FLAGSHIP

THE INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE FOR GAMERS

In this issue ...

After the Flood

Vanguard: Saga of Heroes
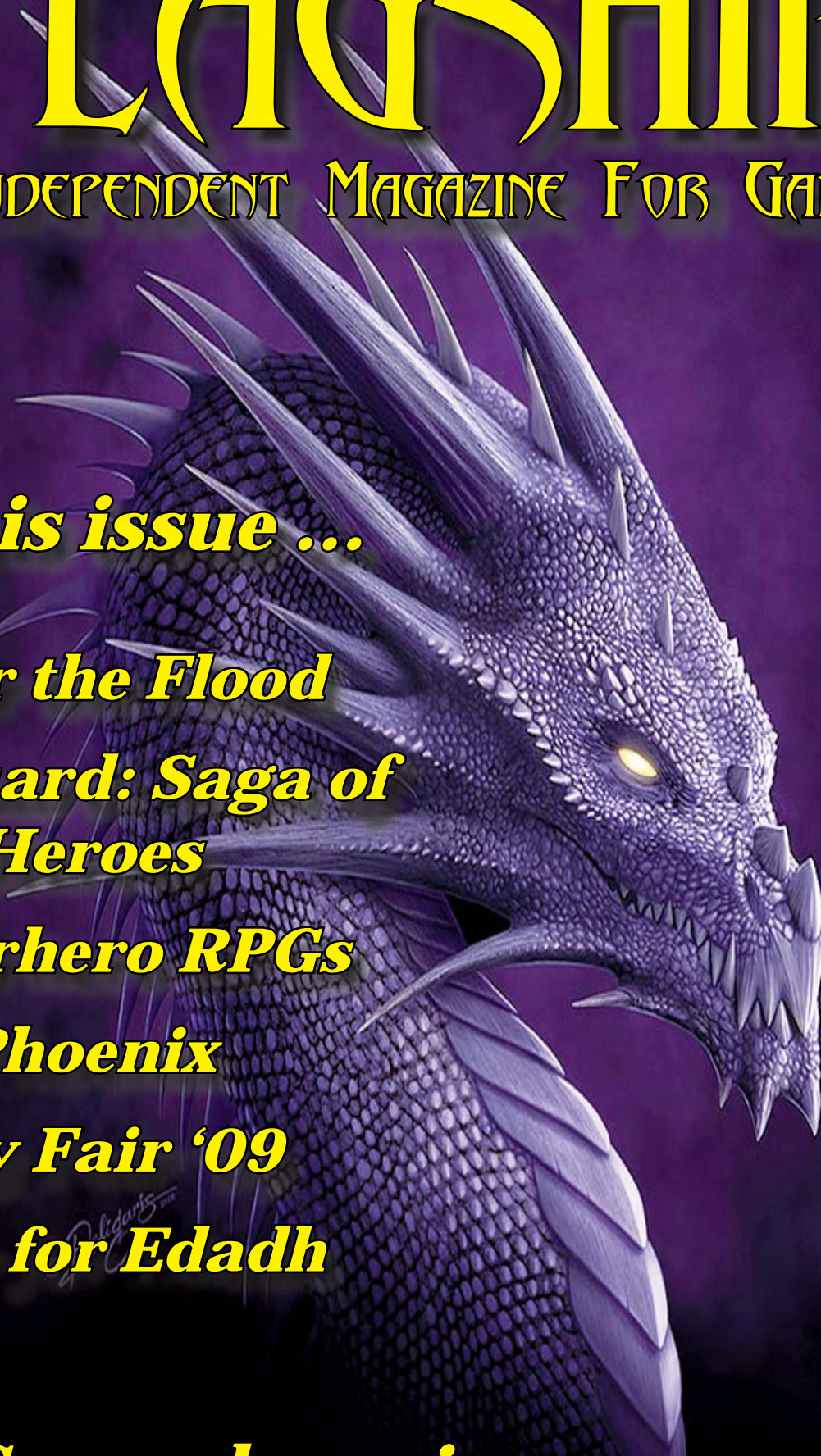
Superhero RPGs

Phoenix

Toy Fair '09

War for Edadh

General gaming news, views and reviews ...

Contributions
are always welcome!

Copy deadline for #129
15th August

In this issue

Report from the Bridge

I'VE ENJOYED gathering this material for Flagship 128, and hope that you'll find it all fun to read. Apologies for the severe delay, however. I wasn't well over Easter and Colin's been ill since then, so what with the occasional computer hiccup we've been running sadly late. Apologies! I do hope that you'll be able to give issue #128 a warm welcome. Oh, and we'll hope to do better with #129.

As usual, we've plenty of assorted material here from a wide variety of games. I think that you are certain to find something of interest. As usual, we've news, reviews and interviews. Our thanks to all our contributors.

For turn-based games, Roy Curtis's guide to victory in Serim Ral reaches its conclusion and KJC's Mica Goldstone describes the development of Phoenix.

Last issue's interview with the designer of the boardgame Playing Gods is followed in this issue by a review of the game, and 126's interview about War for Edadh also results in a review here. It's good to see table-top games flourishing! For your computer, Stuart Connor continues his series about independent video games and we've coverage of web games and MMOGs. Note that the prospect of Middle-Earth coming onto Facebook is the subject of a Special Offer to you all this issue.

Gaming is proving a vigorous hobby despite the current economic down-turn. After all, what better way is there of proving that you can control your own fate than by enjoying a game?

Carol

www.flagshipmagazine.com

Editorial Comment

THIS ISSUE seems crammed with good content to me, though I'll admit to being inclined to believe this for every **Flagship**. Anyway, I hope you'll agree about issue #128! I can't take any personal credit for this, but will instead praise our contributors, who supply knowledgeable insights into the game worlds that they write about. Thank you, guys!

Alas, the economic news here in Britain is dire, so let's celebrate our opportunities in the games we play. Is it just escapism? To a certain extent, maybe, but not altogether. Games give us fair chances to succeed by

testing our skills and interacting with our fellow players. Altogether, games have to be a Good Thing. Besides, playing them keeps us off the streets!

Here at Flagship, we've always tended to promote independent games, without ignoring the big commercial ones. There's room for all types of game in out hobby, as long as they are fun to play. It was good to discover the new games around at *UK Games Expo* in June. It's always inspiring to meet enthusiastic games designers as well as players.

After cutting our subscription rates last issue, I've been mortified to discover that postal charges rose alarmingly in April. Ouch! This is all an extra incentive to proceed with an online version. Various problems have caused a delay, but I'm keen to proceed with this cheaper alternative to print while giving you a choice between print and the internet. See what I have to say in the section below ...

I must confess that to making a foolish mistake last issue. We asked you all to name your favourite three games of 2008, but it looks as if this request got overlooked by most of you because we didn't make it obvious enough. So in this issue we're enclosing a form with the same opportunity for you to praise your favourite games of any genre. Please return your nominations to me by post or email. It's free publicity for the games, after all!

The Future of Flagship: part 2

Decision, decisions ...

I've been continuing to consider your opinions about Flagship's future. It's a vital subject for me, because I love Flagship and it's been central to my life since my husband died. You sent me a great range of different comments when I issued my questionnaire. I'm grateful that they were so supportive. Now, I've made some decisions. Well, one big one! I hope that you will support it.

First of all - Flagship will be continuing, and if you wish to continue receiving a printed copy, you can do so for as long as you wish and I'll organise limited print runs to cover this.

However, I cannot believe that putting out an issue over the internet will maintain enough paid subscriptions. I'm convinced that it would be impossible to enforce copyright regulations for Flagship. Internet users expect everything to be free and I'm pretty sure that pirated versions of Flagship would soon start to circulate. Besides, it's wrong to put temptation in people's way. Also, I'm developing arthritis, which will make getting sacks of envelopes down to the post office a more laborious task than it has been up to now. I don't mind growing old – every year is a victory! – but I don't want to start *feeling* old.

The only practicable answer, therefore, appears to be to issue the internet version for free, charging just our advertisers and, of course, those of you who prefer a printed copy. We will be putting copies available for download on as many sites as possible, as well as making 'virtual' copies of the magazine available in some place (eg in 'Second Life'). We'll also be re-vamping our website, and establishing aFlagship presence on Facebook etc.

In short, we expect the digital version of Flagship to have a far higher circulation than ever before! We hope this will continue to attract advertisers, and also maintain or increase contributions to the magazine.

Once we're under way with this, I hope that subscribers will work through to the end of their subscriptions, but if you wish for a refund on what you've paid us, we'll refund your outstanding payment, just deducting £3 for every issue that you've received.

Our thanks go out to all who replied to our survey. Your enthusiasm has been heart-warming. I hope that you'll be satisfied with these new proposals! Thanks also to those of you who have helped with practical suggestions based on knowledge of the internet and the possibilities it offers. Onwards and upwards ...

Carol

Media Eye
Do Games Matter?

CAROL MULHOLLAND reports how newspapers and TV handle games …

I'LL START by mentioning that there's now a section on *Flagship*'s website entitled 'Games and the Media', which carries current newspaper and magazine articles about games. By its very nature, it'll be more up to date than this feature. It won't, however, include my own sage comments (you may see this as an advantage) and the range of sources is different. There's also been a lively discussion on the website about 'Socially responsible limits to violence in video gaming', which I think many of you will find interesting: some widely diverging opinions here!

A blog by **Ed Yong** quoted on the 'Games and the Media' thread reports an attempt by Buchanan and Anderson from Iowa State University to investigate whether playing a violent game desensitises students to real-life violence. They gave one group of students twenty minutes playing a violent game and another group twenty minutes playing a non-violent game, then measured how long it took each group to react to an altercation staged by actors in the corridor outside the lab. Yes, the group that had been playing the violent game took longer to react, though how far this experiment actually reflects real life seems debatable to me. There was also a warning on April 24th that increasing traffic on YouTube and iPlayer could cause 'brownouts' for internet users, which isn't good news for players, though I do rather like the term 'brownout'.

The most recent news item on the website comes from *The Daily Mail* of the same date and claims that a 'Jesus vs Mohammed' game has been taken off-line following complaints from Muslim nations. More precisely, the game is (or should that be 'was'?) a web game called **Faith Fighter** and it depicted caricatures of a range of religious figures. It was run by the Italian firm, *Molleindustria*, which hastened to claim that their game was aimed to be amusing rather than to cause offence.

I found an interesting article by **Tom Hoggins** in *The Telegraph* on March 14th, arguing that most horror films aren't very horrifying nowadays because cinemas audiences know what to expect. Video games can be more telling, however, because they put their players 'under direct threat, allowing even the oldest of cinema scares to once again feel fresh and terrifying.' The examples discussed are *Capcom*'s **Resident Evil 5**, *Sega*'s **House of the Dead: Overkill**, *Konami*'s **Silent Hill: Homecoming** and *EA*'s **Dead Space** (which won a BAFTA). There's also a box by **Nick Cowen** discussing the frequency of zombies in horror video games. I wouldn't choose horror films and games, myself: not because I'm especially easy to frighten but because I'm too conscious of the artifice involved. However, I found this coverage all intelligent stuff.

Now some bad news for those of us who are growing more elderly than we care to be. Well, that's if we've been inclined to believe advertisements. Apparently, back in February the consumer magazine *Which* reported that *Nintendo*'s publicity claiming that their **Brain Training** game can help its players to improve their memories won't

actually protect against memory loss. Which consulted three expert neuroscientists, who all agreed that there's no evidence that increasing blood flow to the cerebral cortex will have a beneficial impact at all. Nintendo reply that they don't claim 'that Brain Training is scientifically proven to improve cognitive function…' just that it's 'enjoyable and fun. These mental exercises can also help to keep the brain sharp, just like other similar activities, and this is a fantastic bonus.' Hmm, maybe it did sound too good to be plausible… (*Daily Telegraph* 26/2/09)

On February 28th, the Telegraph ran a piece quoting a report from Sweden's Youth Care Foundation which called *Blizzard Entertainment*'s **World of Warcraft** 'the crack cocaine of the gaming world' because a 15 year-old collapsed and went into convulsions after he played in it non-stop for 24 hours. I'm sure that we can all see that a 24-hour non-stop session would be asking for trouble! It seems wildly unfair to blame Blizzard for this. Oh, and it's worth adding that the lad has now made a full recovery.

An interview with the scientist **Baroness Greenfield** on April 5th, in the *Sunday Telegraph*, took up the suggestion (which I think has now been shelved) that that primary schoolchildren should be taught about social networking. Yes, the Baroness is agin it, and also used the interview to condemn video gaming, arguing that 'people who spend a lot of time interacting through the screen can become emotionally detached. They see life as a series of tasks that demand instant reaction. Language gets crunched, along with the ability to imagine or analyse, and attention spans shrink…. These games lead young people to believe that there are no consequences to their actions. They knife someone to death then they bring them back to life. Everything is reversible.'

I think that Baroness Greenfield is articulate but mistaken. In most games, you pay dearly for your mistakes! And it's worth noting that she has no children of her own, so no practical experience of bringing them up. When my own son was small, it was the fashion to worry about the malign influence of TV on young minds, but experience and *Sesame Street* soon showed me that I was wrong.

I'm really disappointed that the Telegraph has taken to running negative pieces about playing games. With a cry of 'Bring back **Sam Leith**!', I've informed them that I won't be renewing my subscription. I do, nevertheless, value their exposure of MPs' expense claims.

Finally, I wasn't expecting much from a *More4* TV programme on June 23rd entitled *True Stories: Another Perfect World*, but in fact this turned out to be a really interesting exploration of 'the search for virtual paradise', with material drawn from a wide range of MMOGs, including **World of Warcraft**, **Second Life**, **Sims Online** and **EVE**. I was puzzled to hear **Lineage II** pronounced 'Line-Age', but the quality of the programme was high enough for me to wonder whether I've always been wrong, myself.

London Toy Fair '09

Not a great vintage, but decent fizzy pop

PEVANS describes the family games he found there ...

I USED TO reckon that I could just about get round the London Toy Fair and see all the new games in one day's visit. This year I was pushed to keep myself occupied for an afternoon! And this after getting a circular from the organisers boasting that the show was occupying even more of the South Hall of ExCeL than before. What it doesn't mention is that the show used to be in both halls (in recent years the London Motorcycle Show has been in the North Hall, which provides an interesting contrast in the people milling about between the halls – leather and heavy metal tee shirts tend to be bikers, suits are mainly toy people).

As always, games are only a small part of the show and I tend to spend most of my time in the 'greenhouse' area for new and small companies – this year split into two. This is where I'm more likely to find something that's of interest to gamers. The big companies tend to stick to anodyne children's games and variations on a theme (umpteen versions of **Monopoly**, for example). Anyway, here are my notes on what I saw.

1745 Trading Company is the Scottish publisher of a series of trivia games – "Quests of the World" – each set in a different country. They started, naturally, with **Scottish Quest** and have expanded into **Irish Quest**, **English Quest** and **Welsh Quest** so far. The games come in plain boxes with the title in gold, looking like a set of hardback books. Each is played over a map of the country concerned. Players take a tour, answering questions at the locations

Brian Blessed, who stars as a new character in The Little Princess, attends the Toy Fair on January 28, 2009 at Excel in London, England. - Photo by Tim Whitby/Getty Images

they visit. They gain gold sovereigns, which they need to travel round, and the letters Q, U, E, S and T. First to get the full word and return to their starting point wins. The questions are in four categories, History, Nature, Culture and Modern, colour-coded to the points on the board. However, players get their choice of category when answering letter questions, allowing them to play to their strengths. There's nothing particularly innovative here, but the focus of the games sets them apart from run of the mill trivia games. They are well-produced and excellent examples of the genre. See *www.questsoftheworld.com* for more information.

The name says it all: *Ace Murder Mystery Games* produces, as you'd expect, murder mystery games. The company has a set of five good-looking dinner party games, each with a different theme/period. They provide a set (8-10) of guests/suspects (with costume tips), a plot, with some scripting to aid players, and a narrative CD to fill in the gaps. The writers stress that their emphasis is on the plot and the characters,

providing role-playing opportunities as well as deduction. It's up to the players to work out whodunit, of course. Again, there's nothing very original in this, but each game is a good, well thought through package. You can find out more at *www.acemurdermystery.com.*

Eezee Kricket comes all the way from Barbados and is a cricket trivia game. The batting player (or team) rolls a die six times (to simulate an over being bowled) and moves around the board. Depending on the square they land on, they will score runs or may lose their wicket. Landing on a square that involves losing a wicket brings the batsman a question and the wicket only falls if they answer it wrongly. The initial edition of the game is based on cricket in the West Indies, but an international edition is due out this spring. As you can see, the game is pretty basic, but it should have some appeal for cricket fans. See *www.eezeekricket. com* for more information.

