product tie-ins. We'll keep you posted about what we hear.

Jay: That's it this month—next time, we'll take a look at **SimTower** and the waiting-for-the-elevator blues.

Ω

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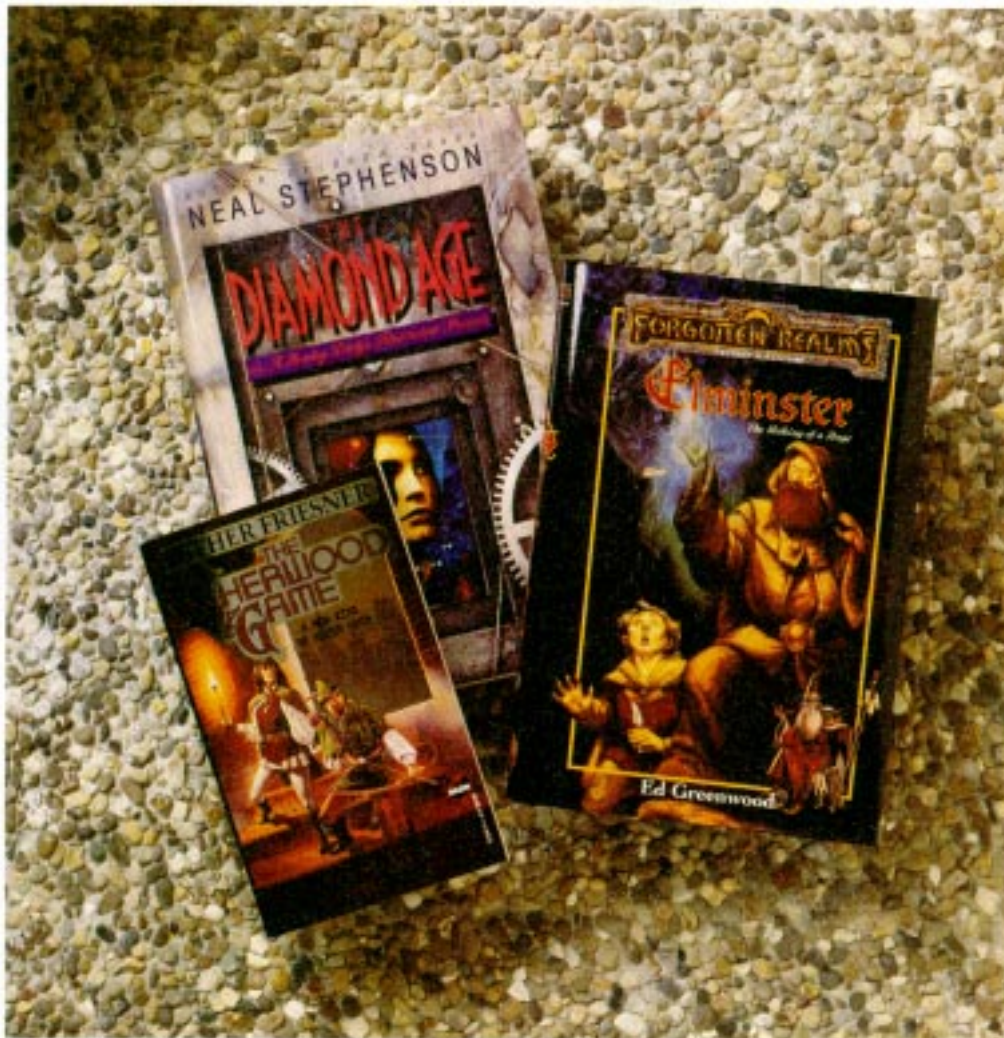
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New takes on Robin Hood, Merlin, and Victorian England



THE SHERWOOD GAME

Esther Friesner

Baen 0-671-87641-4 \$5.99

Esther Friesner has long been a mistress of sharp-witted comic fantasy, and more recently has demonstrated a solid grasp of harder-edged science fiction. Now, in this latest book, she's combined both to produce a virtual-reality swashbuckler with a streak of thoughtful intelligence that neatly complements the brisk tone of the adventure.

The Sherwood Game is the brainchild of VR programmer Carl Sherwood, who's been a Robin Hood fan for most of his life. Trouble is, the corporation he works for doesn't believe in marketing computer games, so he has to work on the Game after hours and hide the software deep in the company mainframes. But just as the Game is beginning to take on a finished quality, chaos intervenes. Co-worker Laurie Pincus catches him in the act, then offers to keep his secret if he'll let her help with the programming. Which would be fine—except that Carl's electronic Robin Hood has acquired a mind and will of his own, and before long he and his Merrie Men have escaped cyberspace entirely and are wreaking undercover havoc in the real world.

Friesner, of course, plays the situation for all the comedy it's worth, which is quite a bit. (Imagine Alan-a-Dale as a country-western singer whose monster hit is a twang-ified version of "Greensleeves".) At the same time, she wraps a solid layer of suspense around Carl's tricky professional position, mounts a cogent if hurried exploration of the ethics surrounding electronic intelligences, and drops in a nasty subplot involving an exotic twist on child abuse.

That's a difficult mix of material, and one easily mishandled. But Friesner is up to the challenge; each element of the story weaves in and out of the others, so that individual plot threads complement each other rather than competing for attention. And though the novel never quite loses its irreverent quality, the serious issues explored are treated with depth and respect. There are genuinely harrowing moments as the tale progresses, and the climax is a superbly executed combination of high drama, ingeniously sprung puns, and apt homage.

Readers who pick up *The Sherwood Game* for the lively humor and energetic swashbuckling won't be disappointed. But the novel's added dimension is what makes it noteworthy. SF and fantasy has plenty of writers who are popular, and not a few who produce works that are good in the literary sense. With this book, Esther Friesner bids fair to become one of the few who belong squarely in both camps.

ARENA

William R. Forstchen

HarperPrism 0-06-105424-0 \$4.99

WHISPERING WOODS

Clayton Emery

HarperPrism 0-06-105418-6 \$4.99

Consider for a moment the following exercise in deductive anthropology: you've hired six people off the street, given them each a camera and ten rolls of film, and sent each one off to a different continent with instructions to take pictures of as much as they can before the film runs out. (The last one out has to cover both Australia and Antarctica.) The resulting 1400-odd photographs, each with a line of description scribbled on the back, are then stuffed into a space probe and sent on a one-way trip out of the solar system—where they will become the sole body of knowledge from which a hypothetical alien must extract five thousand years or so of human history.

It's also a nearly perfect parallel to the challenge facing William Forstchen and Clayton Emery, as the first literary explorers of Dominia, the setting of the MAGIC: THE GATHERING* card game from Wizards of the Coast. So it's perhaps no wonder that the first two MTG novels are a bit rough around the edges.

Unlike chroniclers of events in a traditional role-playing milieu, the aspiring MTG novelist doesn't have a campaign file full of maps, character sketches, adventure plots, and other background materials to draw on. Nor can storytellers assume readers will have such information. Yet they also must attempt to work as consistently as they can within the jigsaw-puzzle framework of the world loosely defined by all those cards.

One is therefore not surprised to find wizardly duels—the keystone of the MTG game—playing prominent roles in both Forstchen's and Emery's tales. If anything, the duel-motif is perhaps too prominent. *Arena's* plot concerns a city whose chief reason for existence is an annual series of magical combat trials, and the wizardly characters in *Whispering Woods* spend much of their time battling rival wizards for little apparent reason. And in both cases, there are sequences where one almost can see the cards being played in the background.

That recalls the old criticism of gaming fiction in general: that replaying gaming sessions in prose frequently produces storytelling that's mediocre at best and painful at worst. Yet at the same time, it's hard to fault Forstchen and Emery for drawing on MTG's established bestiary and spell systems in crafting novels ostensibly derived from the game. After all, quality game-based fiction logically ought to evoke the flavor of the subject game, and where MTG is concerned, there's nowhere but the cards to look for that flavor.

In fact, both novels are credible, compe-

tent adventure yarns. The pacing in Forstchen's *Arena* is tight, the combats are well-staged if a touch repetitive, and the tone as brittle and laconic as one might expect in a tale full of bitter, duel-hardened sorcerers. His characters, if not precisely likeable, are sharply and effectively defined. And while few of the twists Forstchen offers are major surprises, they do keep readers just off-balance enough not to lose interest in the proceedings.

Whispering Woods is a good deal more leisurely and lighter in mood, though it's far from being either whimsical or quiet. Where Forstchen focuses his tale squarely on Dominia's wizards, Emery concentrates on the ordinary people whose lives are touched, and often tossed aside, by wizardly duels. Or at least they look ordinary enough as the novel opens. By the end of the book, billed as first in a trilogy, we know enough about Gull and his peculiar sister Greensleeves to be sure that wandering wizard Towser didn't add them to his entourage by accident.

But although the novels both succeed well enough at telling rousing stories while evoking the unique qualities of the MTG game, neither does an especially impressive job of extracting a richly realized world from the scraps of lore available on the cards. Of the two, Forstchen tries harder, but his ritualized, city-dwelling sorcerer clans draw on far more of the game-system's diverse magical resources than seem justified by their own narrow worldviews. Emery, meanwhile, lets the very idea of random, purposeless spell battles drive part of his plot, taking the idea as a given rather than trying to explain it.

Both novels also suffer badly from inept and inconsistent naming conventions. Forstchen's characters bear an odd mixture of names ranging from vaguely Biblical (Hammen, Uriah) to modern English (Garth, Norreen) to generic fantasy-speak (Zarel, Varena). The mixture is jarring, and works against Forstchen's efforts to establish atmosphere. Emery's choices aren't much better; though they're more consistent with each other, evoking a dim sense of "early British Isles," the tone they set is informal and earthy, quite unlike the air of high, distant history evoked by the MTG cards themselves. ("Greensleeves" is a particularly unfortunate coinage.)

In the final analysis, though, it's hard to be too critical of Dominia's first two novelists where matters of worldbuilding are concerned. *Arena* and *Whispering Woods* are reasonable adventure tales and plausible evocations of the game from which they're derived. That's not bad, and it's probably as much as—or more than—one could expect of novel-length fiction at this point in MTG's development. But as the canon of novels grows, readers should hope that a more coherent, compelling portrait of Dominia emerges than that painted by these early chronicles.

THE HALLELUJAH TRAIL

Bill Gulick
Berkeley 0-425-14293-0 \$4.99

I can't remember now when I first read *The Hallelujah Trail*, but it must have been a good many years ago, and I do recall having checked a nondescript copy of the book out of my local library. So it was a pleasant surprise not long ago to find a shiny new paperback edition on the rack at a local drugstore, right there at the top of the Western section.

Western section?

Trust me on this one. Bill Gulick's novel is not your ordinary Western. There's no sheriff, no gunfighter, no itinerant gambler, no cattle drive, no railroad baron, and no soulful guitar player anywhere to be found in its pages. Yet despite lacking all these traditional Western-novel ingredients, *The Hallelujah Trail* is arguably one of the genre's classic works, and a thoroughly entertaining read into the bargain. And if you happen to own a copy of TSR's BOOT HILL® game, I dare you to read the book and not be tempted to steal the plot for a campaign adventure.

The novel's framing story involves a one-time journalist who's reporting, after ten years of investigative work, to President Ulysses Grant on the mysterious disappearance of an eighty-wagon cargo train along the South Platte River. The train's cargo: 1,600 barrels of prime whiskey and 2,700 cases of first-class French champagne, being hauled to Denver in anticipation of a long, snowbound winter.

As one might imagine, that sort of cargo tends to attract a great deal of attention. Wagon-leader Frank Wallingham has therefore requested an extra security detachment from U.S. Army Colonel Thaddeus Gearhart. The local Indian population, under the leadership of one Chief Five Barrels, has every intention of making off with the liquor under the very noses of the Army and the wagoners. The Denver miners who've ordered all that whiskey, naturally concerned about the Indian threat, have formed a Citizen's Militia and sent it out to reinforce the Army and make sure nothing happens to their winter's supply of liquid refreshment. And it just happens that a noted suffragist and Temperance leader is in the area, marshaling women for miles around in an effort to stamp out the influence of the demon alcohol—and what better way to do that than to pour the entire cargo of the Wallingham Train out onto the Western plains?

Bill Gulick stage-manages the resulting parades and altercations with great precision and cheerful wit. Colonel Gearhart and his aide, Captain Paul Slater, are crisply efficient and carefully neutral. Oracle Jones, leader of the Citizen's Militia, is as wily a character as any two Mavericks. And Cora Templeton Massingale has perfected the art of using politeness and misdirection as tools of war. It's a pleasure watching each of these expert tacticians

trying to one-up the others, all the while looking out for the extra hazards and opportunities posed by the Indians, the Irish teamsters (didn't I mention the Irish teamsters?), and the local geography.

There's both suspense and understated comedy in plenty before the fate of all that whiskey and champagne is finally resolved, and it's to Gulick's credit that nobody emerges from the tale an unqualified hero or villain. Some readers may find the treatment of the Indian raiders a touch stereotypical, but it is not out of character for the time and place, and Gulick weaves such a good-natured yarn that it's hard to be too offended. (He also claims that the tale is based on an actual historical incident, though no doubt the fiction is rather better-organized than the reality.)

If you happen to be a fan of Westerns, *The Hallelujah Trail* should be a welcome diversion from formula, a clever story that's both serious and gently satirical and successful on both counts. If you're not, try the novel anyway. The tactical interplay is as well-choreographed as that in many military fantasy or SF adventures, and the wry humor is irresistibly appealing.

And if you still don't believe me, look up the movie version on videotape. It's one of those rare adaptations that does justice to the novel and a bit more besides.

MERLIN'S BONES

Fred Saberhagen
Tor 0-312-85563-X \$22.95

The recent boomlet in Arthurian novels shows no sign of slowing its pace, but Fred Saberhagen's entry into the lists is easily one of the strangest of the lot. Then again, considering Saberhagen's revisionist treatments of Frankenstein and Dracula, perhaps the oddness of *Merlin's Bones* is to be expected.

Despite the title, Merlin himself is the book's major character, though he spends most of the novel as the youthful "Amby"—short for Ambrosius. His companions, a small traveling band of performers, are on the run after the wrong people see a show satirizing a local warlord. But when the group takes refuge in a ruined castle on a cliff, odd things begin to happen. For the warlord is one of those seeking to snatch a kingdom from the chaos left in the wake of King Arthur's seeming death, the castle may once have been Camelot, and the magical bones of the wizard Merlin may be hidden somewhere in the tunnels beneath the ruins.

Someone, it seems, is playing games with time. Vikings and a Druid priest appear, intent on fetching Amby and one of his companions to Stonehenge and the old king Vortigern, though Vortigern has been dead for a generation or more. And far ahead, in the early 21st century, a research scientist for an obscure foundation finds her laboratory invaded by an old man with a wizard's staff, by a compelling sorceress and her hunting cat, and by one Mordred and his troop of henchmen. And

when Dr. Elaine Brusen finally flees the scene, the ambulance in the parking lot proves to have a certain royal passenger—the reports of whose death have been, as the saying goes, greatly exaggerated.

All this is much less confusing than this summary might indicate, though it is clear that there are indeed mysteries within mysteries at work. Saberhagen's narrative is surprisingly linear for all the time-shifting, and there's an otherworldly quality to the tale that, oddly, adds dimension to it while lifting it smoothly out of reality. And while the various factions' motives are frequently obscure, Saberhagen makes each adversary seem consistent and convincing despite the vagueness. Most obscure of all is the mysterious Fisher King, whose purposes remain shadowy until the book's last line and whose very identity is its own minor enigma.

As Arthurian legend, *Merlin's Bones* is both knowledgeable and deeply weird. Saberhagen displays a thorough knowledge of the familiar lore, but his adaptation of the material takes a couple of striking yet defensible left turns from tradition. The science-fictional elements are exotic but plausibly integrated into the whole, and the plot stays on a reasonably straight course throughout.

One caveat: there's clearly more to come. The ending is not exactly a cliff-hanger, but most of the competitors for ultimate power remain active at book's end, and the aforementioned last line sets a brand new chesspiece on the board. But this is definitely one of Saberhagen's most intriguing tales to date, and well worth a look for those interested in the Matter of Britain.

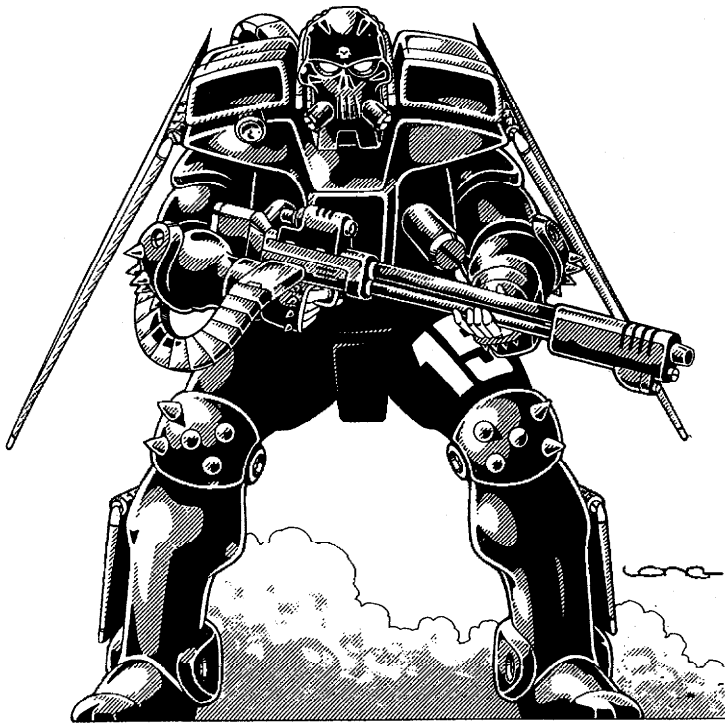
THE DIAMOND AGE

Neal Stephenson
Bantam 0-553-09609-5 \$22.95

The *Diamond Age* is one of those science fiction novels for which "science fiction" is an insufficient description. Imagine a cutting-edge cyberpunk yarn as written by Charles Dickens, cross it with a fairy tale sprinkled with dashes of Asimovian logic and Chinese detective fiction, and add a touch of countercultural color, and only then do you begin to appreciate the dimensions of Neal Stephenson's convoluted chronicle.

The time is the Information Age of the decade after tomorrow, when nanotechnology has made nearly all things possible and one's culture is as much a matter of avocation as it is of birth. Thus the sun has risen again on the spirit of the British Empire—but members of the wealthy New Victorian "phyle" must look warily out their windows at a restored Confucianist Middle Kingdom in the old city of Shanghai, and a dangerous buffer zone exists between the two communities.

The players are numerous and fascinating: John Hackworth, a brilliant but easily flustered nanotechnician; Nell, a young girl whose mother has little or no money



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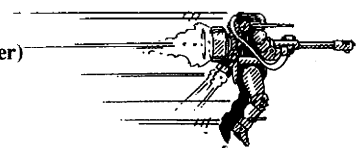
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and consistently bad taste in men; Doctor X, a shadowy Oriental scientist with a most unexpected plan to remake the world; Miranda, a “ractor,” or virtual-reality actress, who unexpectedly casts herself in a role that changes other lives as well as her own. Stephenson draws all these characters and more with keen perception and a versatile style, as his narrative switches from thriller to bedtime story to travelogue to social drama and back to thriller again.

The object connecting the various plots and counterplots is the *Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*, Hackworth's one-of-a-kind improvement on interactive books that accidentally becomes Nell's storyteller, tutor, and surrogate parent in one. Everyone wants the Primer, but circumstance and protocol join forces to see that the prototype falls into Nell's hands and stays there while the powers moving around her lurk worriedly in her shadow.

Thus parts of Stephenson's novel recount Hackworth's efforts to regain control of the book, for his own benefit and that of a series of employers, while others consist of extracts from the Primer itself, with yet other sections interspersed to follow additional plot threads. Impressively, the contrasting milieus of high-tech intrigue and plain-spoken talespinning don't grate against each other as one might expect. Instead, they neatly complement one another in a narrative that is polite yet brisk, straightforward yet subtle.

Only as the climax approaches and the now-adult Nell's destiny begins to reveal itself does the polish begin to flake off of the novel. Stephenson rather abruptly raises the stakes of the game his characters are playing, leading up to a final decision whose consequences are under-explored and the vague sense that much of what has gone before has been largely distraction.

But if *The Diamond Age* falters slightly as issue-driven science fiction, it's still a fascinating Chinese puzzle of a novel in many other respects, and the flaw is the sort of flaw that provokes lively discussion without seriously damaging the story. And it's surprisingly accessible for all its complexity. Weird it may be, but it's also lively and challenging reading.

DRAGON MOON

Chris Claremont and Beth Fleisher
Bantam 0-553-37448-6 \$14.95

If nothing else, *Dragon Moon* is a triumph of packaging over substance. It's a handsome if rather skinny large-format paperback, with cover art toned and colored to suggest something classier than your average graphic novel—and indeed, the interior illustrations are accent rather than focus, though perhaps a bit repetitive in subject. They are not, however, worth the price of the book by themselves, and the brief novel against which they're laid is a classic example of a good idea executed with a spectacular lack of success.

Although the Society for Creative Anach-

ronism is carefully not mentioned by name, it's eminently clear that collaborators Claremont and Fleisher have set their tale at one of the SCA's larger annual mock wars, wherein Cassandra Dunreith expects to have a rare good time whacking enemy medievalists with her rattan sword. But cheerful mayhem isn't on the agenda, not when personal grudges and “kingdom” politics surface, and not when someone casts an old spell that causes genuine ancient ghost-warriors to ride out of the fog in quest of real blood. As a premise, it's pure dynamite. But though Claremont and Fleisher get the SCA window-dressing right, the story they tell fails to convince on three critical counts.

First, while the sword-lore and costuming are eminently credible, the societal politics simply don't make sense. After a trial by combat in which Cass' opponent retains the group's crown only by deceit, we're told that the entire gathered membership more or less abandons Cass to stew by herself—this even though the treacherous King is supposedly widely disliked while Cass has previously been much-admired. This is patently absurd; in real life, such an affair would be the talk of the camp, with emotions raised to a fever pitch and both principals promptly surrounded by their respective partisans.

Problem number two is that nobody, but nobody, believes Cass when she reports magical entities prowling the countryside. Considering that she's telling perfect truth, this strains credulity well past the breaking point. Claremont and Fleisher apparently would have readers believe that not one other participant in the War has any psychic sensitivity whatsoever. Given the origins, membership, and outside interests of the average anachronist group, this is awfully hard to swallow—especially since for the novel's purposes, there really is magic in the world.

The third error of craft is more subtle. Cass Dunreith, as she's defined by the authors, is a strong personality and a lone wolf of sorts, solitary by choice and temperament. Yet the events that define her key actions in the novel are driven not by internal conflict, but by external forces. The decisions she makes don't fit the persona Claremont and Fleisher have created, seeming more the result of authorial stage-managing than of genuine growth and maturation.

It doesn't help that the final plot twist makes the entire tale seem no more than the prologue of a more ambitious, more complex epic, with a promise of high adventure made but not fulfilled. *Dragon Moon* is inexplicable enough on its own; as the prospective beginning of a series, it's an expensive and mystifying exercise in illogic.

ELMINSTER:THE MAKING OF A MAGE

Ed Greenwood
TSR 1-56076-936-X \$16.95

I don't think I want to know what Elminster of Shadowdale would say if he heard

someone claiming to be a “fan” of his doings and person. Truth, however, compels me to admit that I've followed his appearances in DRAGON® Magazine and in Realmslore over the past decade or so with considerable interest and enjoyment. A book-length tale of Elminster's origins, therefore, was a prospect much too intriguing to ignore when it arrived in the mail. And as it turns out, the published chronicle should please most other interested students of the Old Mage's life and career.

Readers may be startled to learn that wizardry appears not to have been Elminster's first career choice, having been preceded in the young man's life by turns at swordcraft and at expert thievery. But although biographer Ed Greenwood's account at last confirms the persistent rumor that Elminster was originally the child of royalty, kingship proves not to be among the Old Mage's previous vocations. Instead, the Old Mage's formative years were spent in a long, slow quest for revenge, directed against the cabal of wizard-lords who sought out and killed his parents even after the couple had abandoned their rank for a rural life.

Greenwood does not provide sources for the material he records—mildly remarkable, considering that of the principals in the tale, Elminster alone survives in the Realms of the present, and that Elminster never has been known to speak so openly of his own history. His narrative, however, is smooth and confident, conforming in spirit as well as knowledge to what is known of the Old Mage. Elminster's companions in his travels are described in less detail but with no less even-handedness; the focus here, as it should be, is on the mage himself.

The shape of the adventures recorded is remarkably well-focused for what is essentially a straightforward biography. Two threads dominate the story: the previously noted quest for vengeance, and Elminster's gradual awakening to the power and potential of the magic surrounding him. In this regard, Elminster is a rare specimen among archmages, as he proves to have been largely self-taught, with even his tenure under the shadowy wizardess Myrjala spent largely in independent study.

The present volume is not, of course, a complete account of the Old Mage's life; such a record would doubtless extend to a full shelf of books. But it fulfills the tale promised by its title, taking Elminster from youth to maturity and to the beginnings of his role as guardian of the Realms. Followers of the wizard's doings should find it a pleasant and enlightening tale, well-suited to Ed Greenwood's strengths as a storyteller and distinctive among chronicles of would-be sorcerers' lessons in magic.

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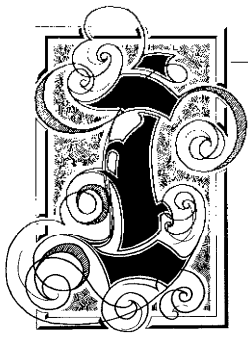
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In its short history, the village of Thingy had suffered many indignities, from the misspelling of the founder's name¹ on the royal land grant, to the hammer whack that struck the new mayor's thumb and thus impelled the last iron pin into its gates.* That singular whack christened the new gates, confirmed the new mayor, and elevated Thingy from a backwater³ village to a young city.⁴

Despite the importance of that whack, Mayor Fitsbot had to bite his puffy lips and squint his piggish eyes to keep from shaking the wounded thumb or, worse, sucking it and weeping in front of the watching crowd.⁵ Instead, the new mayor added insult to injury by jamming the swelling thing into his silken waistband⁶ and trundling onto a tobacco crate provided by the town's merchant.⁷

From that lofty vantage, he saw the lovely little city spread out beyond the newly finished gates, which were done up in gold paint that made the iron spikes look majestic. He then turned and gazed out over the crowd of villagers—er, citizens—before him, who awaited his pronouncement.

"People of Thingy, behold the new, the glorious, the magnificent Thingy—" He'd not intended to end there. He'd meant to say "the magnificent Thingy gates," but a bit of phlegm in his throat edited his speech drastically.

The citizens, thinking he meant "thingy" rather than "Thingy," filled in the silence by clapping and hollering their approval. An expectoration later, Fitsbot tried again. "We are now the City of Thingy!" Thankful that at last he could spit out something verbal, the mayor joined the ovation that followed. "Henceforward, all who enter or leave Thingy by the west road shall pass through these splendid gates, which will be locked at half after eleven every night ."

"When do we get a wall?" shouted a malcontent, dampening everyone's mood by reminding them that the locked gates could be merely walked around.

"When we feel we need it," the new mayor responded.⁸ "And who needs a wall of stone when we have a line of stout-hearted men selected as the city's new militia!"

Again came the applause, and the three militiamen—less-than-capable-looking middle-aged farmers—posed and flexed their muscles (such as they were) in the adoration.

The first man, Kezer, was nearly Fitsbot's equal in girth, his greasy gut pouching out the buttoned front of his uniform. The only thing that cut the cloud of flies in orbit about him was the sterilizing tang of whiskey. The second, Jalab, was a tall, thin, severe farmer with a head two sizes too large for his body and a wide mouth that rarely opened. The third, Snee, was a short, narrow schoolteacher with long, long feet. Standing side by side like that—round Kezer, straight Jalab, and long-footed Snee—they seemed to spell out the word "oil," which perhaps was fitting in that their hair was universally greased with the stuff.

Right through this show of bravado and civic pride, and as though the crowd in their cheering tens were not blocking the path, an old crone approached down the west road and pushed brusquely through the people. To make mat-

Where Thingies Rush In

By J. Robert King

Illustrations by Scott Rosema

ters worse, in her scuttling haste the frail old woman knocked over one of the preening militiamen and kept going, right to the threshold of the city. And across.

The jubilation suddenly faltered, and there was a gasp of amazed horror from the crowd.

Fitsbot, red-faced beneath his black brows, spun about on his crate and shouted, "Old crone! How dare you!"

She turned to face him, and into the silence dribbled out four words: "How dare I what?"

"How dare you pass through our gates without permission!" cried the new mayor indignantly.

She looked taken aback by this, her withered face lifting and her cataracted eyes tracing with disinterest the ornate curves and stolid bars of the gate. Four more words: "Oh, hadn't seen it."

"How could you not see it?" shouted the new mayor.

She gestured with an old claw of a hand. "It's not a proper gate. It's got no heads piked. A gate's gotta have heads piked or it's not a proper gate."

She turned to continue on, but Fitsbot cried out, "Perhaps we'll pike your head as the first."

The named head was shaking now, and it clucked in amusement. "You'd not be wanting my head. You need a good 'un. Somebody important—somebody like the most powerful wizard in the world. You'd not want to curse the town with a bad head, now would you?"

These words struck a chord, a dissonant chord, with the citizens. Though it was forbidden to use the word "curse" to refer to the history of mishaps in Thingy, cursed was exactly how most of the villagers felt. And now, the villagers-turned-citizens turned in turn to their new leader, Mayor Fitsbot, for a solution to the obvious deficiency of the gate. How could he have been so foolish? Forgetting the piked head was like forgetting the lock and key. The citizens were not pleased.

"Of course, we would not settle for your head, old hag"—Fitsbot stalled, looking about the crowd to see if any other present heads might serve. Realizing that he himself owned the most important head in town, Fitsbot decided to try another tactic. His eyes passed over his deputies, yet brushing the dust from the comrade who'd been bowled over—"for my deputies and I have our eyes set on a very prize head, indeed!"

"Whose head?" came the dissident's voice.

"Well, it's . . . it's rather a surprise," the mayor unsuccessfully demurred.

"Whose?" came more shouts.

Fitsbot's typically red features turned scarlet with anger, and his hands fisted on his hips. This was always a dangerous moment for him, this fury, for in its crimson grip he would say almost anything, such as, "The head of Warlock Periwinkle."

Warlock Periwinkle?! The idea sent a sensation through the crowd. None had ever dared utter such a thing, for it was said the warlock could peer right into sleeping minds and learn all they had done and said and thought.

"Periwinkle. Now *his* head would be a prize!" shouted one citizen.

"Yeah, run him out of that mountain cave where he lives!" cried another.

"No more purple haze!"

"No more fear!"

The crone, too, seemed impressed. "Ah, now *that's* a head for you. Pike him, and not a one of you'll be cursed again!"

A cheer followed her claim, and for once the whole crowd, aside from the cowering deputies, seemed overjoyed.

It was one of these less-than-thrilled deputies—Jalab, in fact—who whispered fiercely into the mayoral ear, "What do you mean, we'll pike the head of Periwinkle?"

Fitsbot leaned toward him and, with that smarmy overconfidence of puffed-up politicians, said, "He's already piked on the gates of Lindath."

Lindath was everything Thingy wished it were: populous, powerful, pleasantly named, and protected by not just a gate but an actual wall. Perhaps this good fortune had to do with its placement on the hospitable plains, or perhaps it had to do with strong blood and clear heads. This last is what good Lindathians would claim, for their king was strongly opposed to drink, and his laws included confiscation of any drink from travelers.

It was the one thing Thingy had that Lindathians⁹ wanted.

Mayor Fitsbot and his three dubious deputies rode slowly up the city approach, sitting aback their mounts—a plow horse and three donkeys.¹⁰ Yes, Thingy had little to offer while Lindath had much, including the piked head of Warlock Periwinkle.

They could already see said head atop a spear in turn atop the central tower of the city gate. Old Mage Periwinkle's long white beard and stringy white hair blew in the evening breezes, and his wide eyes were fixed in such an expression of shock that they seemed to stare right at the four liberators as they approached.¹¹

Mayor Fitsbot turned in his saddle¹² and addressed his lowly entourage: "Now, remember. Once they've downed the whiskey, it's off the mounts, into the clothes, and up the stairs."

One of the deputies, studded Kezer of the great paunch, mournfully patted the flask in his cloak. "Just a nip afore we're up there, to calm my nerves?"

"Hush, you jackanapes," the mayor hissed, waving the man's hand from the flask. "It's drugged, you dolt! Now, come on."

They did, following their newly elected despot on their dowdy asses. Another four clomps for the horse and six for the donkeys brought them directly before the guard. As was the wont of Thingyan luck, the plan began to run sour right then. The soldier, wearing field plate mail on his torso and a kilt to his knees, waved them disinterestedly through without a second glance.

Fitsbot did not move, static in his shock and incapable of determining another course of action.

The guard looked up for an instant and repeated his gesture.

Fitsbot had never been a man of action, preferring speeches and ledgers, so when the fierce eyes of that soldier met his again and demanded that he ride on, he did just that. Even so, some impulse entered those fat fingers of his, and they slid into his silken robe and withdrew a

flask of the contraband. He lifted it with great show before him, pretending to pull at the cork.

Still no response from the guard.

"Kezer, Jalab, Snee, join me in a toast to our arrival in Lindath!"

Kezer responded with a dropped jaw. "But you said the whiskey was drug—"

"Whiskey!" cut in the voice of the guard. "Don't try to sneak whiskey past me!" He was on his feet and marching over to the now-halted mount of Mayor Fitsbot. The young man's ruddy, bearded face was a study in overt abstention and covert consumption. Good. A lush. Just what the Thingies had hoped for. "You'll have to hand over that flask, and any more intoxicants you or your friends might be carrying."

Jalab replied too quickly, thrusting out the drugged drink as though it were an angry vole. The soldier dubiously took it from him after confiscating Fitsbot's flask, then had to rough up Kezer and Snee a bit before each relinquished his flask. The mayor winked at that—a good bit of acting for yokels from a place without even a community theater—and then went on to smooth things over.

"We're sorry. We'd not realized so great a city as this would be dry."

"How do you think we became so great?" asked the guard, preening a bit as he clutched the flasks in splayed hands and started for the guardhouse door.

"We'll wait here," Fitsbot said.

"You wait there," the man confirmed. He disappeared through the door, and they could hear his narrow voice come from within, answered in turn by three other voices. Through a small window in the door they could make out excited gestures, the avid play of shadows on the wall, the sight of one of the flasks rising toward a mouth.

"Perfect," the mayor hissed conspiratorially and rubbed his hands together. "Our luck is changing already."

The young soldier emerged shortly afterward, followed by another warrior. Unlike Kezer and Snee, these two were no actors, for they were wiping their lips even as they emerged. Their stern-set faces, too, were belied by the legs that quickly turned to butter beneath them, and they both went down in the sand in a soft jumble of sleep.

Mayor Fitsbot leapt from the back of his horse and immediately wished he hadn't, sliding to his bottom on the sand. Such small disconcertions could not dampen his spirit, though; his plan was working. The three deputies somewhat more gracefully joined him by the guards' bodies, and they began dragging them back toward the guardhouse.

"Looks like we got 'em all," Snee boasted, and was immediately proved wrong when the guardhouse door banged outward, emitting a rushing man in chain mail, a full flask in his grip.

Not long in his grip.

The soldier, who'd been surprised by his partner's quick unconsciousness in the guardhouse, was trebly surprised to see the two others being dragged forward by their ankles. It was, therefore, a simple thing for stoic Jalab to wrench the flask from the man's hand and whap his head with it, thus achieving a different slumber with the same instrument.

Giggling like schoolboys, the four conspirators dragged the limp forms into the guardhouse and closed the door behind them.

Unfortunately, none of them had thought to consider sizes of clothes and armor. Whereas two of the invaders were the literal fat-cats of Thingy, the guards were young and slim warriors. Put simply, the armor and clothes didn't fit well. What paunchy Kezer thought at first to be a thigh guard turned out to be a breastplate. He had to settle for its protection on one side or the other.¹³ Fitsbot had little more luck, the muslin jerkin beneath his armor making his torso look like a great sausage, and the kilt hanging open on one side to show an unsightly bit of hairy hip. But, one way or another, they all were soon dressed and ready for the headnapping.¹⁴

These newly attired warriors were veterans of no war whatever, though they looked as though they'd just fought their way out of Hades. It came as no surprise, then, that they met with no resistance as the four of them bolted past other guards and up the twisting tower stairs to the parapet atop it, the mayor even remembering to take with him a flask of whiskey for the guard there. Being a politician, Mayor Fitsbot had it in his head that he'd drug that fellow, too. But, being a farmer, Jalab had it in his head he'd use the flask once again as a melee weapon.

They flung back the hatch door and went scrambling up onto the parapet. With odd urgency, Fitsbot headed toward the young yammering guard and said, "How's about a drink!" while Jalab ran behind him, grabbing the upraised flask and shouting, "How's about a clout!" The whole thing came across as, "How's about a clink-out!" which made no sense to anyone but the guard, who decided it was a terrible threat and avoided it by leaping from the parapet into a convenient stack of hay below.¹⁵ Despite the ingenious escape the guard had hit upon, he next hit upon an ingenious copper kettle hidden away within the haystack¹⁶ and was knocked immediately out.

This unplan of Fitsbot's had proved so successful that fat, wheezing Kezer thought it time for a drink and grabbed for the flask. Unlike Jalab, he managed to wrench it free and was tugging on the cork when he was interrupted by the words, "What do you thing you're doing?"

Kezer looked up at Mayor Fitsbot and stammered, "I know it's drugged—but just a little nip."

"I didn't say anything," the mayor replied. He took advantage of Kezer's shock to knock the flask free.¹⁷

"If *you* didn't say anything," the guardsman began, the wheels of logic creaking audibly in his head, "who did?"

"I did," came the ominous, growling response.

Only then did the mayor and his deputies turn to face the object of their quest. The head of Periwinkle hovered over them all on a leaning spear of green wood—so green, in fact, that the sucker leaves on it had apparently not been peeled off before the head was mounted. At this point, all they could see was the cobweb mass of the man's white hair, blowing in the wind, for he faced away, gazing out over the road before them. With tremendous trepidation, lanky Jalab tiptoed forward, laid a hand on the leafy shaft, and slowly spun the head around toward them.

"Ah, much better!" it said with far too much life for a head on a stick.

Ah, much worse, thought the four headnappers in unison. "You didn't really think a great warlock such as I would have neglected measures against decapitation, did you?"

Now the conspirators all wanted to follow the guard over the edge of the parapet—Kezer for sake of the still alone. Instead, Mayor Fitsbot managed to yammer out a response.

"We didn't really . . . think . . ."

"So you're here for my head, eh?"

As though a talking head weren't spooky enough, now they faced one that knew their very thoughts. The four heads yet attached to bodies emptied their blood down their respective necks, and they all went very white.

"Well? Are you or are you not?"

"Uh . . . yes."

"What kind of home will I have? A good view? A good gate? Away from the crows?"

It was the schoolteacher, Snee, who responded now. "Yes, all of that. We'd not made provisions for a live head . . . for any head for that matter . . . but we can make you, er, comfortable."

"Sounds nice," Periwinkle allowed, the stern look on his features fading away and an almost grandfatherly reminiscence appearing there. "A nice place in the country?"

"Oh, very nice," replied the mayor, beginning to rally. "Trees and meadows and hills, beaches nearby, and the firth."

All blissful remembrance left the disembodied head, and a look of profound disappointment took its place.

"Are we talking about Thingy?"

"We have our own gates now," Mayor Fitsbot interjected, "and I'm the mayor. You'd be a hero. . . ."¹⁸

That seemed to clinch it. The head tried to nod but realized he couldn't with the spear jabbed up his neck, so instead he said simply, "All right. I'll go."

Mayor Fitsbot and the others were taken aback by this surrender, given that the head had no apparent means to stop his being taken.

"I could have screamed, you know," Periwinkle responded, with a wink that assured the four that at least some of their thoughts were open to him. "I could also have avoided telling you about the guards coming up through the hatch."