JC Games was showing **Qb**, their dice-based word game that launched at the end of last year. While it only got into a limited range of retailers, it has been selling well in all of them. The game itself is straightforward: roll the lettered dice and make words from the letters available, adding them to the grid that the players build up on the table. The dice come in a drawstring bag, which makes the game readily playable while travelling. It's a neat variation on the word game and you can find more at *www.qbgame. co.uk.*

Kamtronic Games had **Football Legend**, a football (soccer) trivia game. Players answer questions and use cards for defence, attack and midfield, aiming to get into position for a shot on goal against their opponent's goalkeeper. There's a football game like this at the Toy Fair every couple of years and they all seem much the same. I can't see anything special about this one that will help it stand out. There's more information at *www.football-legend.co.uk.*

Army of Zero is the first game from *Point Zero Games.* It's a two-player fantasy combat game aimed at youngsters aged 7-12. Players use their hand (squad) of hero cards to attack or defend, aiming to beat their opponent's squad. As the age range suggests, this is a relatively simple game, but you do need to out-guess your opponent's moves to win the game. However, there is another dimension to the game. The entire deck of characters forms a riddle for older players – the publisher is offering a cash prize for the best solution. For more information see *www. pointzerogames.com.*

Tailten Games was at the Toy Fair showing **Pluck the Peacock**, which I saw at last year's *Spiel* games fair. Once I'd got over my amusement at the name, this is quite a neat set-collecting game. Central to it is a spinner and the fan of peacock's tail feathers. Players are trying to complete their own peacock tails using the cardboard feathers and the

actions that the spinner gives them. Okay, it's not the deepest game, but it does give players decisions to make and tactical options. It's an entertaining and highly colourful family game. The Tailten website is at *www.tailtengames. com.*

This was far from being a vintage year at the Toy Fair and there was really nothing there to interest the hobby games player. In fact there wasn't much to interest any sort of games player. It was also noticeable that a lot of names were missing. I suspect many of the companies are concentrating their energies on the Spring Fair, which takes place at the National Exhibition Centre. I thought it was later in the year, but it was actually the week after the Toy Fair, which is one reason companies won't want to do both. Next year I shall have to remember to book in for it as well.

The London Toy Fair is run by the British Toy & Hobby Association (*www.btha.co.uk*). It is held at the end of January each year and is moving back to Olympia for 2010. For more information, see *www.toyfair.co.uk.*

Word Up!
Independent Computer Games

STUART CONNOR explores his addiction to word games ...

AS LIKEABLE as the titular song was/is, this article is not about the 1986 no. 3 hit by Cameo. I remember the song did mark the beginning of my transition from happy-go-lucky (if it's in the charts it must be good, jive bunny included) persona into the miserable, brooding indie kid I subsequently became. In the end what bothered me was how exactly you admire a song whose abiding memory is of a shiny red codpiece in the accompanying video. Twenty odd years later, finding that word ('codpiece' that is) miraculously floating towards the front of your memory might be a crucial moment, when faced with an odd letter selection in one of the word games that I'm reviewing this issue. Come to think of it 'cameo' is not a bad little five-letter word either.

Just as with that song, I am also at a loss to figure out my deep addiction to word games. Especially as I'm no great lover of crosswords and the like. Luckily, I know I'm not just a sad little loner in regard to this one. Witness the incredible passions aroused by the **Scrabolous** vs **Scrabble** affair last year when internet campaigns were launched in support of the upstart (now known as **Lexolous**), with the whole affair becoming notorious enough to warrant a couple of its own spoof videos.

There are obviously many more people out there who find a simple and yet incredibly compulsive joy in making words from a pool of random letters. So, if you are the type of person that has ever received a word of the day email, wasted precious work time playing around with the internet anagram server or knows exactly what chiasmus is and maybe some famous uses of it… Well, lucky you! These games are probably right up your street.

Tommy and the Magical Words
www.viquagames.com
The premise of the game is that you play a rather inept magical student, imprisoned in a book by an exasperated uncle, with the hope that in escaping you might actually learn something. To exit this prison our hero must traverse various environments representing the contents of the magical book by building word bridges between islands.

Early on, as the game introduces its many elements, it's simply a matter of bridging small expanses with a couple of islands to help you on your way. Later on the levels become more maze-like as you are channelled down paths just a single letter wide. The game has a pleasing Scrabble-like quality in that words have to be attached to each other as you make your way across the landscape

Two modes of play are available. First, an adventure mode where you move through a sequence of maps (eight per level) in order to 'complete' the game and escape from the book you have been imprisoned in. Alternatively, there is survival mode where the aim of the game is to keep going as long as possible across an endlessly scrolling landscape from one of the levels conquered in adventure mode. Checkpoints allow you to pause momentarily and give you the opportunity to gain some much need items. Four types of bonuses can be used during the game to

help you progress. You start a new level with a few of each type and more can be found along the way. There is the endlessly useful blank tile and the much less useful hat, which gives you a word hint. The hammer allows you to remove a tile and can be crucial in getting across the more tricky levels. Finally there is a basket, which allows the current letter rack to be discarded and repopulated with a new one. More bonuses can be earned by spelling words over the appropriate location on the adventure grid. The more difficult the letter the larger the number of bonuses received, so there is a lot of manoeuvring to get an 'X' or a 'Z' over one of these spaces.

There is not much more in the way of mini games. In fact the only one I came across consists of trying to guess a hidden word (hangman style) with the additional option to use some of your lives to gain a clue. Quite often the clue was essentially the same as the hidden word. For example *'in a proper and decorous manner'* was a clue given to the hidden word *'decorously'* – a less than satisfactory level of challenge on these, all too common, occasions.

A good feature of this particular game is that for many words you are provided with a definition when you spell a word. Often you are trying some odd combinations of letters to see if the word is configured in the dictionary so it's always good to find out what that strange sequence of letters actually means. Recently I have found out that a 'ged' is a type of fish and that 'topes' is apparently connected with consuming too much alcohol. Useful!

In regard to the interface, lush graphics and a pleasing soundtrack can only partially make up for the irritating presentation. Of course the game is squarely targeted at children, but why bother alienating a potential audience when it would probably be just as easy to satisfy all ages with the storyline and characters? In the end, much of the playing time is spent starting at the letters, so these complaints are going to be background at worst. All together this is a satisfying word game that just fails to hit the middle of the target. If you are a real word fanatic or are looking for a more family-oriented game, then try this. Otherwise one of the others may be more enjoyable.

Dungeon Scroll *(www.rtsoft.com)*
This one is a slightly darker and more moody offering. It is also one that is played at a considerably more furious pace. The premise of this game is exceedingly simple. You are delving deeper into a dungeon and across each level you must defeat several monsters. Not by physical violence, but by spelling words. Each word is considered to be an arcane spell thrown by a wizard. On the other hand, as each letter added to a word is accompanied by the sound of a sword thrust, there is a bit of confusion on this point.

Unlike the other games in these reviews, the word tiles do not constantly refresh when you build a new word. Instead you must continue to make different words with the same set of letters, plus the odd bonus one that comes your way. Having an 'S' tile in these circumstances is

rather helpful in expanding the number of words that are easily created from the pool. Panic can be induced as the timer (your health bar) ticks down alarmingly while you are seeking just one more word from the given letters.

Luckily, bonus tiles accumulate quickly as foes are dispatched. These include one-shot extra letters, healing potions (or timer extensions as they really are) and tiles that give bonus damage. These damage modifiers are cumulative, and combined together can begin to rack up some big damage. Base damage itself is based on word length. With a three-letter word causing three damage, four-letter words do six damage, five causes ten and so on until an eight-letter word does a massive 40 damage. The final bonus tile is the oracle, which immediately works out your best available word, in terms of damage. Save these up for the really tough monsters and watch the damage spiral upwards. Very cool! Bonus tiles are carried over to the next dungeon, so it's always worth thinking before wasting a useful tile on the lowly rats and skeletons which inhabit the lower levels. Also, it's a good idea not to over-damage a creature. Best to save the seven-letter word you have just spied for a tricky spot later on, rather than waste it finishing off some half-dead creature now. A small RPG element is also introduced, whereby your skills increase as you gain experience. Advancement in level is accompanied by some small bonuses, ie better damage, more health, better luck bonus tiles etc.

The game is cut down to the basics. Graphics are low-key with the monsters and foes not being animated and the single progress visualisation screen is just a sequence of red dots across a dreary landscape. There are some nice little touches, though. When you spell the word 'RAT' a few rats swarm down the screen. Spelling 'RATS' provides whole cascades of these furry friends. Very amusing. Also each level clearance (usually around six monsters) is accompanied by some random treasure find, mostly stupid and humorous eg 'You have found an honest accountant'. But very occasionally useful - for example a secret power word that is not a dictionary word.

You are competing not only to get as far as possible down the 25 dungeons but also against your fellow players. Your score is recorded locally, and also online if you wish where the leader board resets every week so you can compare yourself against the current best of the rest of the world. Some interesting stats are gathered and saved with your score so you can see what big and intriguing words each player has been using and what proportion of their words are each length. Mine seem much skewed towards spitting out endless three letter words as fast as possible!

This is quite a limited game but a very entertaining and addictive one. The steadily increasing challenge and the sudden time pressure can make this word game seem very action oriented at times. Sometimes your dungeon delving adventures are stopped prematurely by a particularly twisted set of tiles. But apart from that and the slightly monotone pacing this is a consistently fun game. One that is easy to fire up for a quick wordy assault on your own high score or the latest global leader board.

Bookworm Adventures
http://www.popcap.com/games/bookwormadventures
In many ways this is very similar to the previous game. Once again you are progressing through numerous levels beating up monsters and villains on the way, using only the power of words. Each level consists of a sequence of increasingly tough monsters. At the end of each is a boss monster whose defeat also gives you a unique item to add to your inventory (or upgrades an existing one). At the start of each level only three of these special items can be taken on the quest, which adds a nice level of sub strategy to your adventure. Help with choosing is given by way of a preview of the likely special attacks coming your way, although you may have your own favourite items anyway. Further RPG-lite flavour is given by a level up bar which slowly fills up upon dispatch of enemies, giving benefits to the little green worm on completion. Sadly, however, you have no choice as to what these upgrades are.

As with all these games, there are bonuses to make it more interesting. Sparkling gemlike word tiles have various combat affects, potions are sometimes dropped by the lesser creatures and the magical items can be stacked nicely. For example, having both the item that gives extra damage for words including 'xyz' and the similar one that does the same for 'metal' words means that spelling 'BRONZED' is a one word knockout punch. Very satisfying if you can manage to pull one of these combinations off. Slightly different from the other games is that monsters may also negatively affect your letter pool. Some attacks corrupt or break the tiles, rendering them useless. It's rarely enough to make a big difference to the situation but shows that a lot of thought has gone into the design of the game.

The little green worm that is the protagonist of this title is extremely annoying at first. Slowly I started to be less irritated and amazingly, after a couple of hours, I even began to admire his endless plucky stupidity and dumb wit. Major focus is, of course, given to the words so those of you who might still find him irritating after a couple of hours will usually be looking at something else, possibly the graphics. These are bold, colourful, cartoon like and certain to be appealing to children who are once again probably the focus of this title. Unlike the prior children's game reviewed, it does little to limit its appeal for the older generation too.

There is also a good selection of mini games to add a bit of variety here and there. For example, there is one about making lots of little words from one big word against a time limit. Another one has you guessing a hidden word in a similar way to the old mastermind board game. These interludes happen just often enough to break what could be a monotonous main game and provide extra potions and gems for the main quest.

Once again there are interesting stats provided at the completion of an adventure. But in this game it is also a signal to unlock other content. More mini games at the completion of adventure two and the Arena (whatever that is?) at the end of adventure three. I very much like this game. Despite the irritating hero, and the constant diet of faux history and background you are fed, it feels relentlessly upbeat, happy and positive – and very addictive to boot. Perhaps it's a bit on the expensive side but you do get a lot more for your money compared to the other two games.

I think all these games are worth a look. Possibly it's just me and my general love of words and wordplay. I'm pretty sure I would rate the games a point or three higher than the man in the street. But if you in any way share my passion, these are some wonderful additions to your casual (and independent) gaming collection. Word up!

Vanguard: Saga of Heroes

Content, Community & Customer Service

JAKOB NIELSEN returns to a MMO that once needed work …

IT IS TWO years since **Vanguard:Saga of Heroes** was released, and as most people probably remember it was an epic fail of a launch. There was unfinished content along with huge performance issues that ranged from graphic glitches to high system requirements. Very few good things were spoken about the game at the time. A lot can change in two years, especially when you have a team of dedicated developers working on it and a community that is willing to stand by no matter what happens.

Needless to say, Vanguard is not the game it once was at release. While it is certainly not perfect, countless issues have been addressed. Content has been added, bugs have been fixed. The community may have shrunk since the first few months, but the passion that everyone displays for 'their' game is astounding. Galleons and fishing have made their way into the game, something players have been clamoring about for quite some time now, as well as numerous other additions which I'll get into more detail about further along.

Performance / Lag

Players who tried Vanguard the first time round will remember how you used to chug along across every invisible seam as you entered a new 'chunk' on the map? Well, that's still there – with some fixes. Your lights won't randomly flicker on or off as you cross. You won't be dismounted; your flying mount won't suddenly disappear. It's become slightly more seamless. For those who don't recall, Telon is a world without instances. I am able to play for long periods of time without crashing, though a few people still mention their systems have issues with the game. When opening doors, there's a very small amount of lag as each swings open but it's not nearly the performance-freezing monstrosity that used to occur. Heading into the main cities of Telon does lower FPS slightly (everything slows down a bit). New Targonor in Thestra is still famous as the winding roads take you below ground and tend to shoot you around corners a little quickly. Open areas are far better, and it's still a visible improvement from launch.

Graphics

You can't debate the fact that Telon is absolutely beautiful. If you see something off in the distance there's a way to get to it, no matter what it is. There are no invisible walls, you can climb, swim, walk, or fly all over the world. It's one feature that I find fascinating since I love to explore. At re-

lease most of us became very familiar with the /flush command. It was a command that re-set the graphic engines as we played in order to fix things in the world that had gone horribly wrong, like trees with no leaves, fences with giant holes, that sort of thing. There are very few cases of needing to use it these days (thankfully). Every so often you will still get a graphic glitch where you are wielding no weapons in your hands as you attack things, and there are a few smaller bugs still hopping around. I don't think it's necessary for a game to be absolutely perfect, so long as there is constant work being done on it, and visible improvements.

Played on balanced settings, the game still looks beautiful: not all that different from playing on any of the other settings. There are many suggestions in the player forums about how to increase performance if you are having issues, such as turning off shadows, or turning off sounds.

A unique aspect to Vanguard is the weather systems that roll through the game. If you happen to be standing on a hill somewhere you can physically spot storm clouds off in the distance and watch as they approach. The skies will open up and you'll be caught in it. Snow storms are also an occurrence in Telon, though there is a bug where people using vista are unable to see the weather. If you're not one who particularly cares about these aspects of the game or they slow your system down you are able to customize your settings and turn them off.

Another key item is the amount of customization you have in the game. Character creation is an in depth process, though it has also gone through some revamps. When helmets were added to the game in March of 2008 some facial structures and options had to be reduced in order for it to be implemented properly. This left the community feeling a little neglected, as choice is always top of their concerns. Happily, a lot of these options have been brought back over time, allowing players to continue to create a character the way they want to create it. In September of 2008 character models were revamped to 'bring sexy back' after months of players complaining about 'ugly' characters. While they still don't look like centerfolds, not everything has to.

Sound

Telon is a world that comes to life through its sounds: the crunch of a footstep as you walk over a sandy beach or the metallic ring as you run over a grate in the floor. Each city and town has a unique feel to it. Combat works much the same way, the pitches rising and falling depending on the battle. You can get caught up in the momentum and lose yourself as you battle whatever foe it is you need to conquer. Sound is not only for beauty either, there are indications during combat of when you need to use your reactive skills as you counter an attack. If you're not looking for them you may miss them, but the ringing of the attack triggering is a good indication that you should use it. Handy for me when I'm caught up in the heat of battle and trying not to get squished by some giant creature.

Vanguard at a glance …

High fantasy-themed MMO game created by Sigil Games Online, and now developed and run by Sony Online Entertainment. US$14.99 per month subscription fee.

www.joinvanguard.com/en/

User Interface

The interface works on a very friendly level, and is featured very much like your 'typical' MMO screen, simplistic. Vanguard also allows for a lot of customization in its UI. You can move things around in layout mode to your preferences, add extra hotbars if you want or take some away. A compass comes in handy since Telon is absolutely huge – but I still find the maps in Vanguard lacking. The majority of steady players I spoke to ended up downloading a mod that lays things out in a much more organized fashion. Major city hubs show up on the three continental maps, as well as flying mount stations, and riftways which are use to travel around.

Game Play

Obviously the biggest changes to Vanguard have come in the form of game play. In September 2008 *The Isle of Dawn* was implemented, a new starting zone for characters. This is an amazing little island on the Kojan continent, with a background story about how the island separated from Kojan during the cataclysm. The village is filled with hardened humans, and a band of zealot hobgoblins, and players are led from 1 to 10 in all three spheres of the game. I have always been a fan of alts so I left my 44 blood mage for a few days to play with a new cleric and adventure through the island. Each of the three spheres of the game (adventuring, diplomacy, crafting) is explained in a huge amount of detail, and each quest takes players through the more complex aspects of Vanguard. You may even spot 'Slappy' on the Isle of Dawn, dancing away (and causing everyone around him to dance too). There's so much content on this little beginner island you can easily spend a few days here. The rewards of coin and gear (as well as items like diplomacy cards) far surpass the old starter towns so if you have the option to begin here, I'd certainly take it. It does make the older towns seem somewhat out dated, and I'm not sure if there's any reason at all any more to have a choice in where you start unless you'd like to for roleplay reasons.

When you leave the Isle of Dawn you may feel slightly overwhelmed. You're not given a huge amount of direction on where to go next but for some players that's just fine. There are some indications on what to do next, riftways now have a number of NPCs gathered around who will offer you quests to visit hubs that are around your level range. Each time you level up you can visit these NPCs and pick up new quests for new locations to visit. While you may find that the game is very hack-and-slash, Telon has much to offer, and it's not just based on the combat system.

Crafting and diplomacy are huge aspects of Vanguard, but you may find that diplomacy has very little use and is actually just a grind fest. There has been some work done to the sphere and it's being incorporated a little better into the world of Telon. You'll need diplomacy in the raid Ancient Port Warehouse, and it's a nice casual way to spend some time when you're not in the mood to do anything else. The rewards of coin and being able to change the buffs in particular cities to benefit those around are also nice. Crafting is hugely complex, requiring lots of faction, writs, sigils, and sub combines. You're not required to craft by any means but those who do find it rewarding.

There has been so much content added, and so many things changed that it's nearly impossible to cover it all in one single review. There has been end game content added – even if it's not near enough for players, at least it is something. Racial mounts made it in game, galleons, fishing, and all sorts of other pass times to keep people occupied. On the test server the level cap has been raised to 55 along with a new set of spells for players to learn, and there is talk of plenty of free content being added in the next year.

Community & Customer Service

I stand by my opinion that the customer service in Vanguard:SOH is some of the best I have ever seen. Whether it is because support knows that it needs to hang onto the few people who have continued to play, or because that's simply the way it is, I don't know. Petitions have been met in a timely manor on each of my personal occasions dealing with them, and when they were not there was typically a message displayed as I logged into game about how they had an influx due to some random issue. At least the communication is there.

The game would be nothing without its community. Players are passionate about the game: you can find them everywhere. I would highly suggest hitting the official forums to make friends and find guilds, they are exceptionally active. On the Seradon server there were people constantly chattering in public channels, and joining the player made craft and diplomacy channel also added a lot of conversations. If you're going to argue about why you dislike Vanguard in game, be prepared for some pretty hefty rebuttals from those who love the game, and you will certainly run into them.

Conclusion

If you've never played before expect a few glitches, the game is far from perfect. If you used to play and gave up in a fit of frustration you may want to give things another shot. I don't think that a casual gamer would enjoy the game because there is simply too much to do in Telon between the three spheres. If you're looking for a game with an eager community, and multiple facets, look no further.

Again, there's no way that this one article can cover everything within the game, nor all the changes that have occurred. There are (and will still be) bugs that are being worked on, and things that do not run nearly as well as they should. If you've got the patience to deal with these things in order to sink your teeth into the meat of the game, you may be surprised at what you find.

War for Edaðh

A tabletop wargame using cards

ERIC RIDLEY finds flaws in the presentation of a remarkable game …

IT'S HARD not to root for independent publishers and designers. Everyone likes an underdog and often people like to support the little guy. Backing smaller development teams is all well and good, but the downside is that the production values are usually much lower and some times the games just plain stink.

When you see the **War for Edaðh** game on a shop shelf, you are unlikely to grab it down and pore over it. It comes in a matt black box with a purple warrior (hehehe, purple warrior) woman on it holding guns. The art on the box isn't great but it is passable. However, flip the box over and you are confronted by a block of descriptive text and no pictures of components. A cardinal sin in my book. Very few people are willing to jump into paying £20 for a game that they can't even see. The realities of getting components put together / printed at the same time as the box often means that pictures are impossible. Regardless, it won't help sales.

War for Edaðh is based on a fantasy setting created by the designers and described on the (paradoxically) attractive website at *www.warriorelite.com* It's a tale of warring factions fighting over a conical shaped world. It is a fairly standard mix of creatures and species that you may see in a lot of different sci fi / fantasy backdrops.

The first thing that will strike you as you crack open the box is the massive set of rules that falls out. There are two thick rulebooks that encompass the entire game. It puts off even the most hardcore of crunchy fanatics. In truth, the rules do a fairly good job of guiding you through the initial set up and basic game. From opening the box to playing a game will take you about 30-45 minutes, the top end of average. The rest of the components are 120 cards and a number of counters.

The comprehensive rules describe how to play several variants of the same game. These differ in complexity and depth but all revolve around combat between armies. Each card represents a type of warrior, with all the many types having unique stats and abilities. Generally players organise units in formations and then opponents battle them across various types of terrain. The great thing about War for Edaðh is it's the most like a tabletop war-game you can probably get in a card game. Troop movement, formations and terrain all come into play. There are scout cards that help you with the ground you are fighting on, rules for routing troops and generals to command your army. In this respect War for Edaðh stands out as a

remarkable product.

You start out with a line of cards and a second line behind them, called ranks. In between you and your opponent you will lay a terrain card and then your opponent has his ranks. From there you fight it out for control of the oddly shaped world

All the actions you take in the game will cost Mastery Points. You start off with 50 of these and they increase or decrease as you play different cards. You also have damage points: these are inflicted through battle. If the damage total on your scorecard is ever higher than your mastery points total, then you lose the game. It's a clever system that has you thinking hard about what and how you play. Battles are decided through card play. Each player has a hand of number cards. These cards are used by both players picking a card and showing it simultaneously: the player with the higher number wins the fight. You can also end up losing troops if you blow it enough. Each card has a number from 1 – 12 on it. The higher the card the more likely you are to win. The interesting thing is that some cards are act almost as jokers when played against the cards of your opponent. So a 5 is a 5, unless it is played against a 12, in which case it becomes a 17. It's this uncertainty that often is the most interesting part of the War.

The rule books weigh in at 30 pages for the 'Apprentice' and 60 pages for the 'Warrior' version. That is a lot of reading for even the most ardent games fan. The actual rules part of the *Games Workshop* tabletop miniatures game for **The Lord of the Rings** is only 73 pages and that includes all the optional stuff about siege engines and war elephants. It's a lot to digest and no matter how friendly the presentation, it still seems daunting.

The real problem with indy games is that they are indy games. If War for Edaðh was pushed out in a bigger, nicer box, with stand out, colourful art work for the cards and a rule book that looked less threatening I think there would be a lot of people out there who would pick it up and really enjoy it. As it is War for Edaðh falls into the trap that an awful lot of small games do. Poor art work and confusing layout tarnish this product and turn what would be a very solid game into one that will turn many people off just because of the packaging and graphic design. But if it sounds like you would enjoy this type of game then you probably will like Edaðh. It's not for everyone though.

After the Flood
The Challenge of Ruling Ancient Sumer

*PEVANS tries out this strategy boardgame for three players ...*

LAUNCHED at *Spiel* last year, **After the Flood** is one of Martin Wallace's *Treefrog* games, the first three-player game in the range. Now, there are plenty of games that work with three players, but not so many that are specifically designed for three. And this game is only for three players. Like the other Treefrog games, it contains just wooden pieces along with the board (and the rules, of course).

The setting is Ancient Sumer – what is now southern Iraq – where agriculture began. The central part of the board shows Sumer, divided into provinces. These are where players will build cities. Around this are non-Sumerian areas – these are partly abstracted, as there isn't room (or a need) for accurate geography. It's from these areas that invaders will attack Sumer (and, historically, become Sumerian in their turn) and with these areas that Sumer trades – as it only produces cloth and grain itself.

The game is played over five turns (each represents several centuries, to give you an idea of the scale). In each of these, players get the opportunity to invade Sumer, deploy and use their workers, trade for more valuable goods and build cities. At the end of the turn, players get points for the areas occupied by their armies and can spend goods to score their cities. After the five turns, there are points for workers still in play and the player with the most points wins. Simple, eh?!

The turn starts with each player taking workers. There's no holdover from previous turns, so you only have these workers each turn and fewer if you don't have enough pieces available. Players also get textiles and grain (white and yellow cubes) – the goods produced in Sumer. The number of cubes each player gets depends on how many workers they already have in the production boxes printed on the map. This is a very clever mechanism as it's the relative positions that matter.

Hence, while players can start a bidding war (by placing more workers in one or other box), it's not necessarily cost effective. The number of workers only changes the relative numbers of cubes you gain. If you're happy to be third, you only need one worker when your opponents may be using up half a dozen. While the variation in what you get isn't
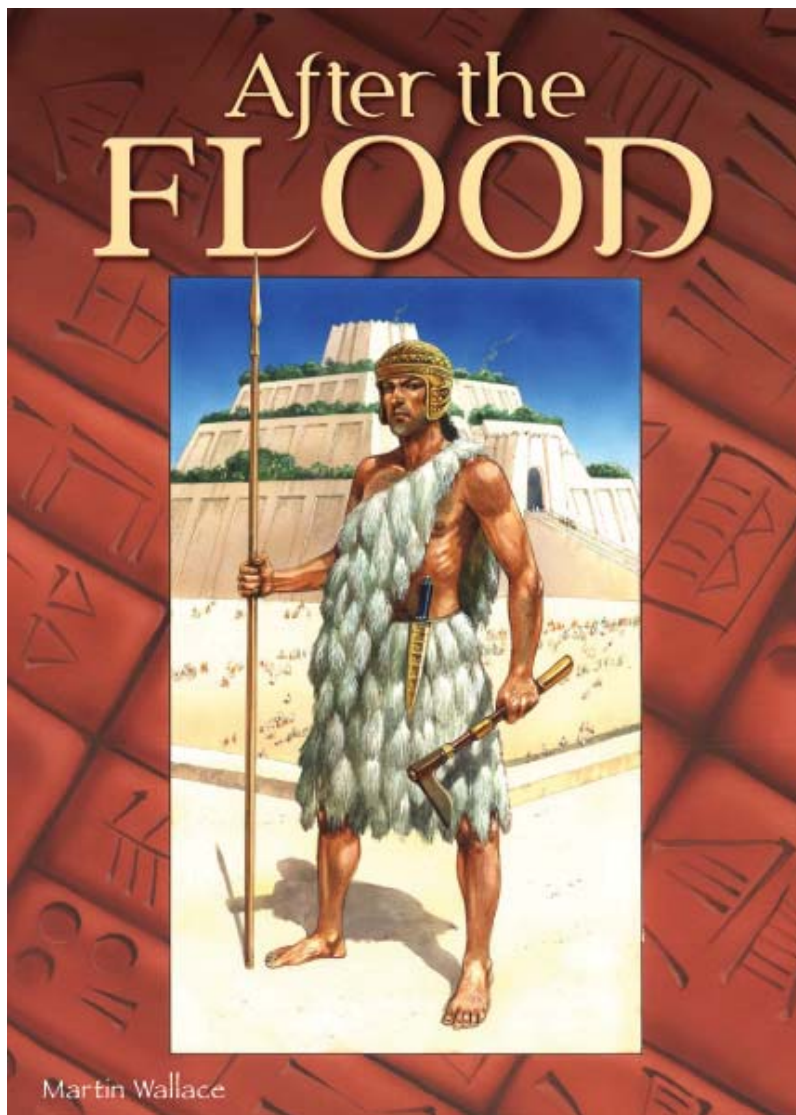
that great, it does make a difference in what you can do during the turn (though goods are kept between turns, so it is possible to build up a stockpile).

The meat of the turn is the players taking actions until everybody passes. As soon as one player has passed, the others must pay something each time they take another action. This allows players to continue doing things – at a cost. When they pass, players may also bid something for turn order for the next turn. Turn order can be important if there's something specific you want to do before anyone else gets the chance.

Apart from passing, players have five actions available to them when it's their turn. The simplest is to build a city, placing one of their big wooden squares in an empty province of Sumer. There's no cost to this, so it's usually the first thing players do in the game. As an added incentive, most provinces provide a special ability to the player who has a city in it. Cities also give players the opportunity to turn goods into victory points.

The second action available is to place workers. This costs one goods cube. Each good has a notional value, so you get to place that number of workers, but only in one place. Workers don't go into Sumer, only outside areas. Here they can act as traders or start an invasion. They can also go into one of the four boxes on the board. Two of these are the Irrigation (grain production) and Weaving (textile) boxes I've already mentioned. The other two are Scribes and Tool Makers. Tool Makers convert cubes of 'Metal' into more valuable discs of 'Tools'; Scribes are used to move workers from one place to another. Scribes are useful tactically, while Tool Makers are a necessity as the only source of Tools cubes.

Most of the areas outside Sumer produce goods. Players with workers (or soldiers) in these can trade goods they hold for what the area produces – a table on the board shows what can be swapped for what. One trade action can involve as many of the player's pieces as they want. They could, for example, trade a grain cube, which they got at the start of the turn, for a metals cube, use a Tool Maker to convert this to a Tools disc and trade this for a Gold disc. The only constraints on one action are that each worker can only be used once and each area only produces one of each good shown. As the notes in the rules suggest, it makes sense to set things up and then make one, big trade. The only problem is the other players getting in the way before you're ready to trade…

Each turn three Empires are available, one for each player. Starting an Empire is another action. Each starts in a specific area and the player has to have the most workers in that area. They get a set number of soldier pieces and put 1-2 in the starting area. They can also buy extra soldiers and pay something to equip their soldiers. This is another relative ranking: each player's soldiers are either better or worse than each of the others and are thus more or less likely to win any fight.

Fights happen as part of the 'Expand Empire' action. This allows the player to place one of their allocated soldiers into an area next to one they already have a soldier in. If this is occupied by someone else's soldier, the attacker rolls the dice. Roll high enough (depending on whether the attacking soldier is better or worse equipped than the defender–though the game favours the attacker) and the defending soldier is removed. If the attacker fails, they can keep on trying while they have soldiers available. As well as expanding into other areas, players can use this action to destroy an opponent's city. And usually follow this up by placing their own in that area. This action can be continued as long as the player discards a soldier for each additional play they make.

At the end of the turn, players score points for areas they have soldiers in. Hence the more soldiers that come with an Empire, the more useful it is. Not just because you can get more areas but because you can use some of the soldiers to make multiple placements in one action. If another player has passed, it's expensive to keep on taking actions, so it's useful to expand your Empire in fewer actions. Soldiers can also trade (and take precedence over workers for trading), so there's a real incentive to get soldiers into areas you want to trade with. Not to mention using the opportunity to remove another player's city to get the province's special ability.

This puts a real premium on getting a strong Empire and using it effectively. A table of which Empires start where when is printed on the board, so it's worth setting up to get Empires in advance. Of course, all the players know this, so the competition for Empires is often in advance of when they appear. This gives players a choice to make on the first turn: between placing cities and grabbing an Empire. The designer's notes suggest cities should be the first priority, but my experience is that having the largest Empire on turn one is quite an advantage. Don't let anyone capitalise on this!

Once all the players have passed, there a few things to do to complete the turn. First off, a new sequence of play is determined, based on what players have bid when they passed. Equal bids maintain the status quo, so there's a tendency for the order to stay the same until someone really wants to go first. Players then score victory points. I've already mentioned that players get points for areas their Empire occupies. They then have the opportunity to spend goods to 'expand' their cities. It costs a minimum of two wood cubes to do this, with players scoring more points for each different 'luxury' good (the discs) they spend on top of this. The expanded city gets a second layer and can't score again – though it can be destroyed or removed and another city built in the province.

There are thus two major ways of scoring points in **After the Flood**: by occupying lots of areas and by collecting and spending full sets of luxury goods. Luckily, occupying lots of areas gives players lots of trading opportunities, which will allow them to gain the luxuries. However, they also need to have the raw materials to trade up, so they need workers in the production areas to gain these (and Tools). It's simply not possible to do all this in one turn. Players need to use some turns to set up a few big scoring opportunities. The second and fourth turns start with a 'decline' action when players lose some of their workers. This gives the players more tactical considerations: minimising what they lose to decline and preserve their positions from turns 1 and 3.