The four nodded, considering this possibility for a moment before their eyes lit with realization and they spun about to see a hulking warrior surging up the ladder from the darkness below.

Luckily, Jalab was quick. His wiry form arched forward like a spring and flung the hatch up and over onto the soldier's head.

"Hey!" the man observed laconically just before the heavy wooden hatch popped him back down, then slammed into place. Next came a boom and the ominous sounds of the man tumbling backward down the ladder and into the other soldiers who had been coming up below. Ooofs and groans and yammers of surprise mixed with angry growls as Jalab threw the bolt on the hatch and stood up.

"Can't get out that way," Snee noted, placing one of his infamously large feet on the hatch to help keep it down.

"Quick!" whispered Periwinkle. "Along the wall!"

That sounded like a good idea to everyone except Kezer,

who yet stared longingly at the half-exposed still that was lying in the hay below. While he slavered, though, Mayor Fitsbot grabbed the Periwinkle pike and led the others at a run along the wall. And just in time, for the noise of the slamming hatch had caught the attention of the guards at the nearest tower, who rushed up behind them.

"Come along, fatso!" shouted Periwinkle, whose head had swiveled to face backward as the mayor ran with the pike on one shoulder. Kezer looked up from the irretrievable whiskey, looked along the wall at the four, five, six soldiers charging toward him, and set off at a frantic trundle after his friends.

The mayor had slowed. "Where from here?" he asked, seeing the wall stretch out in a slow curve toward another tower, which now was alerted, too.

"Well, sling me around if you want me to help," growled the head.

The mayor did so, and Periwinkle shouted, "The rooftop! The rooftop!"

"What rooftop?" the others chorused.

Lacking a finger, Periwinkle stuck his tongue out toward the house. "That rooftop!"

Now they all saw it, a tin-roofed shack that had been built some five feet from the wall but had since leaned to within three. The impression of the long slanted roof as a child's slide was immediate, as was the gasp from the five mouths as guards began pouring from the tower beyond the shack.

"Hurry," cried Periwinkle, "or we won't make it!"

Already the conspirators were dashing toward the roof, but it looked as though the prediction of Periwinkle would prove true; the soldiers closed fast from the other direction.

As if he blamed the bodiless mage for this convergence, Mayor Fitsbot slung the pike out from his shoulder and thrust the head foremost toward the soldiers. This ploy worked, almost, slowing the first man, who clattered on sliding metal soles to try to stop and who held out arms to halt his compatriots. Unfortunately, the soldiers behind were stopped by the man's arms only after they had pushed him onto the mage-headed spear.

There was an unappetizing moment when the spearhead mingled with the brains of the magehead before bursting out the white-haired crown and into the warrior's stomach. Not deeply. But the indignity of having something that a moment before had passed through someone else's brain pass through your gut was enough to make everyone pause—everyone except Periwinkle, who took the opportunity to bite the man's belt buckle.

Next moment, the three deputies made their escape, leaping through empty air to slide down the tin roof while the heads of their company, Periwinkle and Fitsbot, kept the warriors at bay.

These heads, sadly, did not communicate with each other about their next maneuver. Mayor Fitsbot made a great leap for the roof before Periwinkle had let go of the soldier's belt. As a result, all two and a quarter of them lurched en masse into the emptiness between wall and shack. The soldier and the head landed on one side of the roofs peak, and the mayor and the haft of the pike on the other side. The pike shaft cracked in two, and the adversaries slid opposite ways down the roof. The broken end of

the spear went dead and smooth in the mayor's hands.

"Deputies, get the head, go around the shack!" cried out Mayor Fitsbot in his long, slow slide.

To be honest, the deputies had no idea what the mayor had said, nor any desire to do anything but run from the soldiers converging on them where they were. So, it came as a complete surprise to them when they rounded the corner of the shack and into their midst dropped a soldier with Periwinkle affixed to his belt.

He—the soldier—was less than content to stay still, and he began running, the three deputies beside him. All four batted at the white-haired head, each hoping to break it loose, but for different reasons.

The soldiers pursuing the deputies got a great surprise, too, when a fat neo-mayor dropped down atop them.¹⁹ And since the soldiers hadn't expected him, their spears were pointed forward rather than up, though the latter position would have done more to impress Fitsbot with their point. Next moment, amid shouts and curses, they were all down beneath a lardy mayor who spun atop them like a rolling pin. The soldiers sighed in relief when the pudgy man gained his feet and fled around the corner, but just then, guards began raining down from the tin roof above.

Meanwhile Fitsbot, in earnest hope of rescuing his ass, caught up to the three deputies in earnest hope of rescuing their head. Jalab had managed to knock the head loose and scoop it up from the rushing cobbles after only three bounces. He now had Periwinkle tucked under one arm and ran, gangly-legged, with his other arm held out before him.

Snee, Kezer, and Fitsbot, finally working as a team, positioned themselves to block for Jalab. When they rounded the corner, they were glad they had, for they ran literally into a group of guards coming the other way. Jalab clotheslined the first of them while Snee tripped two others by happy accident of his projecting feet, and the paunchy pair bowled down the rest. Despite this success, which left men flailing in the street behind them, they knew their luck couldn't hold here in the open.

Speaking of luck, there was a nice crowded gambling house ahead!

In wordless agreement, they pelted for the carnival-lit establishment. Moments later, they dashed through the swinging front doors and plunged into smoke and shouts and people, people, people—who were so busy losing money that they didn't notice the posse of four with a head on a stick.

That was the whole idea. Their not noticing. And it took only a snatched hat from a hook on the wall and a precipitous dive beneath an unused bingo table before Fitsbot's diversion was ready.

Through the doors burst a passel of angry soldiers, who *did* draw attention as they gazed about like foxes in the henhouse, looking for anyone suspicious.

. . . The next number is 13. That's B13!"

Apparently, lots of the gambling folk either looked suspicious or were afraid of looking suspicious, for in that moment cards that were not previously up sleeves disappeared into them and dice that had not been palmed before were being so. There was much shutting down, so that it seemed the only game yet running in the place was the bingo game, whose proprietor was an old, white-

haired codger too blind and deaf to notice the ruckus. And since he was the only one not looking suspicious, he stuck out like a head on a stick.

. . . The next number is 27. That's G27!"

One of the guards, a fat man who moved with exactly the rolling motion of a barrel being walked across a room, approached the bingo table. He studied the old man for a moment, wondering why he'd wear such a nice outdoor hat in such an unnice indoor establishment. These faint speculations having taxed his brain, the guard began an interrogation.

"You seen anybody with a head on a stick come in here?"

. . . The next number is 9. That's B9!"

"I said, you seen anybody with a head on a stick come in here?"

Only then did the man register, his sloping and seemingly vacant shoulders craning over the table toward the guard. "Eh? I'm a little deaf, sonny."

"I said, did you stick anybody in the head here?" the guard shouted, loudly enough for the whole room to hear the blunder.

The laughter that rose around him convinced the guard suddenly that he'd better move on. "Never mind."

"Bingo!" cried a man from the middle of the floor, who brandished a scorecard in one hand, sending little wooden chits flying in his exuberance.

The guard, wanting to avoid any more attention, ducked away from the pudgy, whiskey-smelling man who rushed now toward the table shouting wildly, "Bingo! Bingo! I'm rich! I'm rich!"²⁰ He reached the white-haired head of the game and shouted, "Gimme my loot!"

The old geezer cried out, "Let me get you a bag!" He ducked over, and a cowed man appeared in his place, holding high a bag that looked to have a cannonball in it, and handed it over.

As if that weren't enough absurdity, the pudgy man then turned and demanded the guard lead him safely beyond the city gate, "To keep the bandits from my loot!"

It was in a cove of trees beyond the wall of Lindath that paunchy Kezer met up with his co-conspirators, who had stayed in the city only long enough to recover their mounts.²¹ In stealthy triumph they rode back toward Thingy, the bag of Periwinkle clutched high in hand. Already they were each working out a version of the story that contained a bit more glory and bloodshed and a bit less sliding down roofs and bobbing atop asses.

First thing next morning, word went out to the citizens to gather at the gates for the piking of Periwinkle's head. But it was noon before the citizens all dragged out of bed and into the shadow of the gate, which already seemed to bear the taint of the city's previous misfortune. They fully expected another disappointing day.

They were not disappointed.**

"Thingies of Thingy!" Fitsbot began from atop the same tobacco crate he'd used before. "Behold the head of Archmage Periwinkle, stricken from his body by Yours Truly and my posse of brave deputies." So saying, Fitsbot clutched the white hair of Periwinkle and lifted the head from the sack.

Its wide-staring eyes and gaping mouth made quite an impression on the simple folk of Thingy, many of whom cringed back in terror lest some bolt of retributive lightning arc from those eyes.

Then, the joyous dread of the folk redoubled when they realized the wide eyes and gaping mouth did not connote the rigors of death, but the prolonged yawn of waking. Periwinkle finished the yawn with a small belch.

Terror! That belch was more horrifying to the folk than the lightning could ever have been.

"He lives! He'll slay us all!" shouted the same malcontent who'd mentioned the lack of walls.

"How unnatural!" cried another.

"I suspect magic!" called out a third.

"Of course you suspect magic," the head interrupted tersely. "I'm a magician!"

That ended the shouts. The terror deepened.

Fitsbot, feeling himself losing the crowd, shouted, "Fear not. We have tamed Periwinkle. He will not harm you!"

"Tamed?" cried the head in disgust. "I'm not tamed. Maimed, maybe, but tamed? Never!"

Fitsbot lowered Periwinkle's head until they were face to face, and he whispered angrily, "What are you trying to do? This is your home now, too. Don't screw it up! Now say something nice!"

Fitsbot lifted the head again, which seemed to think a moment before blurting into the shocked silence, "Nice weather we're having."

Fitsbot smacked his own forehead, though he would have preferred to smack Periwinkle's. "What he means is, what lovely weather and countryside here in Thingy. He wants to be piked on our gates. He thinks Thingy a beautiful, idyllic setting, prime real estate, a place in the country." He hissed through a smile, "Tell them!"

"All that, and more," replied Periwinkle unconvincingly. "Now, get to piking me on the gate!"

The ceremony had quickly soured, just like yesterday's. Fitsbot rightly realized the sooner it was over the better. "The pike, please?" called the mayor, holding an impatient hand out toward his three deputies, who were too busy flexing and waving to hear him. "The pike, please!" the mayor repeated.

Kezer, Jalab, and Snee as one looked up blankly at the mayor, then began patting their vest pockets in search of said item. A moment later, they shrugged, empty-handed.

Fitsbot growled through a grin, "How are we supposed to pike a head without a pike?"

Snee, schoolteacher and scholar, suggested quietly, "Why not stick it on one of the iron spikes atop the arch?"

Fitsbot lowered the head and glared in exasperation at the lofty spikes, knowing he could not have reached even the lowest one.

That fact was moot, though, for stoic Jalab had already yanked the head free. He cupped it in two hands over his head and, tongue sticking out, flung it up into the air.

It arced, tumbling brow-over-neck, the white hair dangling outward like dandelion fluff as it neared the top of the arch.

The crowd let out a spontaneous "oooOOOOOooh" as the head crested above the gate and came plummeting back toward earth.

Now it was time for Periwinkle to "oooOOOOOH," his exclamation ending in some frantic and useless puffing to blow back the rising ground.

To everyone's relief, Jalab caught the head by one ear just before it hit, then popped it up again.

"ooooOOOOOooooh."

"oooOOOOOOOOOOH!"

Again.

"ooooOOOOOooooh."

"ooooOOOOOOOOOOH!"

It took five such free-throws, Jalab forgetting himself once and trying to dribble the head before he shot. On the fifth try, the neck struck a spike and stuck. As soon as it did, the crowd broke into excited applause . . .

"Ah, that's better," said Periwinkle.

. . . and the gates started moving like arms beneath their new head.

Ah, that's worse, thought Fitsbot and his deputies.

The citizens fell back in fresh terror, and Fitsbot clambered down from the tobacco box and ran like he'd never run before.

Behind them, the gates swung closed with a terrifying *clang!* then whipped back open again with an otherworldly *shrieeeeeeek!* then swung shut again. Over this convulsing turmoil, over even the gasps and shouts of the crowd, the voice of Periwinkle rang, malevolent and omnipotent.

"Ah, ha, ha, ha, ha! I have you now! Oh, glorious life! Oh, magnificent power! My body may be gone, but I have taken over your gates, and will rule them now, forever!"

Fitsbot skidded to a halt well beyond the reach of the gates and swung around. He grew very pale, remembering how the pikestaff in his hand had gone dead when it broke from the wizard's head. Clearly, the mage had the power to animate whatever his head was piked on.

Oh, would he never make a blessed decision for his cursed city? This was the greatest mistake in Thingy's unparalleled history of gaffes and blunders. Fitsbot had taken a dead menace and made him a living horror, and at his own city gates!

"From now on, none shall enter or leave Thingy except by me! I am the gate! I am the door!" shouted Periwinkle maniacally, blue magic circling his head in a foul halo and radiating out along the ironwork. The words of the mad mage broke off into wrenching gales of laughter.

Into this storm of evil mirth, however, the malcontent spoke. "We could just walk around you."

Mayor Fitsbot laughed once loudly at that, daring to hope his decision against city walls might have saved the day. "Yeah!" he added.

"No, you shan't," cried the evil mage. The swinging gates suddenly spit lightning out to either side. The blue-white bolts of power crackled across the landscape, extending for miles like a split in the sky, lancing into trees and turning them to black cinders.

Again, the evil laugh.

"That's enough, Harold!" came a craggy voice.

Harold?

In the shocked silence that followed, the eyes of tens of citizens fell on an old crone—the same one who had disrupted the first gate ceremony. Now, as then, she'd wandered up through the throng to a point just about beneath

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the gates, and she glared up with impatient irritation at the piked head.

"Uh-oh," Periwinkle said in a contrite voice. His gates had stopped swinging, and the whole arch had a depressed look about it. "Sorry, mom."

"I didn't bring you here to terrorize, sonny," she said appeasingly. "I brought you here so I could see you more often."

Periwinkle began to pout. "Can't I at least kill one of them?"

"No!" replied the crone firmly, stomping her old foot. "You've been bad enough the last century—moving away to that mountain retreat where your old mother couldn't come to see you. And I know why! It was the floozies again, wasn't it?"

Periwinkle was sullenly silent.

"Then you got yourself killed, and piked at Lindath! You knew I swore not to set foot in Lindath after they shut down my tavern! What were you thinking, son?"

"I don't know. I guess I wasn't . . . thinking."

"That's right. You weren't," the crone said, seeming mollified. "Now, Harold, tell these nice folks you're sorry, and swear to be a good gate for them."

"All my other piked wizard friends will laugh at me."

"They'll not laugh if you make this little crudhole into a city to be proud of, will they?" she replied. "Now, say it."

"I'm sorry, Thingies. I swear to be a good gate."

"That's better."

Fitsbot, recognizing his need to regain control of the ceremony, magnanimously stepped forward and said, "Apology accepted. And now it is my honor to grant you, Archmage Harold Periwinkle, the honorable title of Gate Guard of Thingy!"

"Gate Guard?!" he cried.

"Temper, temper," his mother warned.

Fitsbot coughed into his hand. "Gate Guard and Head of the Chamber of Commerce. It's your duty to see that we cease to be a crud—er, a backwater, and become a thriving metropolis."

"It would be my honor," replied Periwinkle in surrender.

Then, the people of Thingy applauded.²³

And so, the greatest catastrophe to ever befall Thingy also became its greatest blessing, for under the literally watchful eye of Periwinkle the mage, trade flourished and the town grew. Though Fitsbot served but one term as mayor, Periwinkle was made Gate-for-Life. His temper cooled, and he became rather benevolent. Many folk flocked to Thingy just to see him, but then decided to stay.²⁴

But the wisdom of Fitsbot's tomfoolery was most clearly demonstrated when, after five other moronic mayors (including Snee, Kezer, and Jalab), Periwinkle himself ran for office and won. He turned out to be the best of the worst. The motto of his administration was a pun engraved into the gate above him:

"A WISE MAN WAITS WHERE FOOLS RUSH IN."

1. Clive Thinhy.

2. The first building in Thingy was a mill built beside a tidal river; the miller didn't notice the water's fickle nature until he started up the wheel and found that half the day the grindstone turned backward, struggling to reassemble the flour into grain. The second building in Thingy was a trading post built by a myopic merchant who one day mistook a barrel of gunpowder for a barrel of pipe tobacco. He and his shop left Thingy in a great hurry.

And things had gotten no better over the years. The town grew, but so do fungi; and the typical emigrant flotsam floated in. (That was one benefit Thingy had: Since the river flowed in both directions, you often had to pass Thingy twice to get anywhere else, and lots of folk just gave up and moved in.)

That's where Thingy politics began, which leads us back to Mayor Fitsbot, his thumb, and the greatest catastrophe of all, which he was author of.

3. And forthwater.

4. As anyone knows, there are two things that makes a city a city: a mayor and a proper set of city gates (complete with overlaid keys for mayors to hand out to visiting dignitaries so they can always get in after dark).

5. Such displays are not fitting on occasions of import, even in Thingy.

6. An action that *was* acceptable in Thingy.

7. The new one, that is.

8. In truth, Fitsbot and his supporters had considered the construction of a wall to guard Thingy's landward edges, but realized that during the spring floods, the wall would act as a dike—holding the rising river water inside the city. That realization and the subsequent lack of a wall demonstrated to everyone that this mayor had what it would take to steer away from the pitfalls the village had heretofore so willingly pitfallen into.

9. Officially, only "bad" Lindathians wanted the stuff, though some of her staunchest prohibitionists took unseemly delight in hunting down and discreetly "disposing of" the very liquors they denounced.

10. Loaned to them by the generous constituency.

11. The Lindathian attack on Periwinkle's cave had likely come as a

shock, too, since the warlock had reigned indomitable in his cavern fastness for longer than any could remember. And if the capture itself hadn't shocked the old mage, surely the cervical slice of the blade and the cranial intrusion of the spearhead were shocking. Such events are difficult to brace for.

12. He, of course, had taken the horse.

13. Since Kezer couldn't remember where his heart was, he played One-Potato, Two-Potato to decide which side the breastplate would cover.

14. The attirement was not helped by the fact that Fitsbot thrice had to slap Kezer's hand from one of the half-full (drugged) flasks.

15. This was the same haystack the horse and donkeys had found and were munching at, but from which they bolted when their dinner was so rudely interrupted.

16. Complete with a ten-day-old mash of would-be rye.

17. The flask sailed through the air and plummeted down into the waiting hand of the unconscious guard in the hay, who awoke from the slap and, feeling headachy, opened the bottle, took a sip, and straight-away went back to sleep.

18. He initially intended to add ". . . for helping to lift the curse," but wisely decided against it.

19. Unlike his counterpart, Fitsbot hadn't the courtesy to drop between them.

20. Anyone who had ever played bingo would have known that the man forfeited his win the moment he tossed the chits from his card. But the guards hadn't played, or apparently didn't care.

21. The horse and three donkeys had contented themselves beside a low, thatched cottage that now had considerably less roof.

22. In their expectations of disappointment, that is.

23. Whether this ovation arose from fear of the mage, the mage's mother, or the mayor—who had somehow retrieved the irretrievable head and redeemed his irredeemable foul-up—is to this day a point of great debate in the metropolis of Thingy.

24. The miller even turned his backward-spinning waterwheel into a ride for the kids.

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ROLE-PLAYING reviews


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**Something for everyone?
West end Games' MASTERBOOK * game**



Photography by Charles Koh

Role-playing games' ratings

-  Not recommended
-  Poor, but may be useful
-  Fair
-  Good
-  Excellent
-  The best

Pity the poor game designer. He's got this great idea for a brand new role-playing game, say, *Teenage Mutant Food Processors*. He sits at the keyboard, fingers tingling in anticipation, brain bursting with fantastic teenage mutant heroes and food processing adventure extravaganzas. Then reality smacks him in the face. He can't tackle the fun stuff until he—sigh—comes up with the numbers and formulas for character creation, combat resolution, and all the other essential game systems. Worse, he has to figure out a way to make his systems different from the zillions of RPGs that have come before.

And pity the poor players. They've finally got their hands on a copy of *Teenage Mutant Food Processors*, and they can hardly wait to dig in. But before they can even think about mutating their first teenage kitchen appliances, they're faced with the dreary business of mastering an unfamiliar character-creation system and navigating foreign combat rules and trying to keep everything straight from the umpteenth other RPG systems they've learned in the past, so maybe they'll just forget the whole thing and spend the weekend playing video games.

Any wonder, then, why publishers prefer "house" systems, standard mechanics that can be used over and over again? Designers love house systems; instead of reinventing the wheel, all they have to do is adjust a couple of spokes. Players love them, too; instead of trudging through a swamp of new rules, they can focus on exploring fresh settings. That's why TSR has produced so many AD&D® game variants, like the AL-QADIM® and RAVENLOFT® settings. That's why White Wolf has stuck with the Storyteller system from the VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE* game to the WRAITH: THE OBLIVION* game. Chaosium's skill-based system has remained more or less the same from 1978's RUNEQUEST* game through last year's NEPHILIM* game. And Steve Jackson Games continues to champion the GURPS* game, the king of universal RPGs. Just about every major publisher, it seems, has learned the value of a house system.

Every publisher, that is, but West End Games. With few exceptions, each West End RPG exists in a universe of its own. The STAR WARS*, PARANOIA*, and GHOSTBUSTERS* games are all first-rate designs but have little in common. They don't look like each other, they don't read like each other, and they certainly don't play like each other—nobody's going to confuse the combat mechanics of the STAR WARS game with those of the PARANOIA RPG. I have no idea if West End's reluctance to develop their own house system has hurt them in the marketplace, but I suspect it hasn't helped.

In any event, West End finally has joined the party with the MASTERBOOK* series, a product line based around a common set of rules. West End assures us that MASTERBOOK "can be used to role-play in

virtually any game universe, with virtually any options." Sounds promising. But did they pull it off? Let's have a look.

MASTERBOOK game



176-page softcover book, 108 playing cards

West End Games

\$n/a

Design: Ed Stark

Editing, development, and additional material: Bill Smith

Illustrations: Paul Daly, Jamie Lombardo, Ron Hill, Karl Waller, and Brian Schomburg

Cover: Stephen Crane

First off, the MASTERBOOK game isn't altogether new. It uses the SHATTERZONE* game rules (taken, in turn, from the TORG* game) as a template, which is both good and not-so-good news. The good news: West End used the MASTERBOOK game as an opportunity to iron out the rough spots in the SHATTERZONE rules. The not-so-good news: it's still basically the SHATTERZONE game (see DRAGON® Magazine issue #203 for the gory details). Despite some strong elements—a well-written text, an intriguing selection of skills, a clever use of cards—the SHATTERZONE rules bogged down in a morass of dense rules. The MASTERBOOK system, while less confusing, can't get over its love affair with charts and numbers. Though the MASTERBOOK systems all seem to work, they're harder than they need to be.

Take character creation. On the surface, it's simple: players dream up concepts for their characters, then spend a variable number of points to determine their attributes and skills. So what's with all the clutter? Instead of stopping with six attributes—Agility, Strength, Endurance, Intellect, Confidence, and Charisma—the designers continued with Mind and Dexterity, unnecessary redundancies. Intellect makes sense ("puzzle solving and intuitive thinking"); why muddify it with Mind ("mental strength, memory, and learning ability")? Since they gave us Agility ("balance, gross motor coordination, and limberness"), what's the point of Dexterity ("fine motor coordination and hand-eye coordination")? I tried to understand the designers' reasoning, but didn't know whether to use my Intellect or my Mind, so I gave up.

Cumbersome mechanics likewise threaten to break the back of the skill system. The skills themselves are pretty good, encompassing both the expected (Melee Combat, Disguise, Survival) and the exotic (Psionic Manipulation, Super Science, Hypnotism). Players receive skill points based on their Intellect and Mind scores; the higher the scores, the larger the point allocation. Advantages and compensations, such as Knowledge, Luck, and Poverty, establish parameters for skill use. But then, like ants at a picnic, along come the qualifiers. Skills may be *untrained* or *trained* (usable only if the character has the necessary *skill adds*). They may be

general or *macro* (each requiring a focus). They may be *specialized* (defined as "more focused, more specific versions of general skills [or focuses of macroskills]"). I know what the designers are getting at—the focuses, skill adds, and macros calibrate competence in narrow areas of expertise—but it's a long way to go for a couple of die-modifiers. Play balance requires a litany of awkward restrictions. For instance, "No general skill, when combined with a specialization of that skill, may have more than five adds as a total value," and "Specialization adds may never exceed the number of general or focus skill adds by more than two." All this flapdoodle might be worth the effort if the resulting characters were out of the ordinary, but they're no better or worse than PCs from, say, the GURPS or STAR WARS systems.

To resolve an action, the referee first determines the Difficulty Number (DN), a more or less arbitrary assessment of the chance of success; removing a splinter might be a Very Easy action (DN 3), removing an appendix might be Extremely Hard (DN 18). He then decides which skill applies; both the splinter and appendix require Medicine. The player rolls two 10-sided dice and checks the result on the Bonus Chart, which gives him a modifier to boost his skill value. If the player has skill adds in the applicable skill, he gets a bonus roll any time a 10 turns up; with a little luck, then, he can increase his total to 20 or more. A modified roll equal to or greater than the DN means the action succeeds. The Success Chart indicates the extent of the success. If the player beats the DN by 1, the PC removed the appendix with the normal amount of complications. If the roll beat the DN by 15, he removed the appendix and got the patient back on his feet the next day. Despite some clever touches—a single chart that gives results for damage, intimidation, and combat maneuvers; a "many-on-one" mechanic for resolving mass attacks—the designers' fondness for numbers mucks up an otherwise elegant set of rules. The Interrogation Table, for example, lists 19 DN modifiers, making sure we're clear on the difference between Target Feels Information is Important, and Target Feels Information is Very Important. A typical damage result from the Success Chart reads 2Wdn K/O 5, which means the character suffers 2 wounds (becoming moderately wounded), 5 shock points (check his Endurance Attribute and Resist Shock Skill to see if he's still conscious), and a possible knockout (if the character doesn't have a K already, he suffers a K; if he has a K, he takes an O and he's out).

And then there's the Value Chart, an import of questionable utility from the SHATTERZONE rules. The Value Chart purports to help players juggle large numbers by using generic "value" ratings that represent time, distance, and speed; a value of 10 equals 100 kilograms, 100 seconds, or 100 meters. Because the table

is logarithmic, arithmetical calculations are theoretically easier. If the referee wants to multiply 150,000 by 150, he can check the chart for the values (26 and 11), add them together (37), then cross-index this total on the chart for the approximate answer (25,000,000). Or he could do it my way and use a pocket calculator, which gives the exact answer (22,500,000) in oh, about half the time.

The MASTERBOOK game would be just another ho-hum RPG were it not for the card deck, which affects virtually every aspect of the game. Each player begins with a hand of cards—three cards if there are five or fewer players, two if there are six or more. Enhancement Cards, colored black at the top, allow the player to boost an attribute, perform an extra action, or receive a clue from the referee. Subplot Cards, colored red, introduce twists in the story line; with the referee's approval, the player may experience a Romance (a fling with an attractive NPC), Connection (a confidant who appears out of the blue), or Nemesis (an adversary who carries a grudge of dangerous intensity). The cards keep the plot engagingly off-balance, forcing both the players and the referee to stay on their toes. And because the cards act as ability modifiers, players aren't always at the mercy of disappointing die-rolls. The card rules are inventive, fun to use, and, in contrast to the rest of the rulebook, blessedly succinct.

Evaluation: Why did the designers go nuts with numbers? Beats me. If they were after realism, they didn't get it, since the labyrinthine rules raise as many questions as they answer. (Why do skill points—which can be used to purchase physical skills like Long Jumping and Missile Weapons—all derive from Intellect and Mind Attributes? Why is a PC's aptitude for climbing affected by his Agility but not his Dexterity? Why do we need the Lifting skill when we already have a Strength rating?!) And if they were after originality, they already had it; the card deck gave them all the originality they needed. But even with its flaws, the MASTERBOOK system remains a solid, versatile game with strong characters and clever concepts. The designers just didn't know when to quit.

Does the MASTERBOOK game succeed as a universal system? Overall, I'd say yes, though it probably will adapt to some genres better than others. I'm skeptical about fantasy, for instance; the chapter on "Creating and Using Special Effects" boils down to design-it-yourself magic, requiring a lot of time and guesswork. The skill list, with its many technological entries like Heavy Weapons and Computer Ops, suggests that the MASTERBOOK system favors the near future and recent past over the Middle Ages. Human characters get the nod over elves and aliens; hints for creating non-human PCs don't get much better (or less confusing) than: "... the

gamemaster should restructure the generic game setting recommendations for background options by game setting so that things can work out."

As of this writing (the first week of 1995), you can't purchase the MASTERBOOK rules by itself; you have to buy one of the boxed sets. West End plans to make the MASTERBOOK system available separately sometime in the spring. But I wouldn't wait. Since you'll need a setting, and the MASTERBOOK rules contain only a few skimpy suggestions for world design, you're better off springing for one of the boxes. Which brings us to . . .

THE WORLD OF INDIANA JONES* game



One 176-page MASTERBOOK softcover rule book, one 144-page softcover world book, 108 playing cards, two 10-sided dice, boxed
West End Games \$30
Design: Brian Sean Perry
Editing and development: Greg Farshtey
Additional material: Greg Farshtey and Peter Schweighofer
Illustrations: Brian Schomburg and Lucasfilm Ltd.
Cover: Richard Amsel

Raiders of the Lost Ark source book



160-page hardcover book
West End Games \$25
Design: Peter Schweighofer
Editing and development: Ed Stark
Illustrations: Lucasfilm Ltd.
Cover: Richard Amsel

Indiana Jones and the Rising Sun source book



One 96-page softcover book, two four-panel game master screens
West End Games \$15
Design: Bill Olmesdahl and David Pulver
Editing and development: Greg Farshtey
Illustrations: Paul Daly, Jamie Lombardo, Ron Hill, and Lucasfilm Ltd.
Cover: Lucasfilm Ltd.

As old-timers may recall, this isn't Indy's first incarnation as an RPG. Back in 1984, TSR published *The Adventures of Indiana Jones* RPG, an entry-level game that squeezed the rules, the source material, and a full-blown adventure into a single 64-page booklet. It wasn't a big hit—I picked mine up at a GEN CON® Game Fair for fifty cents, still in the shrink wrap—possibly because of the elementary mechanics, more likely due to the exclusion of a character-creation system. Instead of dreaming up your own PC, you simply assumed the role of your favorite character from the films. Thus, the game ensured a flurry of fist-fights as players squabbled over who got to be Indy.

West End casts a decidedly wider net than TSR did. For starters, West End not

only draws on the films for inspiration, but also the Random House novels, Dark Horse comics, and *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* television series. With the MASTERBOOK rules, West End offers role-players a far more sophisticated system; the TSR version relied on a single color-coded table to resolve most actions—similar to the *Marvel Super Heroes* game. And West End broadens the scope; in theory, the INDIANA JONES game can handle any type of pulp-era adventure, regardless of whether the Hatted One participates or not.

Character creation follows the procedure outlined in the MASTERBOOK rules, with a few nips and tucks to make the PCs suitably pulpish. New skills include Escape Artist, Counterfeiting, and Espionage. Law Enforcement, Ambidexterity, and Sense of Direction are among the new advantages. Though most INDIANA JONES PCs are regular people, they're the kind of regular people who can fall out of airplanes and land in one piece. Accordingly, the players receive an additional card beyond the standard MASTERBOOK allocation, allowing the PCs to execute more than the usual number of spectacular stunts. The brief but informative equipment chapter discusses the ramifications of armor fatigue (a bulky fur coat penalizes the wearer with an extra point of shock damage) and explains advanced bullwhip techniques (with a high-enough Melee Combat score, a whip-wielder can swing over a chasm). For players too lazy to design their own PCs, the appendix provides a nice assortment of pre-rolled characters, ranging from College Professor and Soldier of Fortune to Daredevil Pilot and Professional Showgirl.

Too bad the characters don't have much to do. The rest of the book sandwiches slabs of unfocused sourcebook material between a so-so introductory scenario (a generic jewel heist by some generic cultists) and a chapter of flabby referee tips ("Your adventure stories should be like the movies and television shows, fast-paced stories of action and adventure"). With only four pages to spend, the Roaring Twenties section has barely enough room to summarize the era's highlights. Atlantis, Loch Ness, and other fantasy locales are dismissed in a handful of paragraphs. The World War II section mainly consists of a dry historical overview, as applicable to a role-playing campaign as an encyclopedia essay. The lengthy time line recounting Indy's career is interesting but useless, unless you plan to restage his recorded adventures, which the rule book expressly discourages ("Ninety percent of the fun of adventuring is challenging your own abilities and setting your sights on something more"). A referee wanting to put together a campaign will need a lot more material than this.

Specifically, he'll need *Raiders of the Lost Ark* book, a first-rate source book that should've been packaged with the

box. As well as expanding on the events of the film, *Raiders* details a half-dozen provocative locations. Each entry provides maps, NPCs, story hooks, and staging tips; in short, everything a referee needs to get a campaign up and running. Illuminating sidebars discuss the kingdoms of ancient Egypt, the pirates of the Mediterranean, and the savage Hovitos Indians of the South American rainforest. Players may explore the treasure-laden ruins of Tec-na'al or the booby-trapped temple of the Chachapoyan warriors. Between expeditions, they may peruse the course offerings of Marshall College (where Professor Jones teaches Archaeology 225), a blueprint of a German U-boat, and a classified document from U.S. Army detailing Hitler's obsession with the occult. *Raiders* is more than a good resource, it's a great read; thanks to the vivid descriptions, you can almost feel the sand of the Sahara between your toes.

Indiana Jones and the Rising Sun covers Japan circa 1930, offering a good mix of historical briefs, cultural surveys, and character profiles. A compelling adventure (the creepy "Indiana Jones and the Masamune Blade") and the thoughtful game-mastering advice compensates for the lackluster martial-arts chapter and the absence of tactical maps. Of particular interest is the "Unearthly Nippon" chapter, which introduces Indy to supernatural Japan; if you thought the Nazis gave him a hard time, wait till you get a load of the blood-slurping gaki. As a bonus, the book includes a pair of handy referee screens, crammed with tables and lists from the rulebook.

Evaluation: THE WORLD OF INDIANA JONES game makes good use of the MASTERBOOK rules and spawns well-rounded, entertaining PCs. But it's all frame and no picture, missing the grit and humor that made the films so endearing—call it Pulp Lite. (For a taste of the real thing, search the back room of your favorite hobby shop for Hero Games' out-of-print JUSTICE INC.* game and Aaron Allston's *Lands of Mystery* supplement.) In conjunction with the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* book, however, INDIANA JONES finds its focus, allowing referees to stage fast-moving, over-the-top scenarios that rival the best moments from the films. *Indiana Jones and the Rising Sun* is a must for aficionados of supernatural pulp. And if you combine it with a copy of TSR's old *Kara-Tur* boxed set (for the *Oriental Adventures* setting), you've got the ingredients for an Eastern campaign of unparalleled weirdness.

THE WORLD OF BLOODSHADOWS* game



One 176-page MASTERBOOK softcover rule book, one 160-page softcover world book, 108 playing cards, two 10-sided dice, boxed
West End Games \$30

Design: Greg Farshtey
Editing, development, and additional material: Ed Stark

Illustrations: Jaime Lombardo, Ron Hill, Tom Oneill, Dan Schaeffer, Karl Waller, and Brian Schomburg
Cover: Stephen Crane

Galitia Citybook

128-page softcover book
West End Games \$18

Design: Teeuwynn Woodruff
Editing and development: Greg Farshtey
Additional material: Sandy Addison, Greg Farshtey
Illustrations: Tim Bobko, Paul Daly, Jaime Lombardo, Ron Hill, Tom Oneill, and Brian Schomburg
Cover: Tom Oneill



Mean Streets source book

One 96-page softcover book, two four-panel gamemaster screens
West End Games \$15

Design: Stephen Crane
Editing, development, and additional material: Ed Stark
Illustrations: Tim Bobko, Jaime Lombardo, Ron Hill, Tom Oneill, and Dan Schaeffer
Cover: Barclay Shaw



Blending fantasy, horror, and pulp-era detectives, the BLOODSHADOWS game presents itself as sort of a retro-SHADOW-RUN* game, seen through the eyes of Mickey Spillane. The first line of Chapter One says it all: "Found your husband: Deacon said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the walking corpse." Grim and goofy, the BLOODSHADOWS world may be a cartoon, but it's a cartoon with attitude.

As in the INDIANA JONES game, BLOODSHADOWS PCs are larger-than-life versions of ordinary humans, spruced up with a few specialties unavailable in the MASTERBOOK rules. The expanded skill list includes Safe-Cracking, Smuggling, and Vehicle Mechanic. To the MASTERBOOK menu of advantages, BLOODSHADOWS adds Enhanced Senses and Long Life Span, along with a few oddballs such as Glider Wings and Elasticity. For balance, high-powered PCs may be required to take a compensation or two; my favorites are Cultural Allergy, where exposure to nudity causes the character to freak out, and Rot, where chunks of the character periodically drop off. Players also have the option of selecting alignments for their PCs, choosing from Order, Chaos, Oathbreaker/Order, and Oathbreaker/Chaos, which represent the various factions in the game world. But I recommend leaving them out; not only are the alignments hard to keep straight, characters of ambiguous morality seem more in tune with the game's intent.

Because magic is fully integrated into BLOODSHADOWS society—elemental forces power automobiles, *heat water* enchantments keep coffee pots warm—all characters have access to spells. Magic

skills are acquired like other skills, purchased during the character-creation process. The imaginative spell list includes *rain of razors*, *acid bath*, and *glass jaw*. A miscast spell results in a roll on the Feedback Results Chart, which may cause the caster's ears to double in length or—gulp—his head to explode. Unfortunately, the system reflects MASTERBOOK's penchant for overcooked mechanics. To cast a spell, the player must generate a skill total, modify the result with knowledge adds, subtract the total from a Difficulty Number, compare the result to a Feedback Value, check the Success Chart, then determine the effects. That's a lot of work for a *glass jaw*. And to complement the setting's tongue-in-cheek ambience, the spell list would've benefited from a bit more whimsy—maybe something like *faery bullets* or *charm waitress*.

Once they're loaded up with glider wings and enchanted coffee pots, the PCs are ready to explore Marl, the game world. It's a inspired setting, a loony landscape of industrial blight and supernatural sleaze, where you might find Humphrey Bogart sharing a beer with Merlin the Magician. After centuries of brutal conflict, Marl now exists as a series of isolated cities, separated by vast stretches of monster-ridden wilderness. Meanwhile, a cosmic war between the forces of Order and Chaos continues to rage, with the populace of Marl serving as cannon fodder. No wonder the citizens are cynical. "Every city I've ever been to," says Archer, a seen-it-all ex-con who provides commentary throughout the text, "has been run by the same three outfits: the cops, the crooks, and the big rich." Designer Greg Farshtey brings Marl to life with wryly observed details. The vampire in the next apartment swills blood from a six-pack. Lowlifes place bets on cockatrice fights. Zombie slum-dwellers use human fingers for poker chips.

The BLOODSHADOWS game also provides a fully-developed city called Selastos which players may use as a home base. Situated in the middle of a desert, Selastos must contend with the usual assortment of rogue spell-casters and wandering monsters, along with a chronic water shortage and a nasty league of cultists. A fast-paced mini-scenario, "Whisper of Destruction," welcomes newcomers to Selastos by pitting them against a shady arms dealer and a squad of undead hit men.

For referees wanting to expand their campaigns, there's *Galitia*, a source book about Selastos's sister city. Galitia was founded about a thousand years ago by a pair of battalion commanders as a refuge for beleaguered troops. Today, it's a hodgepodge of creatures and cutthroats. The book dutifully catalogs Galosh's history, districts, and occupants; most of it's interesting, but there's nothing noteworthy. The lack of an adventure and the awkward narrative ("You can dope that as my version of the warning labels the bluenoses charge

into anything they don't like . . .") make this an iffy buy. More satisfying is the *Mean Streets* book, bursting with referee tips, generic locations (gin joints, gambling dens, detective offices), and role-playing advice. An engaging adventure ("The Tarnished Heart," featuring a race of subterranean scavengers caught up in a gang war) and a pair of useful referee screens round out this terrific package.