After five turns, there are more points available for the players with the most workers in the production boxes and areas outside Sumer. These points can be significant, especially if one player manages to get substantially more than their opponents. The Designer's Notes make the point that **After the Flood** is "a long-distance race and it's possible to catch up from quite a way behind."

This is a meaty game with a playing time of three hours – and it does take this long. It's also a game that doesn't lend itself to ready analysis. What players need to do is complex and they are playing for the long term. There are lots of choices and decisions about what to do when. Players need to build up their position both absolutely and in comparison to what their opponents are doing. And they need to do everything. One useful tactic is to eke out your turn to be the last player still taking actions. This costs a bit more, but means you can take actions that your opponents cannot react to until next turn.

I find **After the Flood** to be a really challenging game. It's not enough to do well for one turn, you have to do well over all the turns. And it's not clear just what doing well is. It's all about relative positions between the players. Interestingly, given it's a three-player game, there doesn't seem to be any problem with two players ganging up on the third. Each player needs to do their own thing and there's little scope to join forces. At the same time, players have to be very aware of what their opponents are up to. It gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Fighting to Win
Serim Ral: a Beginner's Guide, part 3

PAUL CURTIS concludes his advice for newcomers to this fantasy turn-based game ...

HERE ARE some tips about warfare. **Serim Ral** *is* a wargame, after all! Let's start with Combat and Castles

Most combat in the world of SR takes place at Castles, whether they be yours or an enemy's! One of the main contributions to the outcome of a battle (apart from attack strength and health) is down to the castle's Defences. If you attack an enemy's castle and if he does not attack you in return, then your attack strength is weakened by the castle's defence (in some cases by 89%!) So an Army with 2,000,000 attack against a castle with 89% defences, of that amount only 220,000 attack will get through!

It is wise to employ a thief to spy on the castle before you send an army to attack it. Walls, Guard Posts and Temples play a large part in the defence of a castle: a castle with 145,000 walls (giving a defence of 75%), nine guard posts and nine Temples has a defence rating of 89%. You should estimate that established castles have between 80-86% defence rating (you don't want to go underestimating the defences as it could be you that ends up worse off).

Wizards can scry these castles, too. Although scrying won't tell you the defence rating of the castle, it will tell you how many troops are there and estimate the training levels by working out the magic resistance on the scry report (remember, each level of training = 8% magic resistance).

It is a little-known fact that Training Centres give an attack bonus to the garrison of the castle: this bonus comes in the form of training levels Training Centres at castles not only train the garrison at 600 points per training centre but give a one level bonus to training in combat. This means that castles with two training centres will add two levels of training to each trainable troop type in the castle in combat. So if your garrison is untrained, in combat they will be level 2 (Competent fighting unit) and if they are Veterans they will be boosted to Champions.

Combat

For every Leader you have involved in an attack, the defender has his force split. So if you attack a castle with four leaders, then each leader will face 25% of the garrison in combat. This can be used to your advantage to get your best leaders isolated against small portions of the garrison, so that they overwhelm that portion with minimal casualties.

One common tactic used by experienced players is to have three-five leaders all attack the target. Two of those leaders will be trooped up with the best troops, while the other leaders are there as a diversion. Frequently, the diversionary leaders might even only attack 1% and retreat 0%. What this will do is mean that the diversionary leaders attack for one round of combat only with a very small force. As soon as they take casualties, they will retreat... but this gives the two main strike leaders the chance to wipe out their portion of the garrison. If they are well-trooped enough, the two strike leaders might have 95% of their force left for round two, but only 40-50% of the total target garrison remains. So using multiple attackers is very useful indeed. When attacking a city, the general rule-of-thumb for sucess is that you need double the health of the garrison.

Sieging

Sieging is an alternative to Attacking a castle, if you have sent leaders to the castle with armies enough but not enough to attack through 89% walls, then it would be wise to Siege the castle. If you can cast some stone and Catapults onto the sieging leader, then your force will fire them 160 times until next turn, bringing down the walls: the more catapults and stone, the more damage to the walls Each catapult will use 160 stone per turn, so if you cast 10 catapults then you would need to cast 1600 stone

While sieging, you cannot issue any other orders as sieging will take up your full 160 hours. Some players don't expect a player to siege so they won't send re-enforcements, unless of course you siege all the time: then you will be caught out. Be aware that the enemy may send re-enforcements in the form of a leader or six! I have used the *Siege* order twice in this game, once to bring the walls down and once because half my leaders didn't make it to the castle. A castle that is being sieged cannot be delivered to. They won't make any food or wood or iron etc either, so it is handy too if you want to starve the opposition. *Siege* is a good order to use against Unaligned castles

Defending

If you are the one defending a castle then it is wise not to attack the enemy. Get all your own castles up to a defence rating of 89% and when your enemies arrive, do not attack them but let them attack through the walls, losing most of their attack strength.

The best use of casting while defending a castle is to cast in as many troops as possible rather than to try to dispel his. If your castle has two Training Centres, then cast in troops that are cheap but are trainable as they will receive the training bonus from the training centres (any troop that is cheap and trainable). You can also aid in troops to help combat the threat (using godly DP points).

Castles are automatically set to retreat at 0% losses. This means that if you attack an enemy outside the walls then they will retreat as soon as they have taken losses. This can be used. A tactic that I often use is when my

castle is faced against several leaders, and the outcome is a close call, then I will get the castle to attack all but one of the leaders at 1%, leaving his one leader to face 95% of the garrison on his own for the first round of combat, hopefully causing enough damage to force that particular leader to retreat. Then the next round the garrison faces with one less leader so your forces are less divided.

If you have any leaders with an army inside the castle, then these can be used to defend the castle with the comfort of walls to protect them. If the enemy is not fully trooped then it might be wise to Bless the castle using 1 DP of aid as this will stop the enemy from aiding any troops, though it will not stop casting. Castles with 89% walls, 5,000 or so troops 1,000 or so mounts and 50 or so golems are very difficult to take down without great losses: remember this!

Building an Army
I tend only to use Fighters, Paladins and Demigods for combat. You can use any leader, but these three get the most out of the troops and their total attack strength is much greater.

Another thing that must be remembered is that each troop type has its own strength and weaknesses over differing Terrain. Some have a great Mountain attack, such as Dwarves, but these are weak in Forests. So it would be unwise to send an army of Dwarves to attack an army of Elves in the forests. Try to play to your army's strengths. If you wish to take on some Forest Elves and do not have the 'best' troop type to take them on, consider casting some other troop type (such as Dark Elves or Skaven) with your wizards for a couple of turns to give your army a better fighting chance.

Alignment of the troops within an army will make a difference. For instance, a 'good' troop type will not like fighting alongside an 'evil' troop. The alignment of an army will depend on the troops it has: try to keep the good/neutral and evil troops separate. When building an army, you must remember not to overtroop them as they receive a hefty penalty for this It is OK if they have one-ten too many troops as the penalty will be insignificant, but the more you overtroop them the greater the penalty

Fighters can command 500 troops per level, Paladins the same and Demigods 2,000 troops per level. If your leader is an Orc, then give him Orcs as his main base as he receives an extra 10% bonus for troops of the same ilk. If the army's troops are evil, then give them the same number of evil mounts as this will increase their morale and more or less double their attack strength.

Mounts & Golems
There are many mounts in SR. Some can be made at castles with Stables, others have to be bought or cast. For each stable you can make six mounts at the cost of food per mount. So a castle with nine stables can make 48 mounts. It is wise, therefore, to *Create Farms* at each of these castles before creating stables as this will double the output of food. Always make sure you have plenty of food at your castles or mounts and troops will starve.

Golems are very often overlooked, but they can be made at castles with Quarries for free (apart from the cost of stone, of course). Quarries at castles increase the output of stone, but for each quarry a castle has they can make one golem, so a castle with nine quarries can make nine golems per turn. Each golem costs stone but their Attack and Health especially make them worthwhile additions to

any army. While Golems are slow at moving, if your army has plenty of mounts, then these can usually carry the golems anyway.

Training
Training your troops should *never* be underestimated. It will double their attack strength and health and make them less susceptible to dispelling Troops do not have to be trained, but if you can train them as much as possible before sending them out then it will greatly increase your chances of success in battle. They will gain some training through combat. For each level of training, troops receive an 8% magic resistance to dispelling, so an Elite troop (level 10 training) will be 80% resistant to dispelling by the enemy.

If I am faced with a castle which has loads of troops inside or an enemy leader with loads of troops, if the troops are not trained then I will dispell his troops to make him weaker. In my position in SR32 I can dispell 4,200 orcs in one turn from an enemy leader, but if they are trained up to Elite, I can cast the same spells but will only dispell 840 troops instead of 4,200! As mentioned before, training will bolster the attack and strength of each troop. Per Level of training a troop will gain +3 to Attack Strength and +10 to Health (differs from game to game). So a normal MAO-TOAN has 40 Attack and 200 Health, whereas an Elite MAO-TOAN will have 70 Attack and 300 Health. Multiply this by 2,000 troops and we are talking *big* figures.

Weapons and Armour
As well as training your troops before sending them into combat, it is good to try to get Weapons and Armour for them, too. These can be made at castles with Forges. For each Weapon on a troop, it will receive +5 Attack, and for each Armour it will receive +20 Health. A troop can carry ten of each, potentially adding +50 Attack and +200 Health to each troop. So, if we add all the bonuses of W+A and Training together: a normal untrained MAO-TOAN with 40 Attack and 200 Health will become an almighty MAO-TOAN with 120 Attack and 500 Health! To put everything into some kind of perspective, let's say we have two armies:

Army 1 has a level 10 Dwarf Priest leader; 8,000 Orcs (untrained); 0 W+A.

Army 2 has a - level 6 Orc Paladin leader; 4,000 Orcs (Elite); 4,000 Nightmares (mounts); 40,0000 W+A; 100 Golems

Army 1 = 806,000 Attack and 1,600,000 Health and will move at 50hrs through forest, 40 hrs through hills and 30 hrs through plains.

Army 2 = 2,718,583 Attack and 6,200,000 Health and will move at 22 hrs through all terrains (except solid rock and sea, of course).

Bit of a difference, eh? And Army 1 has double the troops of Army 2! It has a higher level leader but is also much slower at moving

One Final Word
I, along with many other players, have enjoyed battling it out in the world of Serim Ral and I thoroughly recommend it. If you are a newcomer, there are plenty of ways to seek more advice: your first turnsheet will list players who are willing to advise. There is a wealth of information on the Incubus Designs website, including a FAQ page.

Good Luck!

Phoenix
From the ashes of PBM

MICA GOLDSTONE traces the rebirth of a classic game …

IN JULY 1992 *KJC Games* launched its replacement to the sci-fi wargame **Capital**. This game, **Beyond the Stellar Empire**, or BSE for short, had been running for some years in America as a hand-moderated postal game. This version however had been programmed in qbasic by *Adventures By Mail* and while vaguely based on the events in the American version was sufficiently unique to be considered a brand new game.

Members of the KJC company spent a short working holiday at the ABM offices learning how to input the game and came back to the UK complete with floppy discs and rule books.

Within a few weeks the game was up and running.

As the two companies went their separate ways over the next few years it became clear that KJC was on its own. The Americans sold their licence on and the version across the waters drifted through a successive number of owners before finally floundering. Others may know more about its fate but that's another story.

The KJC version of BSE went through a quick succession

of moderators until it was taken on by Mica Goldstone back in 1994.

From there the game became relatively stable (there will always be ups and downs in an open-ended game) and the fan base now having a dedicated GM could look forward to a long and relatively untroubled future.

As technology in the outside world progressed so too did the game. First, back around the beginning of 1998 the game was upgraded to send email turn reports. This was a big change in how the game was played. Suddenly the American and the European players were on a level with the British players.

The shape of things to come
Just over a year and a half later the beginning of a remarkable relationship started.

David Bethel, then a professional programmer and power behind one of the in-game factions, offered his services in re-programming the planetary battle module of the game. These being grounds for occasional grumblings
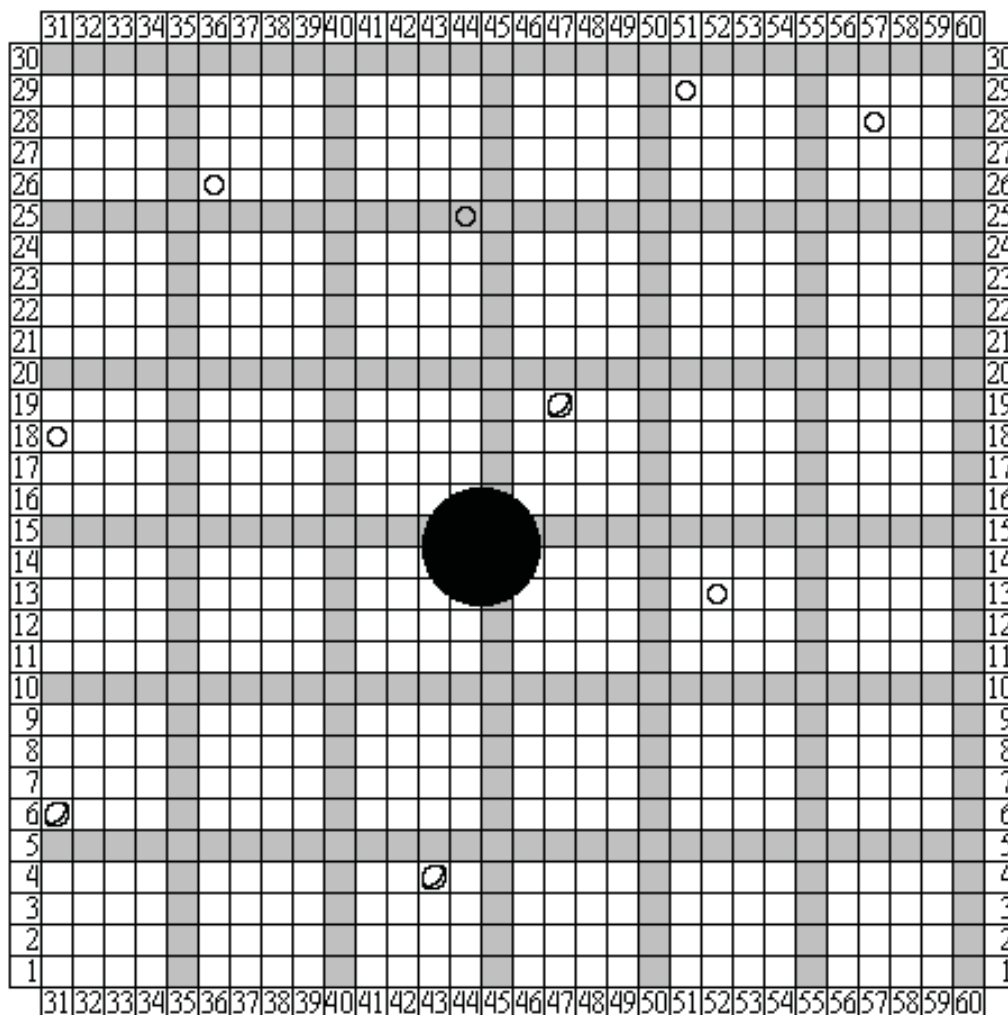
Yank
System 146

Adjacent Systems
Skord (171)

Planetary Data

Space Square	Name	Type	Moons
443	Bull Run	gas giant	1
2544	Chickamauga	O	1
1352	Cold Harbor	O	0
631	Fredricksberg	gas giant	2
2636	Gettysberg	O	0
2951	Mobile Bay	O	4
2857	Shiloh	O	1
1831	Stone River	O	1
1947	Vicksberg	gas giant	3

Map Legend

⬤ Sun Square May not be traversed!	⊘ Gas Giant ◯ Planet ⊡ Asteroid

amongst the players, the offer was readily accepted.

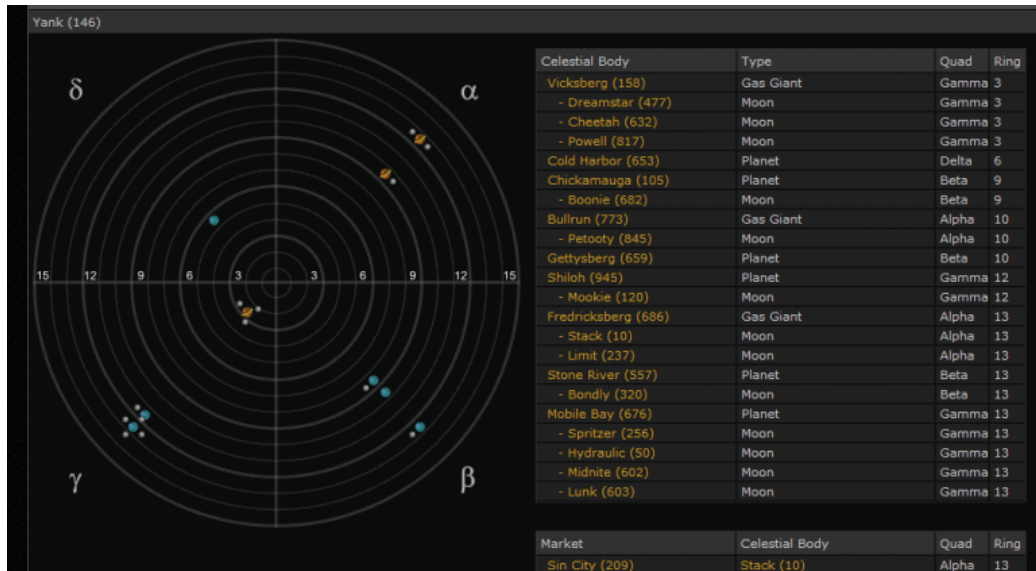Within a month the new program was integrated, though in effect as this new program was written in a different language (c++) it quickly started to reveal the ever widening cracks in the rest of the code.