Evaluation: My PCs have died in a lot of different ways over the years, but this is the first time I've had one meet his maker as a result of a rune-engraved bullet. Strikingly original and glibly entertaining, the BLOODSHADOWS game is role-playing at its lowbrow best. Pass on *Galitia*, check out *Mean Streets*, and if you're the last zombie to leave the poker table, don't forget to pick up the fingers.

Short and sweet

Hail the Heroes, by Tim Beach. TSR, Inc., \$15. *Night of the Vampire*, by L. Richard Baker III. TSR, Inc. \$15.

I recently received a letter from a reader wondering whether TSR's new line of audio CD games justifies the purchase of a compact disc player. Well, no. That's like buying a CD-ROM unit just to play the MYST* computer game. (Despite what you've heard, it ain't that great, and certainly not worth a computer overhaul.) But if you already have a CD player, and you're an experienced AD&D game player, the audio games are excellent values. For less than a third of the cost of MYST (and about the same price as a typical RPG supplement), you get a full-color 32-page booklet, a poster map, four sheets of parchment props, and a full-length CD (*Hail the Heroes* has 89 tracks with a total time of 68:40; *Night of the Vampire* has 72 tracks and runs 73:35). The CDs enhance the Dungeon Master's presentation with sound effects, dialogue, and music. For instance, track 3 of *Night of the Vampire*, played as the PCs experience a shipwreck, features the sounds of a howling wind, creaking mast, and clanking anchor. To simulate a busy urban area, Track 71 of *Hail the Heroes* provides barking dogs and snorting horses. As for the adventures, they're essentially low-level dungeon crawls; *Heroes* involves a quest for an ancient relic in the Temple of the Shield, *Vampire* sends the party after a bloodsucker in Vandevicsny Manor. Though both are fun, *Heroes* has the edge. Not only are the encounters more sophisticated, you get to hear what it sounds like when a skeleton dies and falls apart.

Rough Guide to the U.K., by Nick Gillot, Bruce Craig, Matt Channell, John Rowley, Alexander Blair, Jos Williams, Amanda Chapman, and Ryk Coleman. R. Talsorian Games, \$12.

Any RPG supplement that opens with a reference to Spinal Tap—that's the rock band, not the surgical procedure—is all right by me. Intended for the CYBER-

PUNK* game, the *Rough Guide* examines 21st century Great Britain in all its decadent glory. With the military government in decline, there's trouble on all fronts: riots in the soccer stadiums, terrorists in Birmingham, killer whales roaming the Scottish coast. Mainly a tourist's handbook, *Rough Guide* is short on adventure hooks but long on hardheaded observations. ("If you're dumb enough to stray off the main road in your nice shiny Jaguar-MacLaren XIV50, then you're too stupid to bother about.") And Anglophiles will get a kick out of the in-jokes; who would've thought that geriatric crooner Cliff Richard would still be on the charts in 2020?

DRAGONLANCE® Classics Volume III, by Tracy Hickman, Harold Johnson, Bruce Heard, and Douglas Niles. TSR, Inc., \$15

The DRAGONLANCE Saga, a staggering 14-module series from 1984-1986, stands as one of the most ambitious and satisfying fantasy campaigns ever published. Time has diminished its appeal not a whit, evidenced by the Classics series, which reprints the original books and updates them to AD&D 2nd Edition game rules. This third and final installment compiles the *Dragons of Dreams*, *Dragons of Faith*, *Dragons of Truth*, and *Dragons of Triumph* entries, omitting *Dragons of Glory*, the non-essential board game. Players assume the roles of Tanis, Raistlin, and other characters immortalized in the early DRAGONLANCE novels, then embark on a dazzling journey that takes them from the musty Red Dragon Inn to the depths of the Blood Sea. Don't worry if you passed on the previous two *Classics* books; Volume III is self-contained, including enough background to make newcomers feel at home in Krynn. Whether you experience the Saga as a whole or an abridgment, it's not to be missed. They don't make 'em like this anymore.

Tukayyid, by Jeffrey Layton. FASA Corporation. \$12.

I like the BATTLETECH* game, but I like it in small doses. So three cheers for *Tukayyid*, a compilation of 25 stand-alone scenarios pitting the Clans against the Com Guards in a remote sector of the Inner Sphere. Though I haven't played them all, the scenarios I sampled were balanced and tense, with easy set-ups and intriguing rule variants. But there's a drawback to *Tukayyid*, and it's a big one. To get all the game stats and the right environments, you need *BattleTech Technical Readouts* 3025, 3026, 2750, and 2050, as well as *BattleTech Map Sets* 2, 3, and 4. Boo!

Macross II: Deck Plans Volume Three by Martin Ouellette, Marc-Alexandre Vezina, Jean Carrieres, and Claude J. Pelletier. Palladium Books, \$10.

If the game business ever dries up, Palladium ought to consider opening an architectural firm. This impressive collection of blueprints for the MACROSS II* game, an

RPG of science-fictional warfare based on a Japanese animation series, is a techno-junkie's dream. The level-by-level floor plans of the Macross Interdimensional Space Fortress, Culture Park Museum, and United Nations Spacy Headquarters are rendered in meticulous detail, right down to the last storage hanger and hydroponics facility. Though the material is of dubious value to players—there's not much they can do with this stuff other than drool over it—it's indispensable for referees.

Wizard's Challenge II, by Kevin Melka. TSR, Inc. \$7.

Like the previous ONE-ON-ONE™ volumes, *Wizard's Challenge II* is a breezy, undemanding AD&D game adventure for a Dungeon Master and a single PC. Baron Tigus Felmoor, regent of the frontier town of New Haven, summons a freelance mage to investigate "a ghastly creature that breathed fire . . . whose hide was so tough that swords shattered when they struck it." (A dragon? Guess again.) Playable in a single session, it's good practice for novices and a pleasant diversion for veterans. This series of single-player adventures, which also includes the equally appealing *Fighters Challenge* by John Terra and *Cleric's Challenge* by L. Richard Baker III, seems like a natural to me; I'm surprised other publishers haven't jumped on the bandwagon.

ON THE EDGE* card game, by Jonathan Tweet and John Nephew with Robin Jenkins. Trident, Inc. by arrangement with Atlas Games, \$8.

As a role-player, I prefer this collectible card game to WotC's MAGIC: THE GATHERING* game, mainly because of its pedigree. Where MAGIC's game world was more or less an afterthought, the ON THE EDGE game draws on the setting developed in Atlas's OVER THE EDGE* role-playing game, and as fans of OTE can attest, it's a doozy. Al Amarja, the setting in question, comes off as a police state version of Disneyland, rife with nightmarish technology and devious eccentrics. Players vie for control of Al Amarja by deploying the Resource, Character, and Environmental cards necessary to rack up Influence points. When rivals get in your way, "pop" them with Gear cards; my deck had a cattle prod and a chain saw. Wildly imaginative, gorgeously rendered, it's the perfect choice for the discriminating lunatic.

Ω

Rick Swan has been a full-time freelancer for eight years and a Spinal Tap fan for a decade [Go, Nigel, Go!—Dale]. You can write to him at 2620 30th St., Des Moines IA 50310. Enclose a self-addressed envelope if you'd like a reply

*indicates a product produced by a company other than TSR, Inc.

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Parental Advisory:
This product contains strong language

Sage Advice

by Skip Williams

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This month, the sage considers a mix of questions straight out of the mailbag.

Exactly what is meant by the phrase "magical creatures and spell-casters"; my question relates to the vortex spell from the *Tome of Magic*, page 36, but a general definition would be useful for other purposes as well.

In this particular case, a spell-caster is any creature capable of casting spells or using spell-like abilities, including high-level paladins and rangers. A magical creature, for purposes of the *vortex* spell is anything that has been conjured, summoned, animated, or has its origin on another plane. Golems, creatures carrying magical items, and creatures that are enjoying the effects of beneficial spells are not magical unless they also fall into one of the aforementioned categories. You may indeed find this definition useful in other circumstances, but use your common sense when applying it.

I'm having difficulties with the *charm person* spell. How should the spell work during a combat with several creatures on both sides? Will a *charmed* creature immediately switch sides? Does a *charmed* creature believe everything the caster says? Will a *charmed* creature follow the caster around, effectively become the caster's henchman? Is there a limit to the number of *charmed* creatures a character can control at once?

A *charmed* creature regards the spell-caster as a valued friend who will never harm it or tell it a lie. The creature also loses all sense of personal initiative and does nothing unless the caster tells it to do something (see *DMG*, pages 63-64). It is

possible for the caster to persuade the *charmed* creature to attack former comrades, but the caster's intention must be clear and the caster might need to be very insistent if the *charmed* creature is lawful or good and is loyal to its original group. Such communication is seldom possible in the midst of combat, though the caster can draw the *charmed* creature aside for a chat. Note that if the *charmed* creature's associates try to prevent the creature from leaving the group, it becomes much easier for the caster to convince the creature that the former allies are enemies.

A *charmed* creature doesn't necessarily believe everything the caster says, but it is always certain the caster isn't really trying to lie.

A *charmed* creature will do pretty much anything the caster asks it to do, short of obviously suicidal actions and actions completely contrary to the creature's ethos or alignment. For example, no druid is going to set fire to a forest (though a *charmed* druid might be convinced to leave a campfire unattended). If the caster tells the creature to follow, the creature will tag along while the spell lasts. Note that hostile actions on the caster's part merit a new saving throw for the creature, as does too much abuse or interference from the caster's companions.

A caster can keep any number of *charmed* creatures under his thumb at once, but there are practical limitations to how many creatures he can control at once; under most conditions, the caster might issue brief commands to four or five *charmed* creatures in a single round. If a *charmed* creature cannot see, hear, and understand the caster, it probably won't heed his commands.

The material for the elven archer kit in *The Complete Book of Elves* recommends continued specialization with bow. How is this accomplished? Are the long sword, short sword, and dagger the only melee weapons an elven archer can ever use?

The reference to continued specialization is an error, though the upcoming *PLAYERS OPTION™ Combat and Tactics* book (due out in July) includes rules for weapon mastery, which an elven archer certainly could use.

When spending her initial weapon proficiency slots, the only melee weapons an

elven archer can choose are the long sword, short sword, and dagger. The character can choose other melee weapons as she gains new weapon proficiencies. An elven archer never gains any attack roll bonuses with melee weapons of any kind.

The PLANESCAPE™ box set says priests whose deities reside on the Inner Planes lose three levels of experience when adventuring on the Outer Planes because there are three planes between them and their deities. The example (*DM™ Guide to the Planes*, page 14) lists the three planes as the Ethereal, Prime Material, and Astral Planes. Why are the Ethereal and Astral counted when they don't interfere with priests on the Prime?

Because that's the way the deities want things to work. As my colleague David Wise once put it, there are no laws of planar physics that cause priests to lose levels when they visit the Outer Planes, there are just the rules that the powers have laid down. Note that in general no priest loses levels on any Inner Plane or on the Astral or Ethereal plane no matter where the character's deity resides. Of course, there might be places in the multiverse where the powers have decided otherwise, but that's up to the DM or scenario designer.

In the PLANESCAPE setting, can priests in Sigil receive spells? If so, what is the level cost?

Yes they can. Sigil is part of the Plane of Concordant Opposition and is adjacent to every Outer Plane. Priests whose deities reside on the Outer Planes lose no levels. Priests whose deities reside on Inner Planes lose three levels.

The *Manual of the Planes* says that poisons don't work on the Astral Plane because characters' metabolic rates are slowed. The material on the Astral Plane in the PLANESCAPE setting doesn't mention slowed metabolic rates at all. Is this an official change, or just an oversight? Do magical potions work on the Astral Plane?

The exact magical properties of the Astral Plane in the PLANESCAPE setting

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are currently unrevealed. Until updated material for the PLANESCAPE setting comes out, I'd suggest you go by what's in *Manual of the Planes*. According to that book, potions not only work on the Astral Plane, they can last indefinitely and their durations only begin to run out when the character leaves the plane.

In the PLANESCAPE MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM® accessory, the general entry for tanar'ri says they all have a gate spell-like ability. However, the individual entries for the alu-fiend, cambion, manes, and was-trilith don't give any details on *gating*. Do these creatures have the *gate* ability?

No, these creatures have no *gating* ability. The manes is a kind of sub-tanar'ri, the cambion and alu-fiends are tanar'ri cross-breeds, and the was-trilith is an elemental creature not known for its ability to influence other denizens of the Abyss; none of these creatures enjoy the full slate of tanar'ri powers.

In the PLANESCAPE MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM accessory, the entries for the abishai, lemure, and nup-beribo baatezu are confusing. Under what conditions will each of these fiends regenerate hit points? Also, how do the terms "holy magical weapon," "holy sword," "holy item,"

and "sanctified weapon" really mean in this context?

In all three cases, the creatures will not regenerate back to life if killed by a holy sword or holy water, or if doused with holy water after death.

The terms in your list collectively describe holy water and the +5 holy avenger sword. In some campaigns there might be magical holy avenger weapons that are not +5 or that are not swords—they qualify as holy or sanctified weapons. Some campaigns also might have holy items that are not holy water, such as holy wafers, which can be stuffed into creature's body to keep it from regenerating. DMs also might allow good holy symbols to prevent regeneration if placed upon the body.

SPELLFIRE™ game questions

How do the Eye and Hand of Vecna (#156) affect a champion who is sitting with the card in a pool while some other player wants to kill the champion with some other special power?

A champion's level always includes spells, items, and allies currently attached. The Vecna card gives the champion two extra levels if the card is attacked when sitting in the pool (the Vecna card's +5 bonus applies only when attacking).

When is the +1 from the Ring of Shooting Stars (#208) applied to

another champion?

The plus comes into effect once a round whenever the ring owner wants; it lasts the entire round and cannot be taken back or reassigned once given. If something destroys the ring (such as an event) the plus is immediately negated.

When the champions are both monsters and the Treasure (#312) event is used what happens?

In this case, the Treasure event causes both sides to end the battle. There is no winner, so no spoils of victory are drawn. The spells, allies, and other cards already used in the battle are discarded with the monsters. Another battle cannot be started; the attacker's combat options are completed for the turn.

Can any harmful effect be changed with the Calm (400) card? (I'm thinking of Caravan (#319) as an example.)

Calm only stops events that force the player to perform an unwanted action or prevent an action normally allowed. If the event only effects another player, the event is not subject to Calm, even if the side effects are hideous to the player holding the Calm card. For example, Calm cannot stop the following events: Caravan (#319), Silver Hands (#277), Fortunate Omens (#92), and Calm (#400). There are many other events that cannot be calmed.

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I have decided to write because I feel that the multi-classed character vs. the single-classed character problem deserves a solution. The problem here is that the multi-classed character has better abilities, better combat prowess, more spells, etc., because he's allowed to take a fighter kit (or mage, or thief, or whatever), while the single-classed character may have more hit points and advance faster, but his (or her) kit may not come close to the power of the multi-classed character.

The first possible solution to the problem is to allow only humans to choose the mainstream character kits. This means that only a human can choose the Blade kit, or the Meistersinger kit, or the Amazon Wizardess kit, or the Cavalier kit, or whatever. This gives humans some advantage over multi-classed demihuman characters. The demihumans can choose only racial kits. Dwarves can choose kits only from the *Complete Book of Dwarves* (or any kits specifically for dwarves, such as the Chanter bard kit), elves can choose kits only from the *Complete Book of Elves* (or the Minstrel kit), etc.

This, of course, excludes half-elves from virtually all kits; half-elves though, can be the most powerful race of all. Who needs the other characters when you've got a half-elf ranger/wizard/cleric (or specialty priest). So he goes up slowly in levels and gets a few hit points. He can use two weapons with no penalty; has a warrior THACO; gets fighter Strength and Constitution bonuses; can move silently and hide in shadows; gets bonuses to fight certain

creatures; can wear armor (in some cases, even cast spells with armor on); can cast wizard and priest spells; if a specialty priest, can have special abilities; gets the best saving throws of each class, etc.

The second possible solution is to allow only single-classed characters to have a kit. This allows single-classed characters to be on a par with the more powerful multi-classed characters. It also helps to promote possible pro-human characters (which seem to be lacking; I truly feel sorry for Bryan Fairfield, "Forum" issue #195, with his party of half-elves, perhaps because it will be so hard to even things out in favor of the villains). This also helps to distinguish such characters from any other class, giving them some advantages and disadvantages that add to the role-playing experience. The multi-classed characters gain experience slowly, but ultimately become more powerful than the single-classed characters. But that's only because they live longer.

A third solution might be to require that all multi-classed characters who take kits need an additional 5%, 10%, or even 15% in experience points, in each class, to advance a level. That might make a player think twice about taking a kit. If your characters are particularly powerful (or unbalanced), you might impose the penalty on all multi-classed characters, regardless of whether they have a kit.

Of course, other more interesting options appear. For example, I play Palladium Books' RIFTS* game. Their solution to the half-creature problem (you know, half-elf and half-human characters or half-vampire, half-dragon; etc.) is to say it is genetically impossible. Humans and elves are genetically dissimilar, and therefore any such combination is impossible. I realize this is a scientific approach, but it is adaptable to the AD&D® game. The incredible flexibility of the half-elf is the real problem here. So without half-elves, the problems seem to disappear.

I agree wholeheartedly with Talus London Young (also in issue #195) and his blue-highlighter trick. Though tongue-in-cheek (I assume), it would be a way to control the character class problem. The one solution, though, that everyone has overlooked when discussing this is that this problem exists whether or not you are using a kit. Kits were meant to add more substance to a character, to give the char-

acter a more defined life and to provide a specific focus for the character. This seems to have been lost on the side of the road as the kits got more and more powerful. There is no easy way to deal with this problem. It requires thought and good judgment on the part of the DM to equalize things in her campaign.

In my opinion, though, the one sure way to defeat any so-called "powerful" character is to put him up against an age class Four or Five dragon who uses his magical treasure to his advantage. An age class Four dragon who uses his *book of infinite spells* to cast *stoneskin* upon himself and wields that *sword +2, +4 versus magic-using creatures* (using *polymorph self* to take on the shape of a human) against that fighter/blade is one thing that will make that fighter/blade wish he had stayed home.

Finally, many issues back, some poor harried DM wrote in about his players' frivolous use of the *stoneskin* spell. I offer several solutions. One (as in the example above), have the monsters use the spell also. Two, spell book ink tends to run when wet, like when it falls into the rain or a river. Three, spell books aren't immune to fire. Four, it's a shame when those illiterate savages use the spell books for toilet paper. Five, (and if you have access to the *Complete Book of Elves*), use a Spellfilcher.

For those of you with other problems not addressed here, just remember a quote from the SSI game *Gateway to the Savage Frontier*: A single dagger at midnight sows greater terror than a thousand swords at dawn.

Colin Cashman
Needham MA

I am writing in response to a couple of letters I read in DRAGON issue #195. Vincent Masso wrote about the problems he has with multi-classed characters. I'm rather surprised people are having problems with multi-classed characters being too powerful. In my group of friends, nobody wants to run them because single-classed characters are much more powerful.

At first level a fighter/cleric/mage is more powerful than the single-classed fighter, cleric, or mage, but that quickly changes as the characters begin to advance in level. When these characters have all gained 5,500 experience points, each of the single-classed characters are

third level but the fighter/cleric/mage is still first level in all his classes. When three million experience points are reached, the mage will be 18th level, the fighter will be 20th level, and the cleric will be 21st level but the multi-classed character will only be 12th level in each of his classes. If the AD&D game's level restrictions are used, multi-classed characters will top out at much lower levels.

I find this more than makes up for a character's extra abilities. Add to this the fact that such a character also must average his hit points between his classes. A player running a fighter/mage will most likely end up with a tough mage who can defend himself with a two-handed sword as a last resort. The character will usually have too few hit points to stand toe to toe with opponents designed as fighters.

In Talus London Young's letter, he described several ways to limit the abilities of multi-classed characters. I feel these are far too severe and completely unnecessary. If the DM feels uncomfortable with multi-classed characters, he should simply announce at the start of the campaign that only single-classed characters are allowed. I've played in games with similar restrictions without anyone feeling slighted.

Robert Briggs
Tulsa OK

I am writing in response to the many "Forum" letters regarding the power of multi-classed characters in the AD&D game 2nd Edition game rules. Let me begin by stating that many of the super-powerful characters in question come through the use of character kits, which I personally object to. I believe that class kits and personality types are simply crutches for the role-playing impaired. However, I respect the fact that kits represent an official addition to the rules, so I will address the problems that arise through the combination of kits and multi-classed characters.

Andy Shockney's letter in issue #187 mentioned several specific examples of how multi-classed characters are superior to their single-classed counterparts. Unfortunately, these examples were largely misguided. As Talus London Young pointed out in his letter in issue #195, multi-classed characters do not gain only the best attributes from each class, but also some of the restrictions, as noted on page 45 of the *Player's Handbook*. And it should be noted that the restrictions normally placed upon single-classed characters are not merely the whim of the gods (except in the case of priests), but are based on solid logic. A single-classed mage can wear plate mail, as can a multi-classed fighter/mage, but such armor would interfere with the ability of either to cast wizard spells. Similarly, armor heavier than leather hinders the thieving skills of all rogues, no matter how many classes they may have. The last case is that of multi-classed priests. It states in the *Player's Handbook* that multi-

classed specialty priests can exist only at the DM's option. Such characters should be carefully considered, as many gods would probably not look kindly on such a conflict of interest. In any event, any restrictions placed on a priest by his deity should take precedence over those abilities that come from a second class.

These rules clarifications, however, will not solve the problems presented by Mr. Shockney, nor those brought up in issue #195 by Bryan Fairfield. Mr. Fairfield's campaign, after the introduction of the *Complete Bard's Handbook*, consists entirely of half-elven multi-classed bards. The aforementioned Mr. Young, in his letter in issue #195, in addition to mentioning the limitations placed on multi-classed characters in the *Player's Handbook*, suggested several "house rules" that could help limit the power of multi-classed characters. His suggestions, however, will not help the situation because they unbalance the game against multi-classed characters. The truth is, there is no problem with multi-classed characters. The AD&D game has managed quite well with them for longer, I suspect, than either Mr. Shockney or Mr. Fairfield have been playing it.

The real problem lies not in the game, but in the players. To any DM who finds that his players are all creating half-elven multi-classed bards, or any other race/class combination, and finds that combination too powerful, the problem is that your players are choosing classes and kits not based on which will be the most fun to role-play, but on which will be easiest to roll-play. This disease is known as min/maxing, and if the symptoms exist, no amount of rules changes will cure it.

Jeff Stone
Fullerton CA

I have a question regarding high-level characters interacting with low-level opponents. Recently one of my fellow players had his 11th-level mage *teleport* above a pirate ship (50 crew members), *levitate* down to the deck, and tell the captain to surrender or else. The player was totally befuddled when the captain of the ship (5th level) promptly ordered two shipmates (1st level) to put the mage in irons below deck. The mage offered no resistance (the player felt he shouldn't have had to do anything else). The player's argument was as follows: There is no way two 1st-level people could/would effectively manhandle such a high-level character—they should have been stricken stiff with awe. The player felt so strongly about this that he quit the campaign entirely.

Is there a reference somewhere that I am not familiar with that infers high-level characters or powerful individuals need not fear low-level characters? Does a low experience level necessitate incompetency, cowardice, and stupidity and preclude skill, bravery, and intelligence?

Larry Sonders
Pt. Neches TX

I am writing in response to a letter by Mohammed F. Kamel in issue #204. I run one- to three-person campaigns for friends at camp in Colorado. We do most of our role-playing while hiking in the mountains, and it is impossible to use dice or paper while keeping a steady pace on the trail. To deal with these problems, I came up with a base plot that I built upon during the course of the game and I used settings in which maps were not necessary. I also came up with a number system to deal with the dice problem. It could also be useful to do away with some of your dice problems.

As for maintaining a realistic fear in the characters, in most of these situations, I did away with numbers altogether and judged myself whether the arrow hit its mark according to the character's level and statistics, the measure of the opponent, how well the player was doing, and sometimes whether I liked the person or not. If a player is acting stupid, I simply announce that his character has been killed.

But, back to the number system. If there is a 1 in 4 chance of the enemy's sword hitting the PC, I would think of a number between 1 and 4 and ask the player for one also. If my number was 3 and the player's number was also 3, the blow would hit. I also deal with how close the player's number was to mine. If the player's number was 4, the attack was close. If the player chose 1, the strike clearly missed. The fact that you change the numbers every time keeps the players guessing. As for THACO, if the player's THACO was 17, I would pick four numbers between 1 and 20. If the player guesses one of the numbers, his THACO roll is successful.

Wilson Miner
Wichita KS

I have been reviewing my back issues and I'd like to add my ideas to two topics that were raised in past "Forum" letters.

First, in response to Mr. Lapalme's letter in issue #196, in which he wondered how someone who wasn't familiar with fantasy or science fiction could be introduced into an RPG based on such: About three years ago I made friends with a girl who hated *Star Trek*, and who had actually read *The Hobbit* and hated it! Later (after she had heard me discuss a few of my sessions), she asked me to teach her how to play the D&D® game. I was reluctant to teach her because I felt that she would not enjoy the game, as it is based in a fantasy setting. Well, she eventually wore down my resistance and joined my gaming group. Now, I am very glad that she did because my friend has one of the strangest, yet most refreshing styles of play that I have ever seen, and I thoroughly enjoy my sessions with her. The moral? Go ahead and try; something good may come out of it.

What does my friend play in our group? Well, the girl who once hated *The Hobbit* ended up playing a halfling!

As for my second point, I have noticed

that a lot of problems brought up in "Forum" have to do with DMs wondering how they can stop their players from disrupting game balance. Whether the problem has to do with spells or psionics, there is a simple solution: monsters! TSR has put in enough specialty monsters that a DM should be able to deal with anything players can come up with.

If psionics is the problem, then why not use more of the creatures in the back of *The Complete Psionics Handbook*? A lot of the monsters (such as the cerebral parasite and the brain mole, to name a couple) can be quite effective in reducing a psionist's energy. Some of the other monsters (intellect devourer, thought eater) can be quite effective in reducing a psionist's hit points.

If magic is the problem, then why not use a balhiir (from Ed Greenwood's excellent book *Spellfire*), a glowing cloud that absorbs all magic? Or why not use spellfire itself? The power of spellfire enables a person with it to absorb magic spells or items and convert them to magical fire. Imagine an NPC with this power in a campaign with the *stoneskin* problem, mentioned a few issues back. The NPC could join the party as a trusted member. Then he could absorb their *stoneskins* while the party is resting, and use the party's own spell energy against them!

If all else fails, then just use a method that one of the DMs in my party came up with to handle psionists: Drop a rock on

them. Hey, it may seem cruel, but there hasn't been a psionist in my campaign since.

Anne Butler
Ambler PA

Recently I have been using a method for determining how many of a given magical device exist in my campaign world, which is based on the XP value of the device.

Magical items of less than 1,000 XP are *uncommon* (no form of magic is common). These include potions, a few rings, weapons, and some miscellaneous magic. A town's magic shop may have a potion or two for sale for an exorbitant price, while a big city's arsenal will have one of each kind of sword, axe, and miscellaneous weapon—all under heavy guard, of course.

Magical items of 1,000 to 5,000 XP are scarce. There are about 100 of these items, all told—items such as most rings, a *rod of splendor*, a *wand of magic missiles*, and a *robe of stars*. Most of these items will be scattered about in treasure troves and tombs.

Magical items worth more than 5,000, but less than 10,000 XP are *rare*, with about 20 of each item in existence. Rare items include things such as a *staff of withering*, a *tome of clear thought*, and an *efreeti bottle*.

Magical items worth 10,000 or more XP are *singular*. No more than three of any of these potent items will exist. There are not many items of such power; the only ones

listed in the *DMG* are *rod of cancellation*, *rod of resurrection*, *staff of the magi*, *staff of power*, *vorpil sword*, and the *folding boat*. These powerful items I present as being the ultimate achievements of a culture, and include one for every age of man. For example, in the GREYHAWK® campaign, one *staff of the magi* was invented by the Suloise before the Invoked Devastation, another was found in Blackmoor, and a third was made in the Great Kingdom at its height.

There are a few items listed with alternate forms—*horns of Valhalla*, the *ring of vampiric regeneration*, and so on. Individually, they rate as items of the next higher rarity class. For instance, a *horn of Valhalla*, worth 1,000 XP will be scarce. There will be about 100 of them in my campaign world. About 25 of these will be *brass horns of Valhalla*, and 13 of them will have an alignment. Similarity, a *ring of regeneration* is scarce, but a *ring of vampiric regeneration*, 10 times less common, is rare. Twenty such rings would exist in my campaign.

In this way, I keep track of how many of each item I can hand out, and have a reason for my players as to why I keep the really powerful items to a minimum.

James R. Collier
Georgetown, Ontario

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The Game Wizards

How to build the BLOOD WARS™ deck from heck

by Steven E. Schend

It all started early in the design stages of the BLOOD WARS card game. In order to make a card game attractive to card collectors and game players alike, some of the cards had to be more powerful or evocative to be attractive and lure the fans into buying more in order to find them. Of course, this assumes that some cards are less useful, and that was something I didn't want to set up; every card, in my opinion, absolutely had to be useful from one standpoint or another. After much discussion and changing of cards and how they worked, I set up . . . what? You don't know about the BLOOD WARS card game yet? Well, I guess I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Let's hit the high points of the game's design, and then I'll tell you more about how to customize your decks in a few of the hundreds (or thousands) of possible ways.

The Basics

Conceptually, the Blood Wars are the eternal power struggle between the evil races known as the tanar'ri and the baatezu. For aeons, the wars have been isolated on the Lower Planes and are regarded by denizens of the Outer Planes as "an internal power struggle" among the fallen races and none of their concern. Well, the card game operates on the plot that the Blood Wars have now raged out of control and have spilled out onto all of the Outer Planes! In the game, players control many different Warlords and their armies in attempts to conquer territory and win the latest skirmish in the Blood Wars. Territory can be conquered in two different ways in this game: brute force (Combat) or politics (Intrigue).

There are 300 cards within the initial DUEL-DECK™ packs distributed as follows:

150 common cards, 100 uncommon cards, 50 rare cards (in the decks and Escalation Pack I) and 34 chase cards (available only in Escalation Pack I). Within those amounts, there are four types of cards within this game: Warlords, Legions, Battlefields, and Fates. Each card has at least an alignment and a random number for uses within the game.

- Warlords are the player's leaders, and each has an Intrigue Strength, which measures its usefulness in the political battles of Intrigue. Warlords have powers that can be used during Combat or Intrigue or at any time.

- Legions are the player's combat forces, and their relative power is measured by Combat Strength. Legions can be established under Warlords with matching alignments or another affiliations such as a faction of Sigil. Legions also have 12 standard powers to choose from (seven for Combat, five for Intrigue), as well as some powers unique to individual Legions.

- Battlefields are the territories the player seeks to conquer; when a Battlefield is conquered, the player gains Victory Points, which are listed on the card, and the total of these determines the game's winner. Many Battlefields also bestow abilities upon their player after they have been conquered.

- Finally, Fate cards are the "wild cards" of the BLOOD WARS game. These cards affect the Combat or Intrigue Strengths of cards, change Battlefield conditions, eliminate opponents' Legions, or even alter the very rules of the game! Some types of Fate cards include Orders, Spells, Items, Magical Items, and Artifacts.

Most cards, and all Legions and Warlords, have an alignment; Legions stack under Warlords with similar or identical alignments to form armies (or Battle Hands, as they are known in the game). Fate: Item cards also are placed under Warlords to boost the power of the Battle Hand. When Battlefields are played down, a player also commits either just the Warlord (for Intrigue) or the whole Battle Hand (for Combat), and one (Combat) or more Warlords (for Intrigue) of other players are set to oppose him. Rather than go into all the details of Combat or Intrigue, suffice it to say that there are a number of ways to mount successful attacks and defenses within both methods, and the secret lies in deck manipulation.



Customized decks

Each player needs one deck of BLOOD WARS cards to play, and a DUEL-DECK pack purchased from TSR has two randomly assorted decks of 50 cards each. I took great pains to ensure that the game is playable immediately out of the box as purchased, though (as with many of the current crop of card games) it works even better once your deck has been altered to follow your game strategies.

Fifty cards is the standard deck size, though decks can be altered down to 40 cards or increased to 100 cards, provided they follow the Deck Construction guidelines within the BLOOD WARS rules; the basic limits one must follow are a limit of three copies of any one card in a deck (some cards are specifically limited to one per deck) and limits of how many of a particular type of card per deck (listed in the rules, but not here due to space considerations). Yes, a player with 40 cards can play a person with a 100 card deck and not be totally outclassed. How? Well, once a player has exhausted all the cards in a draw pile, the discards are automatically reshuffled into a draw deck and play continues—everyone has an unlimited deck! The only differences are the speed at which people go through their decks and the variety of cards within a deck.

Now, everyone's going to have a particular way to design a deck, but in general, what sort of card balances should you look for, regardless of your deck's strategy? Well, to cover all contingencies and not leave your deck with any glaring weaknesses, try the following card breakdowns for a 50-card deck:

Five Warlords (two Combat powers, two Intrigue powers, one general; two or three alignments maximum)

10 Battlefields (two of each Victory Point level)

20 Legions (10 Intrigue powers, 10 Combat powers; match alignments with Warlords)

15 Fate cards (two Orders, four Spells, four Support, five Items & Magical Items)

The key to building your decks is deciding which strategy you wish to follow, and those strategies are nigh-infinite. Below are a number of basic strategies and how to think about customizing your BLOOD WARS decks, what lines to build decks along, and some sample decks you can build quickly.

Strategy decks

The simplest type of deck to put together is one designed solely for Combat. These decks tend to include Warlords with Combat powers, Legions with high Combat Strengths, and Combat-effective Fate cards. Obviously, the frequency and the particular cards change, but Combat decks are straightforward in design and effect: they are built to win at Combat and do so quickly. The simple focus on combat contains any number of deck permutations

within it, provided by the following questions: Do you want an offensive or defensive deck? Do you want more high Combat Strength Legions or do you need more combat-effective Fate cards like Items?

Intrigue decks answer the other type of conflict within the BLOOD WARS game, creating decks that are primarily effective against other Warlords in the politics of Intrigue. Cards included in these decks tend to be high Intrigue Strength Warlords, Legions with Intrigue powers or high random numbers (a card is drawn for an extra bonus and these numbers are used for this), or Fate cards that alter a Warlord's influence. Like Combat decks, the builder must concern herself with questions on offensive and defensive capabilities and the like.

While these decks can be oriented as either Combat or Intrigue, power decks count on a number of effective card combinations and card powers to win their games. Most, if not every, card in these decks is chosen for its quick-strike potential in either a Combat or Intrigue situation.

Theme decks

Regardless of their Combat or Intrigue strategies, many playtesters liked to put together theme-decks: decks with an internal sense of logic through one aspect of the card or another. These can still be Combat- or Intrigue-oriented decks, but their theme is most important to the player. Strategy is still accounted for, and each theme deck has aspects of Combat, Intrigue, or power decks. Suggestions on general themes include:

- Alignment decks: The deck is limited to Warlords & Legions of one particular alignment, or an aspect of alignment—a Lawful or Chaotic deck, for example. This makes it extremely easy for Warlords to assemble Battle Hands.

- Armory decks: The theme for these decks is the abundance of Fate: Item cards. Fifty-card Armory decks can have up to 20 Item cards (the maximum number of Fate cards in a 50-card deck). Fate: Item cards also include Magical Items and Artifacts, allowing for some truly powerful card play. An example would be a Swords deck, with triplicates of each of the Blade of Loyalty, Sword of Purity, and the Scimitar of Valor.

- Planar decks: These theme decks limit themselves to the creatures and locations within one or two Outer Planes. Examples include a Mount Celestia deck, filled with the few Battlefields from that plane and the many types of archon Legions, or a Prime Material deck with all the Warlords and Legions who travelled from the Prime Material to the Outer Planes and got dragged into the Blood Wars.

- Magic decks: This type of deck relies heavily on spells, magical items, and magic-using creatures. Out of the maximum 20 Fate cards in a 50-card deck, 12 can be Spells, and the remaining Fates could be Magical Items or Artifacts. Vari-

ous Legions and Warlords have magical affiliations that add to the theme beyond their normal power.

- Racial decks: Very similar to the alignment and planar decks, these decks are themed around a particular race of creatures. Most likely, they all share the same alignment (though not always), and would reflect a common tactic within the fictional war itself (tanar'ri vs. baatezu with yugoloth mercenaries on both sides). The most common racial decks in the BLOOD WARS card game will most consist of archons, baatezu, eladrin, guardinals, humans, modrons, and tanar'ri.

- Story decks: Similar to other decks with a slight difference, story decks contain specifically collected Legions and Warlords and precise Battlefields and Fate cards to allow a player to depict a minor story within the Blood War. For example, a player constructs a number of Lawful Legions under all Lawful Warlords, and every Battlefield in the deck is on the Abyss—the player is attempting to tell a story about the forces of Law invading the Abyss!

Sample decks

Each of the decks constructed below consists only of common cards and a few uncommon cards, so they can be constructed quickly and easily. These decks also conform to the Deck Construction rules and the limits set on the cards themselves. Keep in mind that these are only a tiny fraction of the possible deck styles and combinations, and the only limitation is the rarity of other suitable cards.