Maybe it was the beer, maybe seeing his colleagues going insane under the pressure of highly demanding jobs, or more likely the frustration of continually putting right other peoples' dubious quality work, but David decided it was time for a career change. This project had also whet Dr Bethel's appetite for the sheer 'joy' of coding professional games – the long nights shouting at monitors, stamping

New Map

In many respects it was a bit like converting characters from one game setting to another.

While keeping the players up to date on progress, many of the aspects of the new game would have to remain a secret. The biggest one being turn costs. This was because Beyond the Stellar Empire was a game that required each and every turn to be manually entered - long days of doing nothing more than hitting the keypad, changing DOS screens in order to get to the right entry section. Even now I am a dab hand and can remember always being ahead of the computer – 22, 22, 1, 146, 22, 22, 5, 2951, 8, 22 (swap engines, jump to 146, swap engines, move to 2951 enter orbit of planet Mobile Bay). At a turn cost of £2.50 for a basic weekly turn or £4 for a fortnight turn, it was not a cheap game to play.

The new game would have the strong selling point that turns would be automated – no more inputting except for the unique special actions and scenario plot devices. As such we were going to make the running of ships free.

Surprisingly enough at this time we had still not decided on a name for the new game though we were certain that it should have one. We had already become jaded with the term Starbase to replace Colony – we couldn't call it a colony because it no longer contains colonists.

Celestial Body	Type	Quad	Ring
Vicksberg (158)	Gas Giant	Gamma	3
- Dreamstar (477)	Moon	Gamma	3
- Cheetah (632)	Moon	Gamma	3
- Powell (817)	Moon	Gamma	3
Cold Harbor (653)	Planet	Delta	6
Chickamauga (105)	Planet	Beta	9
- Boonie (682)	Moon	Beta	9
Bullrun (773)	Gas Giant	Alpha	10
- Petooty (845)	Moon	Alpha	10
Gettysberg (659)	Planet	Beta	10
Shiloh (945)	Planet	Gamma	12
- Mookie (120)	Moon	Gamma	12
Fredricksberg (686)	Gas Giant	Alpha	13
- Stack (10)	Moon	Alpha	13
- Limit (237)	Moon	Alpha	13
Stone River (557)	Planet	Beta	13
- Bondly (320)	Moon	Beta	13
Mobile Bay (676)	Planet	Gamma	13
- Spritzer (256)	Moon	Gamma	13
- Hydraulic (50)	Moon	Gamma	13
- Midnite (602)	Moon	Gamma	13
- Lunk (603)	Moon	Gamma	13

Market	Celestial Body	Quad	Ring
Sin City (209)	Stack (10)	Alpha	13

on bugs, explaining to players that their worst fears would only come true if the programmer was a complete moron, then having to explain that no, this was not an admission of being a complete moron... you get the picture.

So, with the unmitigated success of the new battle program, talks (largely beer induced) were undertaken to write a replacement to Beyond the Stellar Empire.

To accomplish this *Skeletal Software* was founded by David Bethel in order to tackle the prospect of re-writing Beyond the Stellar Empire.

Out with the old, in with the new

The first thing that was decided upon was to ditch all code belonging to the previous game including the new battle program.

This was done for a number of good reasons:

First and foremost, everything about the new game code had to be under the control of Skeletal Software in order to ensure professional quality control and only code written by David could be guaranteed.

A new language, C++, would be used as it was significantly better than qbasic.

The game mechanics would be new and unique to the new game. Very little of the old mechanics would be used and then only the generic terms and assumptions common to most sci-fi games.

The game would be purely email and require the use of editors at the players' end in order to produce orders for their positions as well as making the creation of orders simpler.

In fact only the history, maps (modified for the new system) and equivalent assets would be converted over.

It was after considerable amounts of beers that once again a name for the new game was being thrown around – after a number of drunken rejections **Phoenix** was decided upon. From my perspective I was seeing the rise of the new game from the ashes of the old one though I suspect that David was looking at the other end of the Phoenix's life and going down in flames. So the name fitted both our expectations and Phoenix it was called.

First Flight

By December 2002 we were ready to convert – every position had been manually updated to determine what it would be converted into. Each new system had a corresponding system map, planet data and atmospheres. Minerals had been seeded in appropriate locations to match the previous game: everything was looking peachy. We notified the players and for the first time since the launch of the game back in 1994, the game would be suspended for a week.

Converting the game within a week was no mean feat – coffee was consumed by the gallon. Laptops and wires were everywhere. Conversion programs were checked and the test version of the new game was scrubbed.

It was early evening towards the end of the week when the big buttons were pressed and the old rusty data was changed into new sparkly data; data that initially didn't fit due to the radical nature of the economy that underpinned the new game.

More coffee and long hours into the night later, we had knocked some sense into the game – modified populations,

altered markets and shifted dynamics (though in a couple of cases we had to inform the players that they would not enjoy the excesses that were possible under the previously flawed game system).

And so the new game was launched and surprisingly enough it was remarkably smooth. Yes we discovered that the in-house programmer responsible for converting BSE data to Phoenix compatible data had left us with an older version and by the time we discovered this, we were already two days into post conversion manipulation, but otherwise everything seems pretty good.

Over the next few years steady improvements were made to the game. Most of these were refining construction and destruction (building things and blowing them up) but overall the core mechanics of the game remained pretty much unchanged.
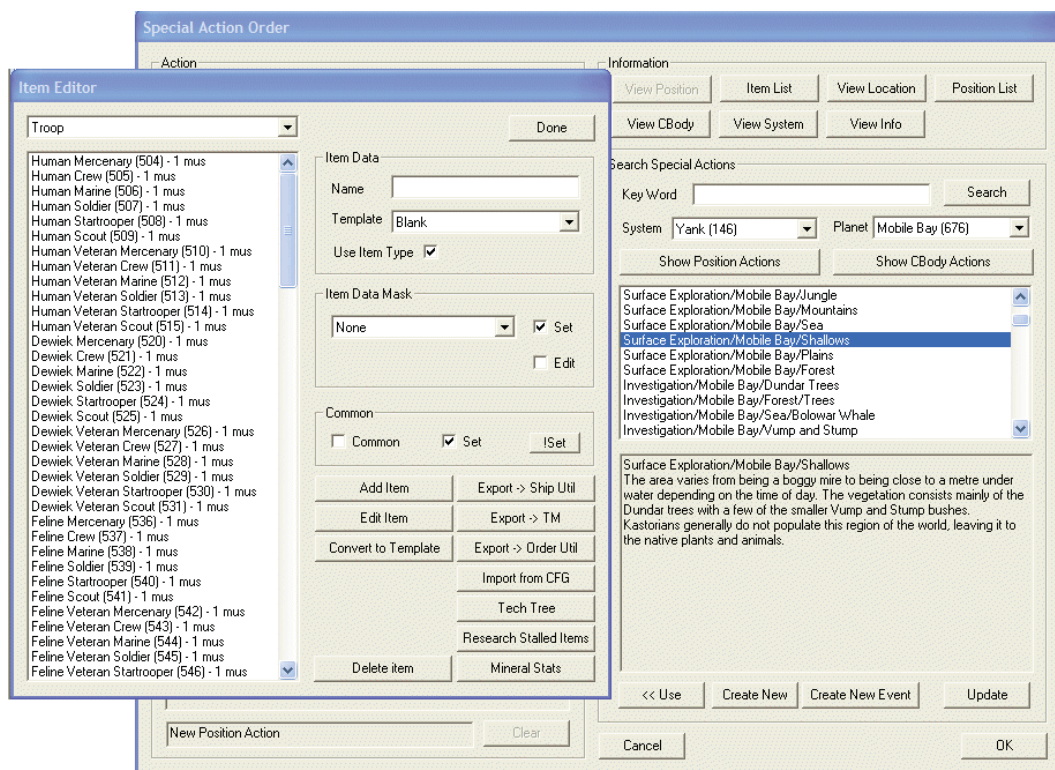
fickle gamers that would only be interested in a game because it had rotating spaceships but no game behind the display.

Obviously a forum was a must – somewhere to meet and greet, argue and rant but also a place to hold the rules that could be modified on the fly – a Wikipedia.

We could have picked something off the shelf and for a few years we did use a commercial forum, but this was always going to be a stop-gap.

Work commenced on a forum-wiki in 2007 – this would be radically different to commercial ones because it was to be integrated into the game but also because it was to contain the facilities for factions in the game to have administration rights within their own sub-sections of the forum and wiki areas.

Skeletal Software, having reviewed all the things that the new online system would be capable of and its primary goal – the bringing of people and systems together on one site named it *Nexus* (not to be confused with the name of the generic game processing engine developed by *Madhouse*).

Also, as this was to be integrated into the game, game data was also to be displayed – automatically updated from the game as new data was generated or modified within the game. First up were system and planet maps along with all the data for items within the game.

After the launch of this in March 2008 work continued, integrating more aspects of the game including a ship design editor that even included the secret information
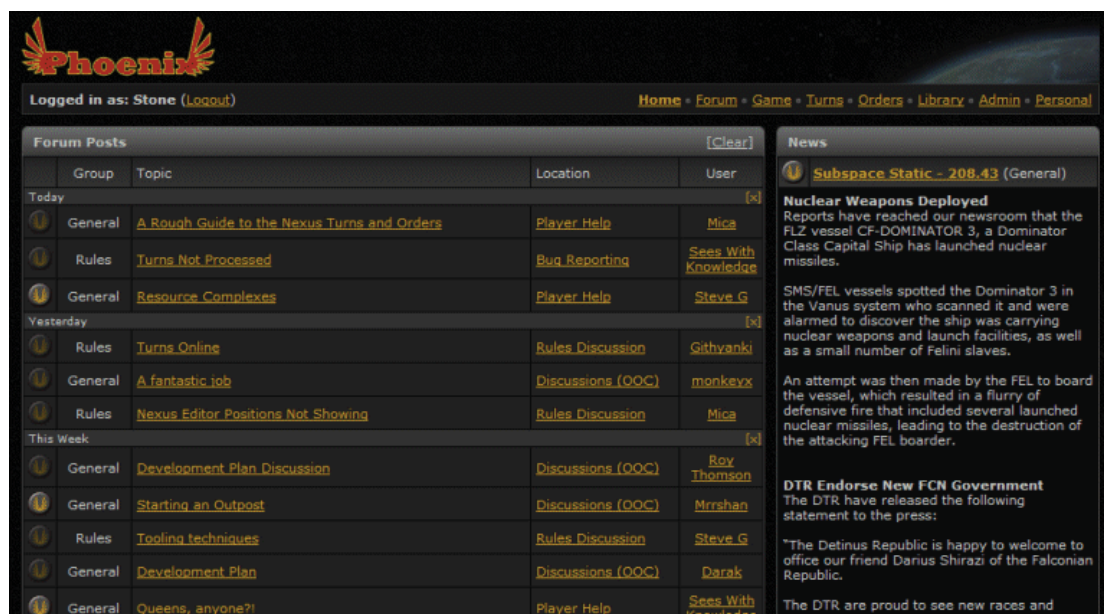
Ascent

Play by email however was only seen as a stepping stone, not a final destination. This is because email doesn't go far enough for modern gamers. We quickly determined that David's vision of Phoenix would come true if we didn't look to widening the appeal and playability of the game.

Our first consideration was to avoid falling into the trap of competing with the newly emerging online games. Graphics and animations unless done well actually detract from what could be considered a good game. Instead we opted for neat, clean and functional – giving our players what they needed rather than attempting to pander to

players who are prepared to commit time and effort to our game, but despite this, a few have sneaked in.

The future

We are only just in a position to open the doors to new players, though at the time of writing we still do not have a new online sign-up system integrated into Nexus, though we expect to have it up and running soon.

It has been a long haul but the end is now in sight. We will have a fully integrated email, online open-ended space opera that is all set for another 16 years. We have a system that is future proof – Nexus has already been shown to be useable by the latest iphone – handy for looking at your positions and keeping in touch while on holiday.

This, though, is just the beginning – when we embarked on the recent developments of Phoenix and Nexus we had set ourselves new goals – the two systems had to be integrated with each other but more importantly also had to be game independent, ie a suitable platform for a range of game genres. This has been achieved and once this final push to complete Phoenix is completed, we will be turning our attention to a new project. We had hoped to be in this position a couple of years ago, but the old adage runs true, everything takes twice as long as you predict, even when you take into consideration everything taking twice as long as you predict.

known to the specific player. After this turn reports were uploaded along with a new all-singing, all-dancing order editor.

There is still more to do, as the more we do, the more there seems to be to do. Also the corporate look of the blue template for Nexus can fool even the most observant boss – how many **Warcraft** players can get away with gaming during work time? Not that we condone such things, nope, not us, nosireebob.

This seems to have paid off: we still have players who have been in the game for sixteen years, with the average player having played on and off for at least eight years and new players (anyone under three years) now slowly taking over positions of power in the established power blocks.

During these long years we have kept our doors largely closed to new players. We have not advertised to any great degree, yet despite this new players find us. Most are confused and put off by the lack of pretty pictures, but then we are happy to lose them. We are only interested in the

Magic and Mystery
The virtual world of Xhodon

PETER KESSLER explores this enchanted setting ...

Padeu had always dreamed of being a very powerful magician with hoards of magical items and a myriad of magical creatures under his command. So three months ago he set out on his journey to become one of the great magicians of Xhodon.

In a small valley, he decided to plant a magical tree. The seed for this tree was something special. Only dragon eggs could be used and it took everything Padeu knew about magic to convert the egg into the seed. Great joy was the overwhelming feeling when he planted his first own magical tree. This really was a wonderful moment. From now on, his tree would allow him to gain mana and create all the buildings and creatures he would need for his rise to power.

A messenger arrived soon after this and offered him a Quest. Padeu accepted and did everything that the messenger asked him to do. The rewards were extraordinary and this not only enabled him to build his small Palace much quicker than expected, he learned a lot about managing his small part of the world.

After a while, the messenger told him there would be no new quests in the near future. So Padeu could no longer rely on the rewards from them and this made it much harder to grow. There was not much happening in his small realm as he had to wait until there were enough resources for new buildings or to summon new creatures.

In the meantime, Padeu picked up a new hobby. He hired a hero to start raiding lairs around his palace. After a couple of raids, he did the maths and found out that this could be a key factor for his development if he attacked with a decent amount of troops. So he ordered his hero to wait until he had summoned more creatures and started a small but successful raiding business. To his surprise, these raids not only produced all four valuable resources, but from time to time he found an artifact and some of these had a direct impact on things like his production efficiency.

Just when he started to breathe a little bit easier, one of his neighbors decided that this would be a good

time to raid Padeus' realm. As this was a very powerful Wizard, Padeu could only try to save as much as possible. He was able to hide only some of his resources, but all his servants were sent away and this wise move resulted in no casualties, except for two kobolds who somehow managed to ignore the alarm.

Now it was perfectly clear to him that he needed allies to help him defend. So Padeu joined a guild of friendly wizards, hoping that the raids would stop. In the first couple of weeks, it seemed that this was true, but he had to learn the hard way, that not every guild would be able to protect against everyone. Nonetheless, Padeu enjoys his life and waits for the moment when he can expand his small realm into a second world.

XHODON IS A game about economy and diplomacy, but in a world of permanent war. You can either play a good or an evil wizard. But it is not about building this character, so the choice only limits the items and guilds you can choose. Most of the time will be spend with building improvements to your various buildings. In addition, you can raid lairs of monsters and you should start with this as soon as possible as it is fun and very useful. But don't put all your eggs in this basket. When one of your larger neighbors attacks your army, you will lose a lot of troops and this will harm your ability to raid. So it is about balancing the cost of new buildings with the cost of new troops. Try to establish good relations with powerful neighbors early and try to join one of the better guilds as soon as possible. This

Xhodon at a glance ...