Forces of Good deck Intrigue/Alignment deck (Lawful & Chaotic Good)

Battlefields (10): Arborea, Arcadia, Beastlands (2), Bytopia (2), Elysium (2), Mount Celestia (2)

Warlords (6): Bahamut, Deva Commander (3), Gwynarwhyf the Veiled, Phylaras
Legions (20): Coure, Firre Troops, Lantern Archon, Shiere Crusaders, Sword Archon, Warden Archon (3 of each); Agathinon, Noviere Raider (single Legions)

Fates (14): Blade of Loyalty, Monster Summons (3), Political Scapegoat (3), Renegotiations (3), Spirited Troops, Sword of Purity, Tide Turns! (2)

Deck of the Abyss Combat/Planar deck

Battlefields (10): The Abyss, Azzagrat, Demonweb Pits, Forbidden Citadel, Naratyr, Plain of Infinite Portals (3), Torremor, Zrintor the Viper Forest
Warlords (6): Lord Tenarrus, Marilith Colonel (2), Molydeus Magistrate, Nalfeshnee Captain (2)

Legions (25): Babau Recruiter, Nabassu, Succubus (3 each); Dretch (16 by use of Horde power)

Fates (9): Ambush!, Charge!, Invite to Battle (3), Lance of Pain, Major Transformation, Rain of Fire, Spirited Troops

Name	Type	Freq.	Artist	Fate Cards	Name	Type	Freq.	Artist			
Firre Eladrin	UC	RL		(I: Item; Imi: Item, Magical Item; Ia: Item, Artifact; 0: Orders; Sp: Spell)	Spirited Troops	0	C	TD			
Ghaele Eladrin	R	RL		Ambush!	0	C	TD	Stolen Seat of Power	0	R	TD
Githyanki	C	TD		Animate Battlefield	Sp	UC	TD	Sword of Purity	1	C	DK
Githzerai	C	TD		Armor of Invulnerability	I	C	TD	Tide Turns!	0	C	PJ
Glabrezu	UC	TD		Assassination Plot	Sp	R	TD	Trident of Corruption	1	UC	DK
Gray Slaad	UC	TD		Astral Conduit	Sp	C	TD	Unified Front	Sp	UC	TD
Green Slaad	C	TD		Battle Scarred Planes	Sp	R	RL	Escalation Pack I/Chase Cards			
Hamatula	UC	TD		Betrayal	Sp	C	TD	15 cards per Escalation Pack; packs consist of original 300 cards + 34 chase cards.			
Hound Archon	C	TD		Blade of Loyalty	I	C	DK	AC: Acolyte; Av: Avatar; I: Item; Imi: Item, Magical Item; Ia: Item, Artifact; 0: Orders; Sp: Spell; St: Support			
Hydroloth	UC	TD		The Bladed Mace	I	UC	DK	Fate Cards			
Kochrachon	C	TD		Blood War Provocation	Sp	C	TD	Amulet of Protection	Imi	Ch	NE
Lantern Archon	C	TD		Call to Arms	Sp	C	PJ	Bebilith Sympathizer	St	Ch	TD
Leonal Guardinal	R	TD		Cambion Mercenary	0	UC	TD	The Converted	AC	Ch	PJ
Light Aasimon	UC	TD		Charge!	0	C	TD	Crown of Protection	Imi	Ch	NE
Lillend	R	TD		Cloak of Invisibility	Imi	UC	NE	Foo Dog Pack	St	Ch	TD
Lupinal	C	TD		Conclave of Generals	Sp	UC	TD	Gaze of the Bodak	Sp	Ch	TD
Malaetar Rider	UC	DK		Consolidation of Power	Sp	R	HH	Hruggek's Symbol	Imi	Ch	NE
Malelephant	C	TD		Cranium Blast	Sp	C	NE	Legions Mutiny!	0	Ch	TD
Mezzoloth	UC	TD		Crysal Ball	Imi	UC	DCS	Lemure Patrol	St	Ch	TD
Monodrone	R	TD		Dragonscale Armor	I	UC	NE	Lower Planar			
Movanic Deva	C	TD		End Hostilities!	0	R	TD	Conscription	0	Ch	TD
Nabassu	C	TD		Escape from Death	Sp	C	TD	Marraenoloth Skiff	Sp	Ch	TD
Nic'Epona	C	TD		Gate Key	0	UC	TD	Massacre in Baator	Sp	Ch	HH
Night Hag	C	TD		Honorable Passing	Sp	C	TD	Mercykiller Paladin	St	Ch	TD
Norse Dwarves	UC	TD		Invite to Battle	Sp	C	TD	Mephit Swarm	St	Ch	TD
Noviere Eladrin	C	RL		Lance of Pain	I	C	DK	Modron Sentries	St	Ch	TD
Nupperibo	C	TD		Lost Comrade Returns	Sp	UC	TD	Native of Sigil	AC	Ch	TD
Octon	R	TD		Mace of Misery	I	C	DK	Nupperibo Host	St	Ch	TD
Oread	UC	TD		Major Transformation	Sp	C	TD	Peace Compact	0	Ch	TD
Osyluth	UC	TD		Modron Procession	Sp	C	DCS	Prisoners of War	0	Ch	TD
Outsider Archer	C	TD		Monster Summons	Sp	C	TD	Ring of Protection	Imi	Ch	NE
Parai	R	TD		Pandemonium Madness	Sp	C	TD	Scream of Armanites	St	Ch	TD
Piscoloth	C	TD		Pandemonium Madness	Sp	C	TD	Shamble of Rutterkin	St	Ch	TD
Quadrone	C	TD		Political Scapegoat	Sp	C	TD	Shekinester's Symbol	Imi	Ch	NE
Quill	R	RL		Powers of Evil Intervene	0	UC	TD	Slaadi Mob	St	Ch	TD
Red Slaad	C	TD		Powers of Good	0	R	NE	Slaughter in the Abyss	Sp	Ch	HH
Rogue Modron	C	TD		Powers of Neutrality	0	R	NE	Tiefling Sensate	St	Ch	TD
Shield Maidens of Odin	R	TD		Intervene	0	R	NE	Upper Planar Recruitment	0	Ch	TD
Shiere Eladrin	C	RL		Press Gang	Sp	UC	PJ	Yeth Hound Pack	St	Ch	TD
Snowhair Oread	UC	TD		Prime Summons I	Sp	C	TD	Yugoloth Bribery	Sp	Ch	HH
Spinagon	C	TD		Prime Summons II	Sp	UC	TD	Legion cards			
Spirit of the Air	C	TD		Prime Summons III	Sp	UC	TD	Bugbear Shaman	AC	Ch	TD
Succubus	C	TD		Prime Summons IV	Sp	R	TD	Tutor of the Crone	AC	Ch	TD
Sword Archon	C	TD		Protection vs. Fate	Sp	C	NE	Warlord cards			
Tiefling Amazon	UC	TD		Protection vs. Legions	Sp	C	NE	Hruggek	Av	Ch	DK
Tiefling Wanderer	C	DK		Protection vs. Warlords	Sp	C	NE	The Lady of Pain	Av	UR/Ch	TD
Tiefling Wizard	R	TD		Rain of Fire	Sp	C	HH	Shekinester	Av	Ch	TD
Trumpet Archon	UC	TD		Renegotiations	0	C	TD				
Ursinal Guardinal	UC	TD		Scepter of Shekelor	Ia	R	TD				
Vargouilles	C	TD		Scimitar of Valor	I	UC	DK				
Vrock	UC	TD		Sneak Attack	0	UC	TD				
Warden Archon	C	TD		Spell Mirror	Sp	C	TD				
Yagnoloth	UC	TD		Spies in the Walls	Sp	C	TD				
Zoveri	R	TD									

Rain of Fire, Spell Mirror (2), Spirited Troops, Tide Turns!

Major Transformation, Modron Procession, Monster Summons (3)

Arcane desk

Power/Magic deck

Battlefields (10): Arcadia, Astral Plane (3),

Outlands, Infinite Staircase (2), River Styx (3)

Warlords (6): Hawk Lord, Lazzaret the Brown, Marisa, Old Hannirian, Phylaras, Tulani Warlord

Legions (18): Clueless Wizard, Cranium Rats, Githzerai, Mezzoloth, Nic'Epona, Spirit of the Air (3 each)

Fates (16): Astral Conduit, Cloak of Invisibility, Cranium Blast, Crystal Ball, Escape from Death, Monster Summons, Pandemonium Madness, Prime Summons I, Protection vs. Fate, Protection vs. Legions, Protection vs. Warlords,

Outlands deck

General Planar deck

Battlefields (10): Dwarven Mountain,

Mausoleum of Chronepsis, Outlands, Palace of Judgement, River Ma'at, Semuanya's Bog, Sheela Peryroyl's Realm, The Spire (3)

Warlords (6): Chronepsis, Old Hannirian, Scion of Ilsensine (3), Thomstel Maederson

Legions (21): Baku, Cranium Rats, Einheriar of the Outlands, Malaetar Rider, Nic'Epona, Quill, Spirit of the Air (3 each)

Fates (13): Bladed Mace, Call to Arms, Cranium Blast (3), Mace of Misery (3),

Tales of the Blood Wars

Last but not least, I'd like to hear from you, card-game players out there who've given the BLOOD WARS game a try and are willing to share your opinions. Tell me if any questions or problems crop up during your games, let me know about some particularly devastating card combination you've discovered, or write down your own "killer" decks and how and why you built it. I want to hear from you, so we can continue to produce the games that you want to play. Write to me at: TSR, Inc., 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva WI 53147.

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Ral Partha Freezes Prices

By Ral
Editor of Partha Chronicle

Happy New Year! A little late, I know, but it is 1995 and, thankfully, 1994 is long gone for all eternity. Thank goodness! The miniatures industry was on shaky ground for too long. That Card game, "you know the one", took the country by storm, forcing all the Game Companies to reassess their priorities.

Well anyway, we ended the year on a good note. We have a lot of exciting projects on the board this year. I can not tell what yet. It's a surprise.

What I can tell you is very good news! We will NOT increase our prices this year. Yeah!

We knew you would be thrilled. The truth is we realize how big a price increase you had to swallow when we went to Lead Free metal and we can appreciate how hard it was to take. When you buy toys they are supposed to be fun. Taking out a second mortgage on your house to buy a Battletech miniature is definitely not fun.

In lieu of all of that, we want to thank you for your continued support. Those of you who patronized Ral Partha over the years and have come to expect a raise in prices this time of year, can rest easy.

As a second note, the 1995 Ral Partha Catalog is now available. Talk to your local Game/Hobby store or give us a call.

ERRATA

It has been brought to our attention that in our last missive (appearing in issue #212 of DRAGON® Magazine) we neglected to mention one of our Canadian Distributors for Retail Stores. (The Great Partha evidently was 'Seer'-ing something else at the time.) We would like to correct this gross oversight on our part at this time and call your attention to:

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Rampaging Trolls Check them out! They are really nasty. Cool looking too.



02-140 Troll Leader and Shaman



02-144 Troll Light Infantry

By Partha, the Great Seer
Great Seer of The Partha Chronicle

A Drumbeat in the distance...The smell of rendering fat and swamp in the air...I see...a wart. No. Wait. I see a bunch of warts...And puss, I definately see puss. The mists of Space and Time are clearing. Ahhh! It is the return of the Trolls, I sense! Gone from the ken of man for 'lo these past hundred years, the Troll-kind have returned to wreak their vengeance on the lands of men.

A dark day is at hand and any that would remain free (and indeed, retain their entrails!) must set aside current jealousies and strife to join forces against the coming tide of war.

Partha
The Great Seer

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BOB LESSL

ACE!
CHARLIE!
WHAT
HAPPENED!

HE'S DEAD.
REALLY DEAD.
MURDERED!



WHO WAS IT?
DID YOU SEE?
OH, CHARLIE...

WHOEVER
IT WAS MUST
HAVE HEARD
ME COMING
AND GOT
AWAY.

I... WAS SUP-
POSED TO BE BUT I
WAS LATE. ONLY THIS
MYTE WAS LEFT AND
IT SLOWED ME DOWN
ENOUGH THAT
THE OTHERS
GOT AWAY.

BUT I
THOUGHT
YOU WERE
WITH
CHARLIE.



IT WAS
ALREADY
TOO LATE
FOR CHARLIE.



WHO
WOULD
WANT
TO
KILL
CHARLIE?
I DIDN'T
THINK
HE HAD
ENEMIES,
ONLY
FRIENDS.

SOMEONE
TRYING TO GET
AT ME... OR TO
STOP ME FROM
GETTING AT THE
LIBRAM. THE
LAW-
BOYS.

ACE, I'M SORRY
ABOUT CHARLIE.
I KNOW YOU
WANT US TO
FIND WHO KILLED
HIM
AND.

THE BEST
WAY TO PAY
THEM BACK-WHO-
EVER DID THIS - IS
FOR ME TO FIND
LIBRAM X, AND
MAKE SURE THEY
NEVER HAVE IT.



YOU MEAN
"WE" RIGHT?
WE'LL FIND
THE LIBRAM
TOGETHER.







Dragonmirth

"Remember, our foe is a small, but crafty dragon! He could be anywhere . . ."



By David Hanson



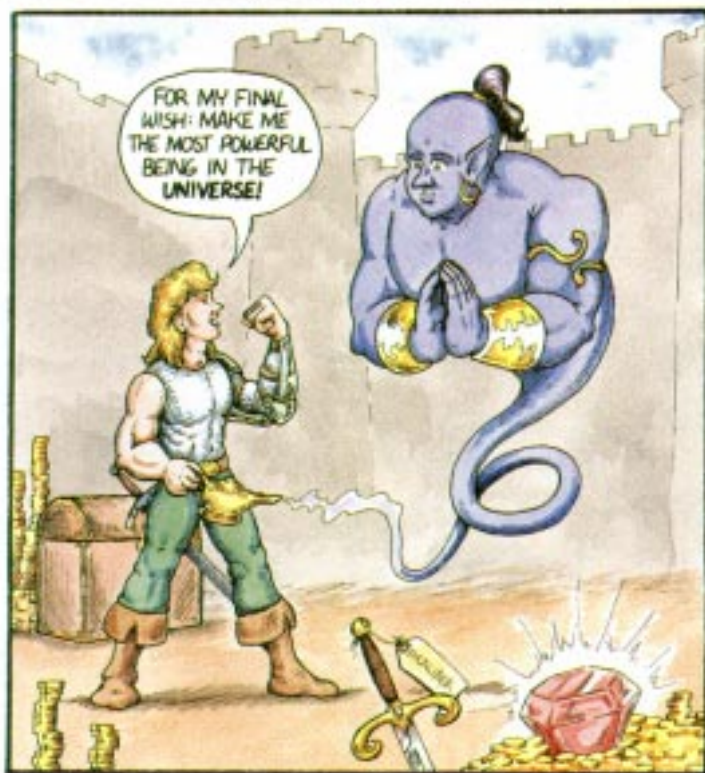
By Matthew Guss



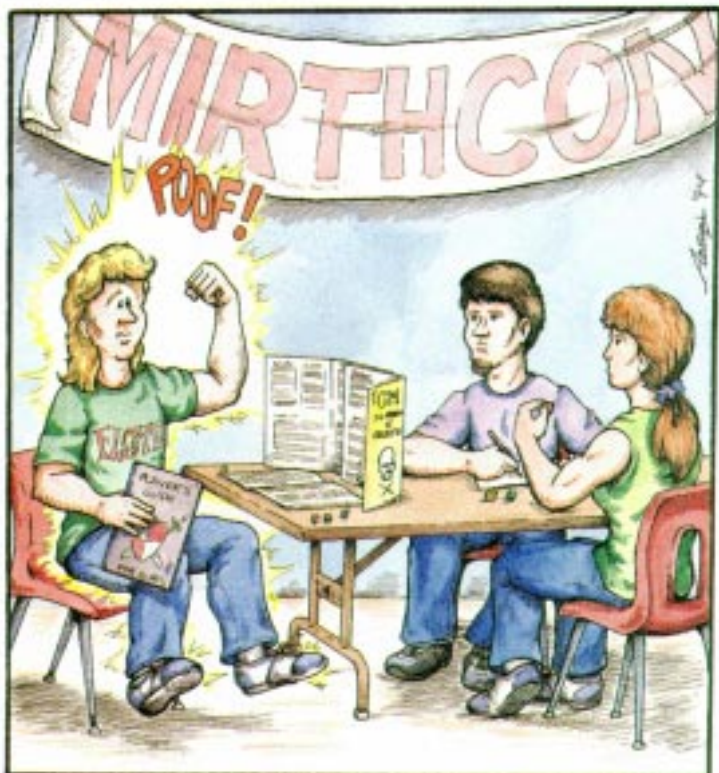
REMEMBER ALAN, THE BEST DEFENSE IS A GOOD OFFENSE!



WHAT'S THE SECOND BEST?

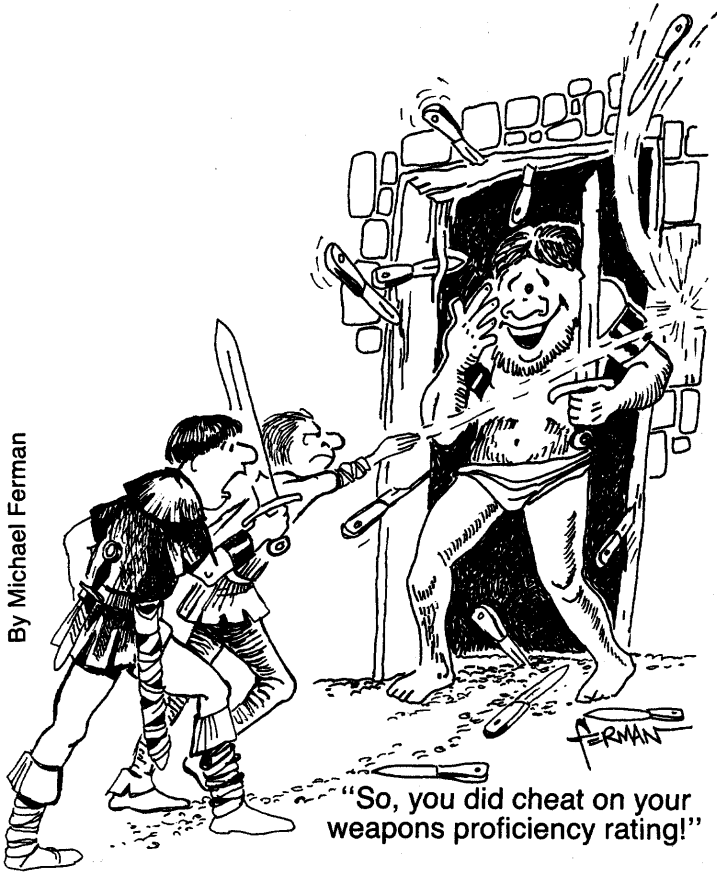


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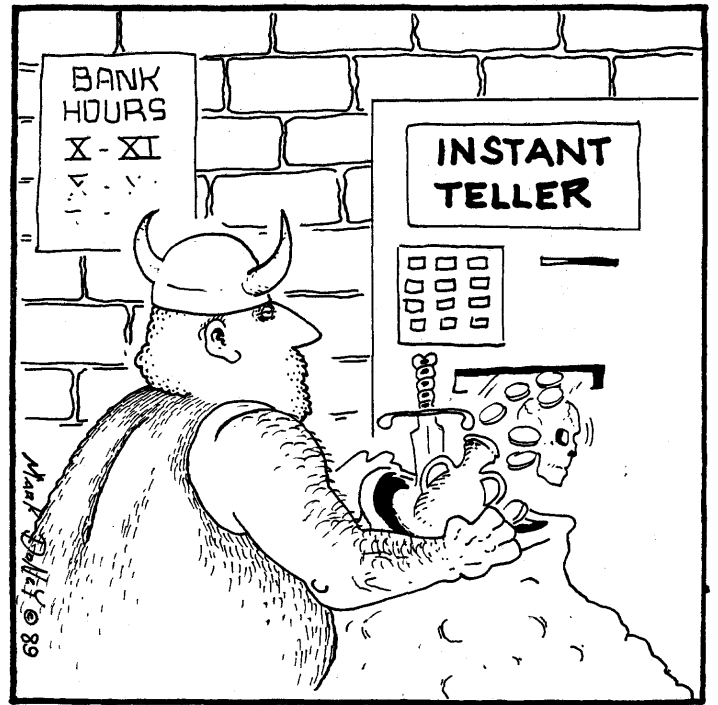


POOF!

By Michael Ferman



"So, you did cheat on your weapons proficiency rating!"

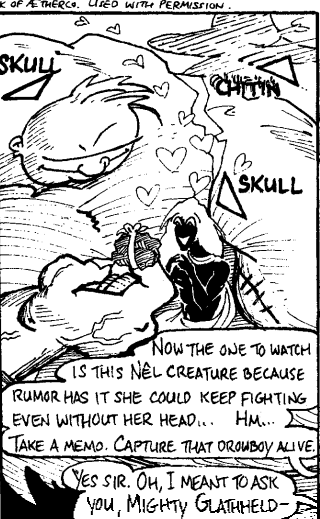
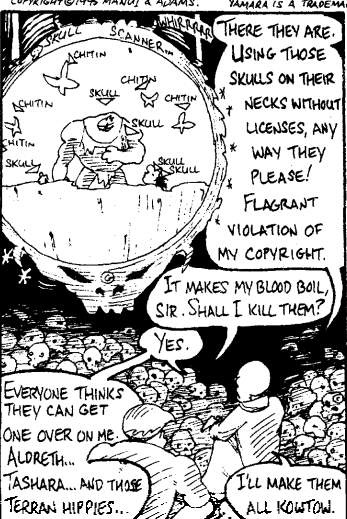


By Mark Doney

Yamaupa

HARD FUN

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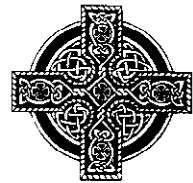
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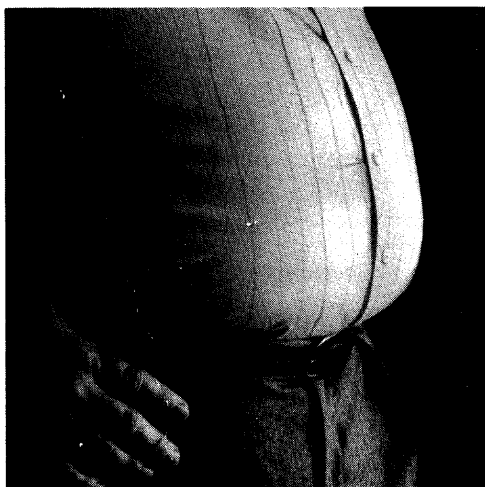
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What's your opinion?

What is the future direction of role-playing games? What problems do you have with your role-playing campaign? Turn to this issue's "Forum" and see what others think—then tell us what you think!



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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS



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Monks (Lance and Laser)

Figure on picking up these miniatures

Even after all this time, people are still expressing interest in the BATTLETECH* campaign rules I discussed way back in DRAGON® issues #161, #162, and #163. We are presently developing an updated campaign using all of the new information, but FASA keeps adding tidbits to the game, making it hard to stay completely up to date. While we're waiting, there are a few different products that you can build your own campaigns around.

If you like confined combat, check out the *Solaris VII* boxed set and modules. These give you a limited playing area and up-close-and-personal slugging matches. The campaign is set up to allow you to develop your own championship 'Mech. This can give you a great deal of personal satisfaction as you prove yourself in the arena. As you advance, the competition becomes more difficult. If you like this kind of combat, I would recommend that you quickly pick up the *Solaris VII* box set it may soon be out of print.

If your group enjoy playing mercs, pick up Hot Spot, product #1679. This is a two-book product, based primarily on the MECHWARRIOR* RPG, that will require an referee. One book contains contracts and maps for the ref, while the other book contains all of the information a ref needs to make a player's life "interesting." The contracts are from all of the different houses, covering over 64 pages. They range from very easy to very hard and should keep your players busy for a long time. They may even have to learn how to fight with a less-than-perfect 'Mech. It should be quite a challenge.

Miniatures' product ratings

*	Poor
**	Below average
***	Average
****	Above average
*****	Excellent

Lance and Laser

P.O. Box 14491
Columbus OH 43214

P-21 Monks

The monks of the medieval period made significant contributions to the cause of civilization. They spread the Word of God, helped the poor, and acted as the printing presses of the Old World. These three 25 mm monks, cast in lead-free alloy, are representative of each of these areas as each treats his highly textured, circular base. These monks are designed for use with the PENDRAGON* role-playing game.

Monk number one wears the long habit common to the period. His face is strongly featured with clear detail that is framed by an upraised hood with drawstring. The habit is secured by a rope sash with knotted ends. Each of his hands is tucked into the opposite sleeve. The rough appearance of the habit is very similar to sackcloth and is an excellent rendition. Just the tips of the sandals extend beyond the hem of the habit. He could be on his way either to devotions or working a sick ward.

The second monk is slightly more round and is in traveling mode. His habit is cinched beneath his ample girth by a rope belt with multiple knots. Frequently these knots were a reminder of the mystery of the rosary and were an important part of the monk's gear. His left hand clutches a slightly oversized walking staff and his right hand holds a small bag. The face has excellent detail, including the faint beginnings of jowls. His head is down and his otherwise bald pate is surrounded by a circular fringe of hair at ear level. His sandal-clad feet are visible beneath a slightly raised hem. The wrinkles and fabric texture are appropriate for the position and the time period.

The last monk has a slightly serious look and is apparently recording an important event, such as a wedding or baptism, in a book. Both feet, clad in sandals, are protruding from under the habit's hem. His rope belt is unknotted. His right hand flourishes the feather quill, complete with

veins, that will mark the blank pages of the book in his left hand. The cheeks are slightly pinched, and he has dimples at the corners of his mouth. As is standard, a fringe of hair surrounds a bald pate, and the fabric proclaims his penance to God.

These are excellent figures and would make good additions as player characters or NPCs in a number of different role-playing games involving monks, priests, or clerics. There was no flash on any of the figures. The mold lines were discreet, and the separation between clothes and body was excellent for a one piece casting. My only disappointment was that there were no crosses on what are obviously Christian monks, but then I was reminded that leaving crosses off made them much more versatile. These monks are a bargain at \$5.95 per pack.

Palladium Books

12455 Universal Dr.
Taylor MI 48180

8010 Coalition Sky Cycle

The Sky Cycle comes as a blister-packed, 13-piece, lead-free kit. The assembled unit represents a sky cycle with a mounted and a dismounted cycle pilot. The kit is scaled to the larger 28-mm scale. The dismounted pilot is 31-mm tall and is standing on a rock as if thinking. The base is oval and fully detailed, but there is some overfill on the left boot heel that makes the boot appear bigger than it should be. In the RIFTS* RPG book from Palladium, the illustration for the pilot's helmet can be found on page 52, and both figures' helmets match almost exactly. The uniform is standard body armor with full respiratory gear on the back. The armor has fully protected joints and studded plates on the left shoulder and both knees. Air hoses and a support harness cross the chest, while a belt with a large number of containers and a pistol in a holster hang from a combat belt. There was some flash on the shoulder protector, and the mold line is evident but not intrusive on the armor.

There are no directions for the sky cycle in the kit, so get out your RIFTS game rules and turn to page 202 before you begin to assemble the bike. The miniature is almost a carbon copy of this picture, so familiarize yourself with it. You may want to fill in some small gaps in the directional nozzles, and the strange-looking single piece that looks like a wheel is the bottom nozzle pictured between the two landing gear. The finished bike measures 53-mm tall from bottom fin to top fin and just over 53-mm long. The pilot is cast onto the main body, and the definition of feature and the illusion of separation from the cycle is not as sharp as it could be, so be prepared to paint the shadowing. The Coalition face is molded into the wind faring of the cycle, but the "eyes" aren't deep enough. The missile openings on the gear pods and the laser turret front and



Coalition Sky Cycle (Palladium Books)



Book of the Dead pack (Leading Edge Games)

upper rear are recognizable and remind you that this is an instrument of war.

The one sore spot is the stand. I highly recommend that you replace the base included in the set, or modify it to include a heavier and deeper connection to the cycle using a pin vise and strong wire. This base allows the miniature to shift position. There was little flash, and the mold line will take some care to remove as not to bend the pieces. I can see uses for this in several other SF RPGs including GDW's TRAVELLER* game. The kit retails for \$9.95 and can be challenging to assemble properly.

Leading Edge Games

PO. Box 70669
Pasadena CA 91117

64111 Book of the Dead pack *****

This kit is a must-have for a DM's dirty trick department. This five-piece set is scaled for use with 25-mm figures and is made of lead. The set contains a rock altar that must be assembled from a base with a

pair of supports and a two-tiered stone slab complete with an old cross. The remainder of the set is three human-skin-covered books with the faces worked into the wrinkles in the covers. The faces are actually glaring at you! The books also have discernible pages and a marker.

These books can be used exactly as they were in the movie, or as a trap in an evil wizard's or cleric's quarters. They all project magic, but only one is real; the others are traps. The set sells for \$5.95 and is a little pricey, but the result could be well worth the money.

64106 Knights pack *****

If you run your adventures with miniatures, this pack has definite appeal. The Knight set contains four 25-mm scale lead figures, on raised circular bases with no surface detail. Three of the figures are wearing virtually identical uniforms: a chain shirt covered by a surcoat and cinched by a wide belt. They are wearing chain mail and their arms, legs and hands are protected by a series of half-plate



Knights pack (Leading Edge Games)



Wolf (Reaper Miniatures)

pieces that are secured around the legs by straps and buckles. The figures are armed with a long sword, a battle axe, and a broadsword respectively. The helmets over a variety of periods from early to later medieval. For very detailed descriptions of the individual parts, get Palladium Books' *The Compendium of Weapons, Armor & Castles* and turn to page 119. The figures are almost exactly as shown here.

The fourth figure is dressed entirely in chain over padding. A belted surcoat is connected to epaulieres by flowered clasps. The figure has heavy gauntlets on his hands and is wielding a two-handed word, though there is no scabbard for it. His helmet is similar to those from the 17th century. An interesting point on this miniature is the extra section of belt and how it is folded over as if hanging, not custom-sized.

This set of figures would make an ideal set of city guards for a prosperous trading enter, or a capital. These could easily be the elite troops you would expect to find as the backup for men-at-arms. There were a few bits of "airhole flash," but the mold lines blend in and there are no other major flaws. Best of all, the figures are only \$5.95 for the pack of four, which makes for an inexpensive, detailed guard.

Reaper Miniatures

Suite 220, LB 11
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1227 Wolf

This 25-mm lead wolf is a whopping 46 mm from nose to tail end and stands 21-mm high. It has a certain hungry look about it, with large haunches and flanks and a lean body. The fur is coarse, and there appear to be some growths on his body. His mouth is open without showing teeth, and he is holding his position as if pointing. The miniature also looks as if its left hind leg is wounded at the paw.

This figure is an old Heritage casting, and even with the mold fixing, the figure is not fully up to today's "perfect" look. Judicious metal removal and light trimming will give you a base figure to build a cheap wolf-pack, something everyone needs. Even if you use it as a dire wolf, the price of \$.90 (for lead) or \$1.35 (for lead-free) price is reasonable, and a pack of twelve in any of three poses is a bargain.

1352 Mounted Verminites

Skaven or ratmen players of the world, unite—you now have cavalry available. This two-piece 25-mm lead casting depicts a rat leader riding on a giant kangaroo rat

mount. Though the scale is 25 mm, it matches closely the rats by Grenadier, and these figures could easily be smaller nomad cousins.

The rat rider stands 24-mm tall and is clothed in a rotting, ragged robe. His feet are bare and curled downward, while his arms are held out from his sides. The left hand points toward the enemy, and the right hand holds a staff topped with a rat skull. Three sharp spikes jut from his neck. He must be a leader, because he is howling out his fury through a wide-open mouth complete with buck teeth and a curled tongue. Beady eyes and a long snout leave no doubt as to his heritage. His tail is molded onto his mount, and this and the sack on his right side only look right when he is in the saddle.

The kangaroo rat is rubbing its paws together as it strides along. The mount measures almost 80-mm long and 55-mm high to the top of the standard pole. The head has huge ears, a closed mouth, and bug-eyes. A ragged blanket acts as a saddle guard and extends over the head to the snout armor. The hind legs are a little square, and have some light flash. The tail is long, and the fur over the entire body is long and coarse. The saddle looks like formed leather held on by a wide belt and buckle, and the rear stretches upward to a point. The pommel is a head, and eggs or pods rest to the right in a bundle. The back pole is a display for several human heads in different states of decay with varying looks of sheer horror.

I highly recommend this and the other pieces in the line for anyone who runs rats. The small amount of cleaning needed versus the high potential make this a must-have model. The price for lead price is \$4 each, while the lead-free price is \$5.



Mounted Verminites (Reaper Miniatures)

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Tempest (Ral Partha Enterprises)

Ral Partha Enterprises

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Minifigs

1/5 Graham Road, Southampton
England SO2 OAX UK

20-617 TMP-3M Tempest *****

The model for this Ralidium miniature can be found on page 57 of the *Tech Readout 3055* from FASA. The miniature stands 48-mm tall from its base to the top of the turret-mounted medium laser on its shoulders. The shoulders are 25-mm wide and cover and protect the arm joints. The kit is very simple; all you have to attach are the two arms to the torso. The miniature follows the illustration almost exactly, except for the lack of a slot on the right leg, the absence of venting and ribs on the inside of both feet, and no thick wire provided in the kit to make the two "horns." The panel lines on my miniature were not quite as good as the Tempests for sale at my shop, and there was some easily removable flash. The parts all fit well.

The fairly heavy weaponry of this miniature, the variety of areas covered in firepower (short, medium, and long), and the jump jets raise some interesting possibilities. These points and a couple of very good suggestions in the *Tech Readout* write-up should make this a sought-after 'Mech. With a good paint job, this 'Mech is well worth the \$6 price, especially if you are a Free Worlds player.

20-662 Nightsky *****

The Nightsky is a 50-ton, hatchet-equipped 'Mech operated by the Federated Commonwealth and designed to replace destroyed Axemen and Hatchmen. The Ralidium miniature is 50-mm tall, and only the arms need to be attached. The miniature matches the illustration on page 45 of the *Tech Readout 3055* except for the lack



Nightsky (Ral Partha Enterprises)

of foot fins, which were a concession to molding. All pieces fit well, and few airhole streamers. The mold lines are very distinct, but the positioning is excellent. The only thing I would have done differently would have been to make the patterned base wider to avoid rocking.

The almost snakelike head makes this a really strange-looking 'Mech, but the lack

of weaponry and the possible heat sink problems will highly restrict the number of these 'Mechs in my units. If you're close enough to "axe," it's probably already too late fighting the clan (unless you're in a city). This 'Mech is definitely worth the \$5.50 price tag, even if it's just one to keep your collection going, and really worth it if you like fighting close and dirty on a more modern scale.

11-488 Cyclops *****

This "giant" 25-mm scale figure comes as a three-piece set. The cyclops stands 72 mm tall and is nearly 30 mm across the shoulders. He is dressed in a ragged fringed skin that covers him from mid-belly to the groin and over the left shoulder. The skin is secured by a thong belt tied in a knot and hidden in spots by overhanging clothes. His feet are protected from the rocky base by sandals with thongs that go to just below the knee for support. Both wrists are covered by canvas-laced bracers and he is preparing to throw a large boulder from his right hand while his left is clenched in a fist. Body detail is excellent, especially the gnarled knuckles and large amounts of tightly curled hair on the thighs and chest. His face is slightly exaggerated in the cheek, ear, and nose areas, but the effect grows on you. His hair is slicked back and falls to mid-shoulder.

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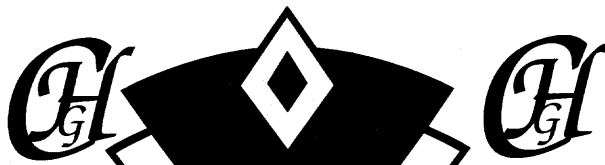
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Cyclops (Ral Partha Enterprises)

The upper trunk joins the lower torso at the belt line, and some trimming was needed on the upper half to make it fit correctly. Pre-position the two halves so they fit best and mark the position. When you are ready to glue, use the marks as



Virtual Adept (Ral Partha Enterprises)

alignment guides. Follow the same procedure with the right hand. There was some flash in the armpit area and two mold lines that were pesky, but the worst problem was the throat. Not only my copy, but one of my three store pieces, had a round hole at the base of the throat as if he had been shot. The metal also is soft, so this may be a fill problem.

Even with these flaws, this is a nice piece when finished. If you play BATTLESYSTEM® games, it's also a great piece of self-propelled artillery. The kit costs \$6.50.

69-300 Virtual Adept

This set is scaled for the larger 28-mm scale and is a must for anyone who plays any of the modern role-playing games. At a time when you can order virtual reality gear from news magazines, this is the first set of figures to have the full set of virtual reality gear. The female is wearing what looks like a comfortable jumpsuit over a blouse, a loose belt and mid-thigh flexible boots. The sensor gloves fit right over her long sleeves, and individual controls and finger hookups are visible. The upper half of her pursed face is covered by a virtual visor and head hookup cables snake downward, occasionally mixing with her mid-back length hair. All the cables join into a huge bundle that goes just over the edge of the cable-littered base and ends abruptly. She looks like she is traveling through cyberspace, but there is nothing feeding her signals.

The male is wearing shoes, slacks with suspenders, a long-sleeved shirt, and a tie. The hand sensors are slightly different from the female's, but the virtual reality goggles are almost identical. His wires also pass through his hair, which is shorter and wavy, on the way down to the base. The cables wind down and join a larger bundle that is connected to a small, powerful computer. A variety of control surfaces are noticeable, but no other jacks can be seen.

I hope someone will make a small, separate computer miniature so the female miniature can have one. Mold lines were not a problem and there was little flash. The set is well worth the \$4 price tag, especially if you've seen the Net setup on *TekWar*.

If you have any suggestions or comments, you can call me at (708) 336-0790 after 2 P.M., CST M,W,Th,F or 10 A.M. - 5 P.M., S & S. Or you can write me: Robert Bigelow, c/o Friends Hobby Shop, 2411 Washington St, Waukegan IL 60085.

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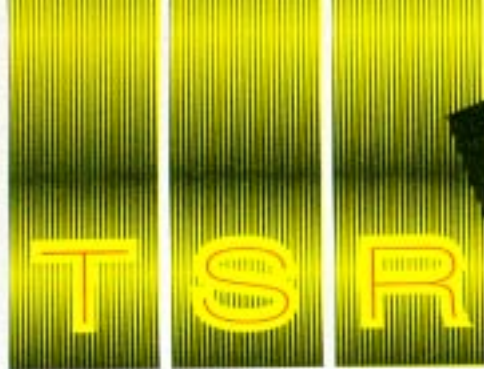
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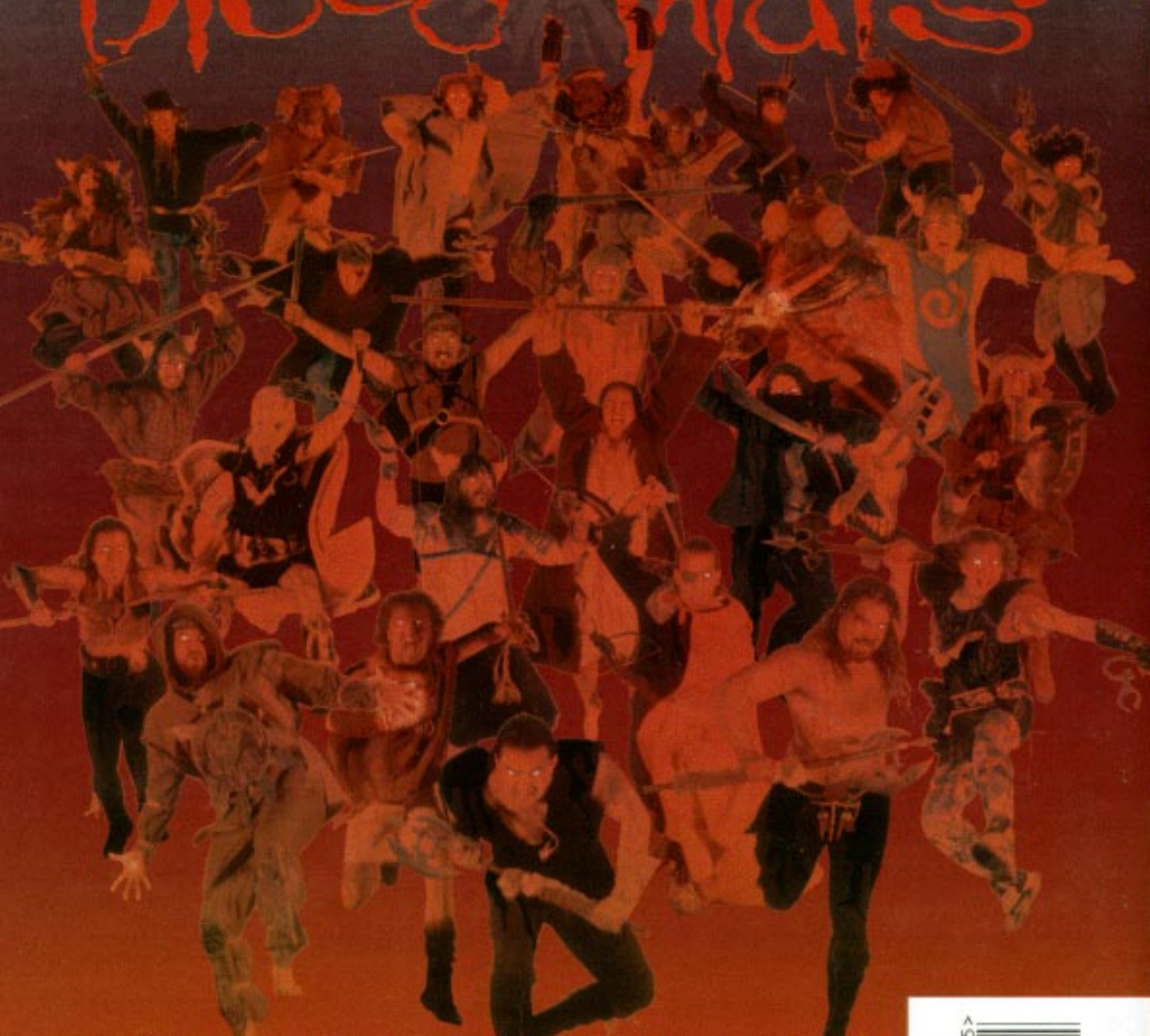
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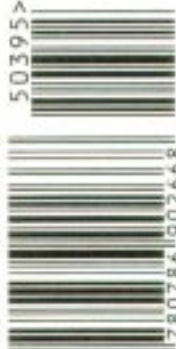
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