A free-to-play fantasy wargame set in a magical land. The basic game is free, with some advantages available at low cost.

www.xhodon.de
(site in German only at present!)

will often require you to do some roleplaying in the hall, but hey, every Flagship reader should be up to this task. The website has a build-in chat system, a forum and the ability to send private messages, so communication is easy. And some of the easy quests will require you to communicate, making it easier to get in contact with fellow players. If you join a guild, you can expect that they will try to establish additional guild communication through either a forum or stuff like ICQ.

In Xhodon, as in so many other games in the web, you need to be one of the first players in a new world or you will have to live with an occasional raid. This is not really a problem as long as you are able and willing to spend some time every day to save your servants and goods.

Everything you are doing is based on four different resources and mana. How many resources you will need for a building depends on the level of the building, so expect to pay a lot for small gains later in a game. Mana is only needed if you want the building to be completed in less than twenty-four hours, but in most cases, this is exactly what you will need. New servants are created with the same resources, but you cannot reduce the amount of mana through waiting.

Every five minutes there is a turn (here called a tick) and this is the fastest speed for movement. But most creatures are slower, so your armies will need more ticks to cover one square on the map.

In addition, you will get new resources from your buildings at this moment and the results of your fights will be calculated. If you had a fight with another player or in a lair, you will get one of the internal mails, telling you what happened to your army. So you will be able to see how many troops you and your opponent lost and, if you won, how many resources you raided. If you managed to find an item, this item will be transferred directly to you and you can use it immediately if you fulfill all requirements

The map itself is 60 to 60 and each square can contain up to 16 palaces. As each player is able to create five palaces (depending on his resources), you could expect a lot of players and at the moment there are 10000 active positions in each of the worlds. One of the worlds called Troll is open-ended, but the second game world will end when one player, together with his guild, is able to raid the main lair and keep the magic crystal from this lair for five days.

Be prepared to spend quite some time per day with this game. If you are really trying to be one of the bigger players, you will need to have your browser open 24/7. From what I have seen, most people tend to play at least three times a day and spend around 30 minutes to one hour per day. You can play a position with about five minutes per day, but you will grow very slowly and miss out on some of the fun in the hall. Additionally, you will never win one of the internal leagues. Every month, all players are put into leagues of 20 to 60 players. In a league, you will get the chance to catch one of three very powerful artifacts. Each of those artifacts will help everyone in your guild, so they are hotly contested. And if you manage to be one of the three best players, you will get a lesser artifact for your character. Manage to be number one in your league and you get a medal to separate you from all those lazy and lousy players around you.

The game can be played without any cost, but you can decide to buy yourself some advantages like better production for euros. If you spend your money on all things possible, you will end up with a cost of more than ten euros, but two-three euros per month will give you a small package with some of the most attractive advantages like better mana production and the improved magic eye.

The game is completely payable on your web browser. For signing up, you need to create an account on the website *www.xhodon.de* and can start playing. You are simply required to include your email address and respond to one mail.

The Flagship Interview
Mike Lachtanski and Dave Long, the team behind Scimitar Games

Flagship interviews **Mike Lachtanski** and **Dave Long**, the team behind *Scimitar Games*. **Carol Mulholland** asks about launching their new games …

1 - What first attracted you to gaming?
Dave - I'm pretty competitive, I enjoy cerebral challenges, planning and carrying out strategies, and the social interaction that comes with playing games with friends and family.
Mike - I started playing board games with my friends as a kid and have never stopped. Game night is something I always look forward to for the competition, the conversation, and of course the snacks. :)

2 - Where are you based?
San Jose, CA

3 - How long have you been playing games and designing them?
We've both been playing board games all our lives. We've always had a tendency to add 'house rules' to games we've played and wanted to make better. Dave and his son have designed a couple of games over the years which haven't yet made it into production and have always run them by Mike for his feedback and input. We've found that the collaboration and team approach has always produced a better game.

4 - SECTOR 41 has a science fiction theme, right? What made you decide on this as a game theme?
When playing computer games with a 'Fog of War' mechanic, Mike always likes to uncover the entire map removing all of the fog. We used tiles to create a similar concept in a board game and toyed with various exploration themes including a search throughout a dungeon, but the initial tile layout created a game based mostly on luck. Once we switched to a Science Fiction theme and added the concept of 'Folding Space' so the players could manipulate the board, we knew we had something special. We now had a deep game where players could use strategy and tactics to overcome the luck of the initial tile layout, and the rule-set fit on one sheet of paper. A rare combination that we felt was worthy of bringing to market. Of course, we still have ideas for how to use the base mechanics of Sector 41 for other game themes and we may re-visit it someday.

Sector 41 is an unstable (some say cursed) region of the galaxy that contains the most potent power source ever discovered; Glynium. Four enemy races converge in this dangerous region of space to fight for the rights to harvest enough Glynium to rule the universe! While the conflict rages their presence disturbs the ancient Guardian of Sector 41 who begins to anger...

Foil the plans of your opponents by using your massive Mother Ship to fold space and alter the board to your advantage. Can you combine strategic planning with fast changing tactics to guide your race to victory before the Guardian fully awakens and reclaims his home?

Destiny calls and victory awaits!

Warning; This game contains multiple Black Holes. Scimitar Games is not responsible if a Black Hole swallows you, your planet, or your solar system.

Game variants included in this box:
> Co-op Variant for 2 on 2 team play.
> Quick Play Variant for a shorter, simpler game.
> Lite Variant for younger children. (8+, 15 min)
> Centralized Glynium Variant for more of a challe

More variants available online at scimitargames.com

Not recommended for children as the small parts may be swallowed or inhaled.

Scimitar Games
1665 Willow St
San Jose, Ca 95125
support@scimitargames.com

5 - Are you aiming for an international market with SECTOR 41 and if so do you think that players have similar tastes world-wide?

Yes, we've always been aiming for the international market. We like games that emphasize strategy over luck. We believe that over the past ten or so years there's been increasing evidence that a lot of other gamers feel the same way.

6 - Has this had any effect on the design of your game?

Yes. We made sure to keep Sector 41 from growing in to a game with twenty pages of rules or words on the tiles because we wanted to be able to easily localize it to other languages.

7 - SECTOR 41 is described on your web-site as a 4-player game: can the number of players vary?

Sector 41 is a game for from two to four players – although it's best with two or four, because the third player has an advantage without a fourth player to keep an eye on him.

8 - Do you work mainly on your own or as part of a team?

When we're first thinking of ideas we explore the concepts individually. We try to test things out for a bit before bringing it to the 'team table' for consideration. Once we are both comfortable with a new idea or change and have tested it enough we reach out to our playtesters for feedback.

We are two people with different approaches to gaming and we have different styles and strengths. We try to combine these styles to complement one another and provide balance.

9 - Who does your art-work?

Many of the tiles and art were done by Mike in a 3-D graphics program. Some of Sector 41's artwork is inspired by Hubble telescope photos and then modified (with the permission of NASA) by Mike's creative talents.

10 - How do you plan to gather new players?

We plan to have a strong online presence so we can support the board gaming community on the internet. Word of mouth, gaming conventions, wonderful magazines like yours. :)

11 - Your website also mentions RACE FOR THE SUMMIT: is this a forthcoming game?

Yes, RFTS is a forthcoming rock climbing card game, designed and initially playtested by real life rock climbers. It is a lighter game than Sector 41 where you have to decide how many risks to take to be the first climber to reach the summit.

12 - Do you have plans for more games?

Yes, we hope to establish *Scimitar Games* as a publisher known for quality products and we do have other products in the pipeline. Our goal is to bring well-tested games to market while not taking ourselves too seriously. We always add a little humor to our games, as evidenced by the 'Black Hole Warning' on our Sector 41 box.

13 - Do you see game design as your future, full-time career?

It would be wonderful if it could be; but no current plans to quit our day jobs.

14 - Do you have any advice for other hopeful game designers?

We've been game designers for years, and we started Scimitar Games so that we could bring what we feel is a very special game to market.

The transition from designer to publisher had a lot of hidden traps and hurdles to jump along the way, and has actually turned out to be much more work than designing the game. We hope to be successful so we can launch future games from other designers as well as our own.

We would offer the following advice to other designers:
1) Thoroughly play-test and produce solid rules. We've been playtesting Sector 41 for years to make sure that our rules don't have any glaring gaps that are all too common. We resisted the temptation to rush it to market for Christmas 2008 because we wanted to make sure to make a superior first impression with our first product.
2) Find the right balance between sticking to your own beliefs and perceptions of your game vs. embracing the feedback from playtesters. Know when to stick to your vision and when to accept ideas for change in order to make the game better.
3) Ask yourself this one basic question about each change/rule you are considering for your game: Is it fun? If not, get rid of it. This doesn't mean you can't have negative events or things that challenge your players, but at the end of the day it is all about having fun.

http://scimitargames.com/

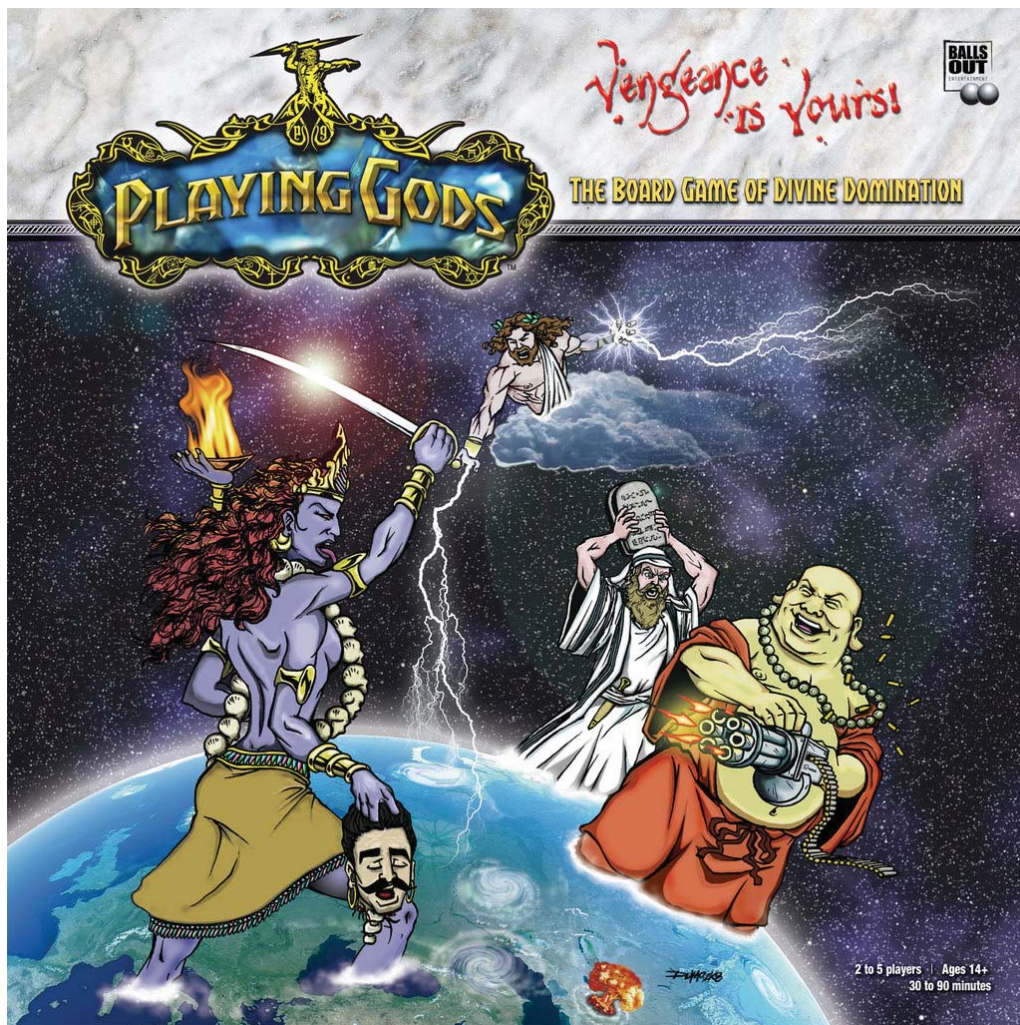# The Joy of Sects
Playing Gods offers Divine Domination

COLIN FORBES prepares to convert or simply smite his unbelievers ...

'Righteously convert other gods' followers to your benign rule or smite those too foolish to recognise your greatness, laying them to waste with terrifying natural disasters and plagues.'

IT SEEMS ONLY right to kick this review off with a flavour of a game which will either offend, or amuse. The intention is of course the latter, so if you already find your hackles rising, I can only suggest that you stop reading right now, as **Playing Gods** is not the game for you!

Put simply, Playing Gods is a satirical board game of divine domination, produced by *Balls Out Entertainment* (an independent games producer – see the interview with game designer Ben Radford in *Flagship 127*). Two to five players each play a different god, and compete with each other to take over the world. This is done by spreading your believers, converting the followers of other gods, or killing them off with Acts of God. The game has an open-ended structure that encourages player creativity. For example, players may choose to be a figurehead of one of the five main religions, or they may choose to create their own gods - or even be their own god! In the Expansion Pack (sold separately but supplied with the review copy of the game), artistic and creative players may even write and design their own cards.

The game is relatively easy to learn. The board is a simplified map of the Earth with five continents, each containing four regions. Coloured chips representing sects (groups of followers) are placed on those regions. Circling the globe is an outer ring where the gods move around the board, gathering power through Wrath and Conver-

sion cards. Wrath cards (also called 'kill cards') are used to bring down Acts of Gods and natural disasters, while the Conversion cards are used to convert other gods' followers to your beliefs. The game ends when one god has either killed or converted all other gods' sects, or has spread followers to occupy more than half the world's eleven regions.

In some ways the game design owes a little to the **Risk**-school of games : it's certainly not an in-depth strategy game, but rather a fun game best played socially. The game involves rolling a die, moving your god around, and using cards to try to kill or convert the sects of the other gods. It's actually pretty straight-forward - you move, and then you interact with the space you land on. If you land on some spaces, you draw a card. Some spaces are portals that let you affect the religious sects on the planet below. And a few trigger special actions, such as jumping to another space or stealing cards from the other people.

The real fun comes when you get to ruin your opponent's followers with the wrath cards you've been collecting, and then you watch sects devoted to the other gods fall into the ocean or go up in smoke. I believe they call it 'smiting' in godly terminology.

Playing Gods at a glance ...

A board game of competing religions for two-five players designed by *Balls Out Entertainment*. Available from Paizo Entertainment, JKLM and others at prices ranging around $35.99.

www.playinggods.com

If you want to be a little less aggressive, you can also convert your opponent's sects. There are conversion cards you can play like resurrection and miracles, and then the other god can play cards like prosperity and afterlife, and the god who plays more cards wins – so playing cards can often be a question of judgment: do you stand a chance of winning this time round, or perhaps it would be better to hold your (holy) fire and bide your time? The trick here is that if a god can later come through and kill some of those converted, they'll revert back to their original faith. So be prepared to temper your righteous wrath with mercy. As the holy book of at least one god says, to every season there is a time. Your turn, turn, turn!

Although there are some choices to be made along the way which very much determine the outcome of the game, this is definitely not a strategy game and should not be approached as such. There is a high degree of chance involved, although there are checks and balances to this. For instance, gods may be eliminated from the game when all of their followers are killed off or converted to another religion. However there is a chance that the god may be able to return to the game by being resurrected (by this time, as the game rules suggest, the god in question may have 'gone home, turned pacifist or be too drunk to wage holy war'). Furthermore, there is the Godkiller conversion card. This isn't exactly easy to use, since the god holding the card must land on the corresponding Godkiller space on the board. However, when the card is played, the god-player may immediately and irrevocably kill off any other god. This of course means that even a seemingly powerful god can always be eliminated - although it soon becomes apparent if someone is hanging around the Godkiller space, and muttering 'give me a two, a two' to the dice.

So what sets this game apart from others - for set apart it most definitely is? First and foremost, Playing Gods is a lot of fun! The game itself offers great opportunity for laughter, and the rules themselves will have you chuckling (older games players may remember the sheer agony of reading through Avalon Hill rulesets - this is the perfect antidote). However, what really makes this game work is the opportunity it provides to players to create their own laughs. Players should not feel constrained to play 'regular' gods. Far from it - the game contains the stickers needed to play such diverse deities as Cthulhu, Oprah, Scientology (represented by Tom Cruise) or my own favourite, the Flying Spaghetti monster, as well as conceptual gods such as Technology, Beer and Television. But why stop there? Make your own up!

The production values of the game also deserve a creditable mention (for it is right to give thanks and praise, saith the lord). The art is of high quality as well as being amusing, the rules are clear and concise and the game even includes a little letter from the game designer, which concludes: 'If people would lighten up and accept each other's faith (or lack of faith), if people would judge others by who they are instead of what they believe, if religious wars were fought with cards and dice, instead of bullets and bombs, we'd all be in a better place.'

Hurrah and Amen.

Then, Now or Still to Come?

SHANNON APPELCLINE recalls thrilling game experiences …

"The Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve."

IT'S A WELL-KNOWN quote popularized by David Hartwell in his essay of the same name. But, Hartwell never meant to say that we experience an age of wonder in our adolescence that cannot be replicated in adulthood. Instead, he claimed that the greatest wonder in science fiction comes when an individual is first introduced to it. The 1940s was not the true golden age of science-fiction, nor the 1960s, nor the 1980s; instead it was when each fan became a member of that culture.

When a reader is first introduced to science fiction, he enters a world of legends. He hears stories of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, rumors of a *Rendezvous with Rama*, perhaps even whisperings of Gene Wolfe's multilayered *Book of the New Sun*. They become larger than life, and so they take on mythic proportions. When a reader finally consumes Asimov, Clarke, or Wolfe he is not just consuming the actual tales--those words that they wrote--but he also is consuming every thing he has ever been told about them, and every image he has ever conjured up in his mind to tell those tales that he had not yet read.

So it is with board games as well.

I have enjoyed a Golden Age of gaming not once, but three times
When I first discovered roleplaying games through the blue **Dungeons & Dragons** book, I began to seek out those legends that had come before. I searched out *Greyhawk* and *Blackmoor*, the two original supplements to the game. I tracked down back issues of *Dragon* magazine. Later I would sit in my childhood bedroom with a TSR catalog, wondering over such strange games as **Dungeon**, **Saga**, and **They've Invaded Pleasantville**.

A decade or more later I enjoyed a new interest in small-press American board games, and I often haunted convention flea markets and regularly visited game stores which sold used games. **Divine Right**, **Arkham Horror**, **The Riddle of The Ring**, and **The Source of the Nile** had taken on mythic qualities and thus they entered my collection in that time period.

And so it was a third time when I discovered Eurogames, four years ago now. Reiner Knizia, Klaus Teuber, and Wolfgang Kramer were the names spoken of in hushed, reverent tones. I pined for **Ra**, dreamed of **Taj Mahal**, and wished for **Tikal**. **El Grande** had already taken on such a legendary quality by the time I first played it that I was awash in its possibilities, awed by its magnificence.

My Golden Age of roleplaying games was 10, my Golden Age of American board games was 20, and my Golden Age of Eurogames was 30.

Now the mysteries hav been uncovered. The legends have faced the harsh light of truth. There are few secrets left for me to uncover in the world of Eurogames, other than that which has not yet been published: the games still being developed and playtested by designers across the world.

My Golden Age has faded and become silver
Other write of this and they call it 'burn out'. They ask, Is it just me, or are this year's games not as good as last's?' They fondly say, 'Do you remember 2000? That was the best year for games.' Or maybe it was 1998 or 1995. Or 1975.

No reality can ever stand up to the dream. We are chasing after phantoms that will forever elude us. The Golden Age is behind us, always behind us, unless we move ever onward to new and different things: new genres, new entertainments.

But there is another option as well. If we look beyond the facade and see the truth we may find enjoyment there as well. It can not live up to the dream. Nothing could. But do you prefer dream or reality?

When I turn 40 perhaps I will have moved on to a new Golden Age. A new dream. Perhaps I will be chasing a new phantom. I can't see the future. However, in the world of board games I have found a strong core of enjoyment. I have found a true gold shining beneath golden dreams. So perhaps I will remain Eurogaming instead. I am certain that I will never again know that secret thrill that I felt the first time I heard of **Puerto Rico**, the first time I played El Grande, but that was a thrill born of phantasms, not facts.

Enjoy what you have, not what might be.

UK Games Expo 2009
Established Games & New Arrivals

CAROL MULHOLLAND is just back from Brum … …

THIS WAS Games Expo's third year, and this year the event ran with all its previous enthusiasm displayed by the organisers, the exhibitors and the players who were attending. Numbers didn't seem to have slackened at all this year, despite the world's sad economic straits. I was delighted to be there, myself, and to see so many new and familiar faces.

The main venue, Birmingham's Clarendon Suites on the Hagley Road, was open on Saturday June 6th and Sunday June 7th, and this year the organising team had arranged for the nearby Strathallan Hotel to have some downstairs rooms open on Friday 5th and after the Clarendon closed on Saturday evening for free boardgames and RPGs. This innovation was welcomed and enjoyed by many of those who attended.

Overheard at the convention #1
'He told me that it'll be possible to crew a submarine with my dwarves – brilliant!'

I was happy to notice how many youngsters were present, making the convention a real family event. Well, maybe the youngest of them all was not quite old enough to play at only four months, but even the smallest children were fascinated by what there was to look at and of course there were plenty of children of seven and older, all of whom were keen to try out the games of **Monkey Dash**, **Solairis** and **War for Edadh** near the Flagship stand. I liked the look of **The Great Fire of London** from *Medusa Games*. Not far away, *Terrorbull Games* had a new topical offering, **Crunch** 'The Game for Utter Bankers'. Nothing on our MPs' expenses yet, though.

What with chatting and looking around short-sightedly, I didn't manage to compile legible notes on every game that was on display, but can report that the atmosphere was one of fun throughout. The Tardis, Dr Who and both Daleks and StormTroopers made a fine display in the Exhibition Area. It was possible to register to play in the **Living Dungeon** and Zone 5 was devoted to playing RPG games. As a frivolous female, I always tend to favour trinkets like the rings and pendants at the *Pagan Angel* stall, so I treated myself to a tiny dragonfly there.

Overheard at the convention #2
'I should have packed my black T-shirt!'

The stands selling miniatures always look numerous and attractively well-stocked. There were plenty of tournaments, and votes for favourite games were collected. See the listing below for the results, while there's a list of all the nominations on the Games Expo website.

The convention's programme deserves a mention, too. With a cover by Ralph Horsley, as well as listings of guests and exhibitors it contained some thoughtful articles on subjects like What Makes a Good MMO?, Getting into Boardgames, Cthulhu, Options for RPGs and others. I enjoyed the witty RPG that was included, 'It's a Con' by Jonathan Hicks, in which your character has to survive testing sessions at the various convention tables without succumbing fatally to stress. And yes, personal grooming is a factor each time, though everyone seemed pretty well-put-together to me this year.

Overheard at the convention #3
'Oh dear, this sandwich has got salad stuff in it!'

I'm sad to report that I heard it confirmed that *UK GenCon* won't be running this year: mainly because Reading University have increased their charges and the organisers think that potential attendees would be put off if they raise their prices to cover this increase. They won't give up, though, and are looking out for an alternative venue in the future, though Reading had the big advantage of being quite easy to reach. So it looks as if the one-day *Dragonmeet* is the next games convention in this country. There's always the mega-convention *Spiel* in Germany, of course. Do tell me if there's a convention that I've overlooked!

On an upbeat tone, it's good at conventions to see so many people with fresh ideas for games and with attractive names for their products: **Overclockers**, for instance, **Hellfrost**, **Wildlife Rescue** and **Eurobabble**. The firms, too, often sound enchanting: new ones to me this year were: *Dice Maestro*, *Mynd Games* and *Tied to a Kite.* Whether you are able to make it to a convention or not, you may be interested learn that there's a new website established to help you find players in your own area. This could be just what you're looking for!

www.gamesetupmatch.com

AWARDS
Best New Boardgame: **Snow Tails** (*Asmodee*)
Best RPG: **Lovecraftian Tales from the Table** (*The Bradford Players*)
Best General/Party Game: **Liar-Liar** (*Pants on Fire Games*)
Best Family/Children's Game: **Cubiko** – *Kevin Birnbaum*
Best Abstract Game: **Kamisado** (*Burley Games*)
Best Card Game: **Fzzzt!** (*Surprised Stare*)
Best Collectible Card Game: **Huntik** (*Upper Deck Entertainment*)
Special Awards: *Doctor Who, Companions and the Daleks*; *Galactic Legion*

It's worth adding that the website lists all nominations, along with the games which won in previous years:
www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk

Game Theory 101

Part 4: Nervous Systems

JONATHAN DEGANN describes how instability in a game system helps make a game great … …

WHEN A GAME leaves a player feeling that he has little control over the outcome, it is often described as being 'chaotic'. A well-known example of a chaotic system is 'The Butterfly Effect', which argues that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas. In gaming or in weather, a chaotic system is one which is so unstable and complex that a small change in one condition sets off large unpredictable consequences. Since much of the fun in a game comes from setting up moves with predictable consequences, chaos is usually a bad thing.

There is another type of instability though, which I think is a good thing. It is the sort in which the effects of your actions are reasonably predictable, but which injects an element of surprise which forces players to adapt and make sometimes radical course corrections. Operations Management professionals call these systems 'nervous'. A 'nervous' system is one where a small external change forces you to alter your plans substantially. A small change won't suddenly turn a winner into a loser, but it may force a winner into inventing a new plan if he expects to maintain his lead.

In the metaphor of storytelling, if the Agonizing Decision provides the characterization, then the Nervous System provides the plot twist.

A game system in which small ripples force players to make substantial changes to their plans helps to inject an element of surprise into the game and to insure re-playability. Without sufficient nervousness, a game can become predictable and repetitive. It can enable a player with a leading position to just fall back on his strategy and become unstoppable.

Abstract two-player games tend to provide the best examples of nervous systems, although we'll ultimately focus on multiplayer German style games. Imagine a game of **Chess**, somewhere in the middle. White is winning, and is up by a couple of pieces, but black has some good threats set up. Black makes an entirely unexpected move that catches white off-guard. White is probably still winning, but oh, man, does he have to rethink his position! The game of Chess has an unstable, nervous, system of threats, counter-threats, and defenses because of the complex and subtle ways in which Chess pieces interact. A small change can have large ramifications for the plans of the players. It is this instability which has helped Chess to endure; small surprises create a new game. Nobody ever complains about Chess's lack of re-playability in spite of the fact that there is no luck and every game begins in exactly the same way!

This high degree of instability and precision found in Chess is, to me, what makes abstract games different from German games, which are more forgiving. The element needs to be present, though, in order for the game to be exciting. If players can reliably predict the way that the remainder of the game is going to unfold, the game is over. Players may have complete control over the remainder of the game, but there needs to be the instability that prevents

everyone from simply continuing their current strategy undisturbed in order for the endgame to be exciting.

Princes of Florence has sometimes been accused of being too much like multiplayer solitaire. Indeed, there are only several points in the game in which players can affect their opponents. However, Princes has a beautiful instability working for it, so that it only takes a small surprise to force players to reshape their plans considerably.

Sometimes, it can even be a 'good' surprise. I came to appreciate how nervousness makes Princes of Florence successful during one play when I bid for a Jester, just to keep the price up, and got it unexpectedly cheap. Fantastic! A Jester is a sort of wild card in Princes of Florence. The Park that I expected to buy would have added value to certain works I expected to build, but the Jester helps every work. Now, if I wanted to, I could just keep playing, sticking to my strategy. I could just get the Park later, knowing that every work I produced would be worth more. Not so easy! There weren't enough turns left now to do it all. And I was running just a bit short on money, and really needed to produce a work soon in order to keep going. Suddenly I found myself frantically rearranging my entire plan in order to insure that my good fortune really was something good.

In spite of the limited direct interaction in Princes of Florence, the game is widely loved and rarely grows stale. It is the nervousness of the system, especially in the consequences of the auctions, which magnifies the effects of this limited interaction, keeps the players on their toes, and prevents the game from just being a logic puzzle.

In a nervous game, an unexpected move forces you to radically reconsider your plans. In a chaotic game, an unexpected move renders your prior moves meaningless, potentially rewarding good play with poor results. The former keeps you on edge; the latter frustrates you.

Fresh Fish is an example of a game which can suffer from being chaotic. In Fresh Fish, players are attempting to build the shortest possible routes between pairs of tiles on a square grid. The twist is that players don't actually lay track, but instead lay blocking tiles which define the detours that the path must make. A player's best efforts at trying to direct the path may be thrown entirely out of whack by a single unexpected play which can divert the path entirely around the board. To make matters worse, the ability of a player to ruin another player's entire set up can depend on a lucky tile draw.

Chaos arises in a game when relationships are so interdependent that a position can't be judged inherently good or bad, but can flip upside down depending on actions outside the player's control. In Sid Sackson's **Bazaar**, players are trading groups of colored stones according to limited formulas in an attempt to get particular combinations, with as few extras as possible. A player can advance his position gradually, moving toward a goal, only

to be beaten to it—at which point that goal is taken away and replaced with a new one. All the work getting to that goal may not advance your position at all and the extra stones are likely as not to hurt you. So were you advancing your position or not all that time? A player needs to feel that his work earned him something. If a player finds himself getting punished for his efforts, he's going to feel sour and powerless.

But I've come to praise instability, not to bury it, so let's look at the problem that arises when there isn't enough. Such games will have a runaway leader problem if there is nothing a player can do that will force the leader off of his course for victory.

Economic games are often the ones in which there can be a runaway leader problem. The danger comes from the fact that a player's ability to generate more resources is based on how many resources he already has. If a player in the lead can shadow the actions of those behind him, he'll always be able to maintain that lead.

The old 3M game **Stocks and Bonds** is clearly flawed. Players invest in different securities which fluctuate somewhat randomly. If a player makes a lucky pick early on, he can secure his lead by mimicking the moves of the next best player without restriction. Possibly now the player in third place can take some fresh risks and leap ahead, but there is nothing that player #2 can do to shake off the leader until that happens.

Acquire also involves investing in shares, but now players are restricted. A player who gets a cash lead can only buy three shares a turn. This limit, along with the importance of having majority control, adds an essential degree of nervousness into the game. A leader attempting to secure majority control in Continental may be able to achieve that, but if a third player threatens his control in American, the leader becomes forced to choose between the two. He can't invest in everything at the same time. The counter threat could even change the complexion of his tiles; ones which once promised a majority payoff no longer do. What to do now?

Funkenschlag has all the structural problems of being a 'rich get richer' economic game. A player can evaluate his production capacity, plan his routes, and then execute an expansion with only limited interference. Even if a player is beaten to a city, he will have alternative cities or alternative routes to take. Losing your first choice has a cost, but it isn't likely to turn your plans in a distinctly different direction. Friedmann Friese obviously knew he had a problem and injected solutions into the game, some of which are very effective, and some of which are artificial and seem like workarounds. The artificial solution is to give the players at the back of the pack all of the advantages. They get the cheapest commodities, they get to build early, and they have the greatest control in the auction for new power plants. Rather than giving trailing players tactical alternatives which they can exploit to upset the order, Friese gives them handouts. This has always struck me as being a cheat. It turns a game of economic development into a sort of bicycle race where players jockey to draft behind the leader. In contrast, the way that old power plants become retired and new ones enter the game introduces some nervousness which is very organic. You need to replace one of your aging plants, but nothing available is really cutting edge. If you settle for what is available, you'll soon need to replace that too. If you hold off, you'll have difficulty expanding into more cities and your opponents will close out your best routes. Whatever you do, your growth plans need to be reconsidered and adapted on the fly.

A nervous system has a sort of bounce back effect—like when you jiggle one end of a rope and watch the wave travel to the far end and then return to your hand. The unexpected change occurs in the current game turn. The consequences cascade through the rest of the game, but the game is predictable enough to provide feedback, forcing you to make course corrections now.

Compare Acquire with **Union Pacific**, a game which also has a battle for majority control of shares. Acquire is the more nervous game. In Union Pacific, if someone overtakes you in a stock, the most common response is to redouble your efforts to regain control of the same company. Either way, the consequences have a clear dead end. You get the points or you don't, and you move on. In Acquire, the fact that the merger will pay off in cash means that the majority holder can use his winnings to create an entirely new threat. A player who emerges as the leader in **Worldwide** might use his earnings to challenge your leadership in **Imperial**, even though he currently has fewer stocks than you. That challenge forces you to reconsider how to defend your position in Imperial. In Union Pacific, the timing of the payoff is largely beyond your control; mostly all you can do is manage your risk as you decide whether to draw shares or lay them down. In Acquire, the timing of the payoff is critical and it must be actively managed. Now, maybe instead of expanding Imperial, you might buy yourself some time by expanding Worldwide because you can not allow it to be taken over right now. A temporary change in majority control has ripples in the ways players can invest, in the players' strategic positions should the merger take place, and on the consequences of each possible tile play.

Princes of Florence adds nervousness to the system by imposing strict constraints in the number of actions a player may take during the game. The little tile puzzle on each player's mat is a metaphor for the entire game. In each case, a player has severe constraints on what he can do during the course of the game. Each choice creates a series of possibilities, but also closes some off. A small change - whether in the position of a building on the player mat or in the item purchased at auction - ripples through all the subsequent choices the player must make. This would not be as profound if a player's purchases were only limited by his cash on hand, which can be managed flexibly. However, with only seven auctions and fourteen actions to work with, if you change one thing, you must reconfigure your entire game.

The geometry of the game board can go a long way to adding either stability or nervousness into a game. A board that is broken into many small pieces will have the relationships between locations measured in small increments, and will tend to be stable. A board in which moving a piece a single space changes its relevance dramatically will offer its players more variable challenges. You can see the difference characterized in games from the 1980s, which leaned toward more realism, contrasted with modern German-style games. Wargames tend to be very stable. They have lots of pieces moving relatively long distances. If one piece can't quite make it to its target this turn, maybe another can. Or maybe you'll just have to choose a slightly closer target or settle for slightly poorer

odds in a given combat resolution. Rarely would moving a single piece a single space change much. Similarly, in **Empire Builder** or any of the crayon rails games, landing an unexpected few dollars on an easy short won't typically open a menu of new opportunities for you.

On the other hand, board geometry is used to great advantage in **Taj Mahal**. As the board is laid out, a player will typically try to map out a strategy of specific palace placements that can create large chains and score many points. But if one contest proves to be more draining than expected, suddenly the player no longer has the resources to fight aggressively for a key spot. In Taj Mahal, every palace must be lined up 'just right'. There is a little wiggle room, but not much. Once you are forced to abandon your quest for a specific placement, you are likely to find yourself forced to reconsider your entire game. The 12 areas and 49 palace locations in Taj Mahal, along with their quirky network of connections, can prove to offer greater strategic challenges than the 1,000+ hexes on many wargame maps.

The power of nervousness goes a long way to explaining the lasting power of **Puerto Rico**. Some writers have commented on how little luck there is in the game—the only thing that changes is the offerings in the pool of plantations. Shouldn't the game become repetitive? The reason that the answer is 'no' is that Puerto Rico offers its players a very nervous system. You can build a coffee plantation and calculate exactly how you're going to earn the money to build the roaster, when to time the sale of

your first coffee barrel, and the building you're going to acquire with that money. Then, someone takes the Trader before you thought it would be taken. Or: the player to your right builds a coffee plantation. Or even: you unexpectedly get a windfall by being able to pick a prospector with three coins on it. These possibilities don't just delay your plans, they may flip your plans topsy-turvy. Your prior choices still make sense (Puerto Rico is not chaotic) but these surprises do force you to build yourself a very new battle plan. This new plan then has implications for the other players. And so it goes...

Instability in a game shouldn't go too far. If a game is too nervous, you probably won't bother developing a strategy, because there's no point in even trying to plan. If the game is chaotic you become frustrated, the unexpected twists not only force you to rethink your plans, they make you feel as though the choices you already made didn't help you.

Here's what a good degree of nervousness in a game feels like. You get into the game and begin to develop a viable strategy, and then you find yourself in the middle, holding on for dear life, trying to keep your strategy from unravelling, or else you get pulled into a new plan because unexpected opportunities seduced you into trying something unexpected.

Nervousness in a game keeps you on the edge of your seat; it makes you sweat. It's like the fun of riding in a roller coaster - it's been carefully engineered to stay on the tracks, but always feels like it's just a little bit out of control.

Dave Arneson
1947 - 2009

Co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons and latterly much respected teacher ...

DAVE ARNESON, who has died aged 61, was the American co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) and the father of role-playing games. He was a fixture in the gaming industry even before it was an industry, his work having driven that transition, as well as spawning books, movies and computer games - and creator of a pop-culture phenomenon that brought joy to millions.

Born in Hennepin County, Minnesota, Dave started playing Gettysburg, the board game that re-enacts the American civil war battle of the same name, in the 1960s. While studying history at the University of Minnesota, he moved into playing military miniatures games, with ranks of toy soldiers. In 1969, while refereeing a Romans v Gauls contest, Dave allowed a player who had painted up a Gaul shaman to call upon the gods to destroy a Roman elephant. As the Roman player laughed, Dave described a lightning bolt destroying the elephant. In that instant, role-playing was born.

The same year, Dave met Gary Gygax at the gaming convention Gen Con at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, thus beginning the collaboration that would lead to the creation of D&D. The two first worked together on Don't Give up the Ship, a set of naval miniatures rules eventually published in 1971. In 1970, Dave began working on Blackmoor - the first role-playing game. As is common practice among game designers, he incorporated bits of other rules into Blackmoor, including parts of Gygax's medieval rules Chainmail.

By 1974 they had produced D&D. None of the existing game companies wanted to produce it and its creators lacked the funds to do so themselves. Dave was then a security guard. In the end, a friend came up with the money, and Gygax formed his own company, Tactical Studies Rules (later TSR) to produce the new fantasy role-playing game. The first 500 copies sold out within a year. D&D introduced dragons, wizards, trolls, dwarves, goblins and elves to quests in search of treasure or to defeat the forces of evil. Without a board, all this was achieved with just graph paper, pencils, the polygonal dice and a set of complex rules.

Dave's focus rescued role-playing from miniatures rules long on tables, tape-measures and army units. He brought the game down to single characters, drawing inspiration from the fantasy works of authors such as JRR Tolkien and Jack Vance. Individual players assumed their roles and sought to complete quests organised by the gamemaster in sessions that could last for hours, and in campaigns that could carry on for months and years.

For Dave, the fun was in the by-play between characters and the application of cleverness when it came to problem-solving. Role-playing at its best is cooperative storytelling and his strength was in creating settings and rules that encouraged this.

Dave and Gygax went their separate ways in the late 1970s, and in 1979 Dave filed the first of five lawsuits to recover his royalties. One part of the agreement was that TSR was obliged to refer to Dave as the co-creator of D&D. The settlements also paid him a significant sum, with which he founded Adventure Games and 4D Interactive Systems, Inc - one of the first computer game companies. He generously used the settlement to help numerous small game companies through the 1980s, despite knowing he would see little, if any, of that money back. He was loved by game designers, and in 1984 was elected to the Academy of Gaming Arts and Design hall of fame. (Gygax died last year.)

In the late 1980s, Dave shut down Adventure Games and moved to California. He worked with Sleuth Publications for a time and did a great deal of freelance work. He also worked with special needs students. He was a great advocate of the educational use of games and role-playing.

In his later years, he moved to Florida to teach game design at Full Sail University, work he greatly enjoyed, especially when he could take students on a "field trip" - to a convention. His affable demeanour made it easy to forget how insightful he was. Often enough his eyes would narrow and a discussion would turn serious. He would solve a problem, smile and make a joke.

Personable and possessed of a wry sense of humour, Dave was very approachable, and kind to the awestruck. In 1980, as a new employee of the games company Flying Buffalo, I met him at a convention. We ended up in a coffee shop, had lunch together, and struck up a close friendship. Even when he was diagnosed with cancer, he remained positive. Last August, he attended Gen Con once again, where 39 years previously he had begun his career. As his daughter said, he just wanted everyone to have fun and be happy. And there, surrounded by throngs of gamers, he was at his happiest.

In 1984, Dave married Frankie Morneau; they later divorced. He is survived by his daughter, Malia, her husband, Luke Weinhagen, and his grandchildren, Shelby and Duncan.

David Lance (Dave) Arneson, game designer, born 1 October 1947; died 7 April 2009   *(AP)*
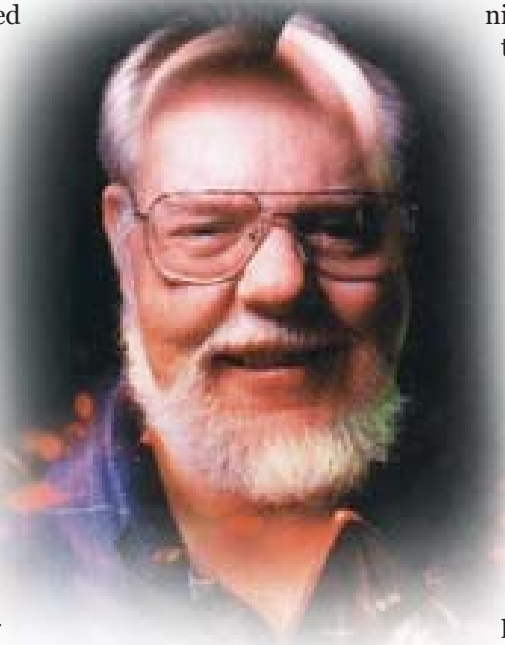
Ultima Online
A Restrospective

SHANNON YOUNG discusses the game from lauch to today ...

IN SEPTEMBER of 1997 the evolution of role playing games found its catalyst. Role playing games had already been enjoying a long history of success. The video game boom of the late 80s and early 90s saw companies such as *Square* become household names in the United States with the series **Final Fantasy** and in Japan, games like **Dragon Quest** (made by future *Square* partner *Enix* found themselves in similar graces

RPGs were the thinking man's video game. They catered to gamers who wanted to feel like a part of the world they were playing in, and established connections to it through meaningful dialogue and memorable characters. Each RPG tells its own story and has its own personality, but they quickly become shadows of each other, with common central beliefs such as a hero rising up to face an extraordinary evil or an epic quest to save the world.

In the early 80s, a man named Richard Garriott and his team created the first game in a series that would change the face of RPGs forever. **Ultima** was set in the world of Sosaria, where an evil wizard named Mondain uses the Gem of Immortality to rule over the land. The people cry out for a hero, and after being summoned to the realm by Lord British (Garriott's in-game alter ego) you, as the mysterious stranger that would become the avatar in future instalments, set out to defeat him and restore peace. Though the series started in classic RPG storytelling roots, later games took on a more distinct approach formula. By Ultima IV there was no ultimate villain, only you and the path of virtues that you walked.

The Ultima series became a phenomenal success and a genre favorite amongst fans. Its diversity and mature plots stood out amongst the collection of Japanese influenced RPGs. But in that fateful September of 1997 Garriott unleashed his greatest creation, the online only next game in the Ultima series - **Ultima Online**. Taking place in an alternate reality where Mondain is killed and the Gem of Immortality has shattered into countless pieces,

each shard became another world for people to inhabit, adventure in, and ultimately shape as they saw fit.

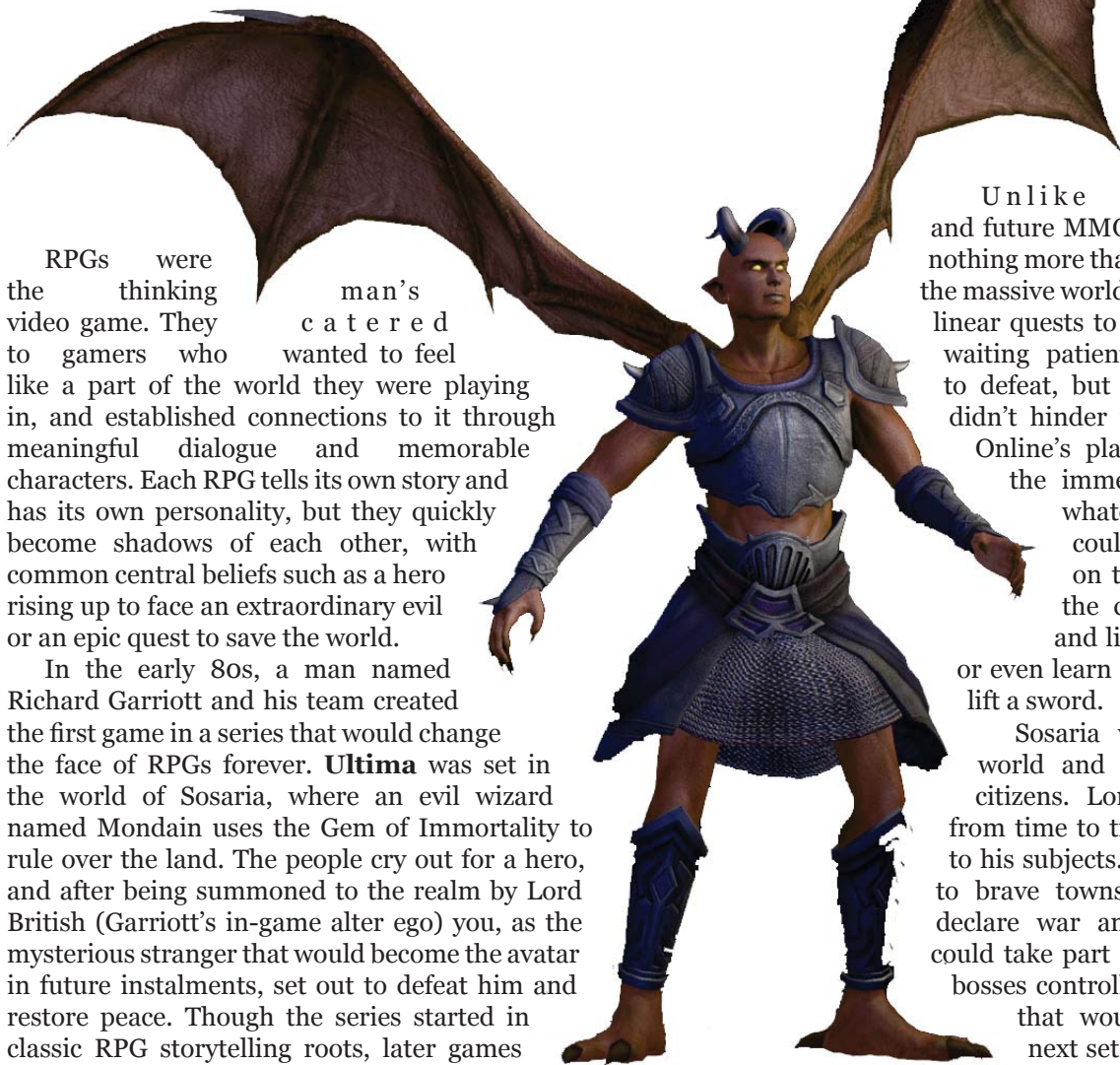Ultima Online was not the first graphical MMORPG, or multi-massive online role playing game, to be created. It was, however, the first one to achieve true success, and paved the way for online RPGs such as **Everquest**, **World of Warcraft**, and even new games that borrow heavily from UO, such as **EVE Online** and **Darkfall**.

Unlike other RPGs at the time and future MMORPGs to come, you were nothing more than another person living in the massive world of Sosaria. There were no linear quests to follow or boss characters waiting patiently in their set position to defeat, but the absence of set goals didn't hinder the enjoyment of Ultima Online's player base - it gave them the immeasurable freedom to do whatever they wanted. Players could band together to take on the monsters that roamed the countryside, buy a home and live peacefully off the land, or even learn a trade and never have to lift a sword.

Sosaria was truly an interactive world and you felt like one of its citizens. Lord British would appear from time to time in his castle to speak to his subjects. Town criers would shout to brave townsfolk as monsters would declare war and invade cities. Players could take part in real time quests to kill bosses controlled by real people, bosses that would not respawn for the next set of adventurers. The town of Magincia was even burned to the ground recently and has yet to recover. Players molded the world around them, not just by crafting and setting up vendors, but by actually altering storylines for their server through live events.

Adding to the evolving storyline aspect of the game, Ultima has seen many expansions in its long reign as one of the premier online worlds. Everything from steam punk influenced content from one of the two canned sequels to samurai and even elves have found their way into the alternate worlds created inadvertently by the evil wizard

Mondain.

With as much content, exploration, and diversity as it has acquired in its long history, one would think Ultima Online would be the most popular online game today. But *EA*, the game's current holders' claim that UO was the first MMO to reach 100,000 subscribers now pales in comparison to the attention drawn to the genre by industry juggernaut *Blizzard* and its **World of Warcraft** franchise.

UO is a different world now than it was a decade ago. Most of the city streets are empty and the spirit that made it so unique seems to be all but lost. But those who count out this MMO survivor might be in for a rude awakening soon. For all of the new MMORPG that are released on a yearly basis, Ultima is the game that will not die.

Recently it benefited from the acquisition of *Mythic* by EA, and found its graphics overhauled completely in the much talked about *Kingdom Reborn* campaign. An even newer client will be released along with the newest expansion to the game, *Stygian Abyss*, which will introduce gargoyles as a playable race along with adding new skills, lands, and what is being touted as the most intricate dungeon to ever grace the world of Sosaria.

Its players, though fewer now than when the gates were first opened, are loyal to the core, and have stood by their fantasy world through all of the changes that have come to it, both popular and despised. It's not a world for everyone, the graphics definitely show their age and the learning curve is quite steep. But for those who have found themselves enamored with Ultima Online, no other game can compare.

Garriott and his alter-ego Lord British may have left behind UO years ago, but it was recently announced that controversial ambassador Casca has been elected king. The land finds itself under the hand of a new ruler, and suddenly the long standing quiet of its stagnant existence seems to be dissipating. This news, along with the new expansion and contributions from event moderators, indicates Ultima Online is poised to make a comeback that would make Mickey Rourke shed a tear!
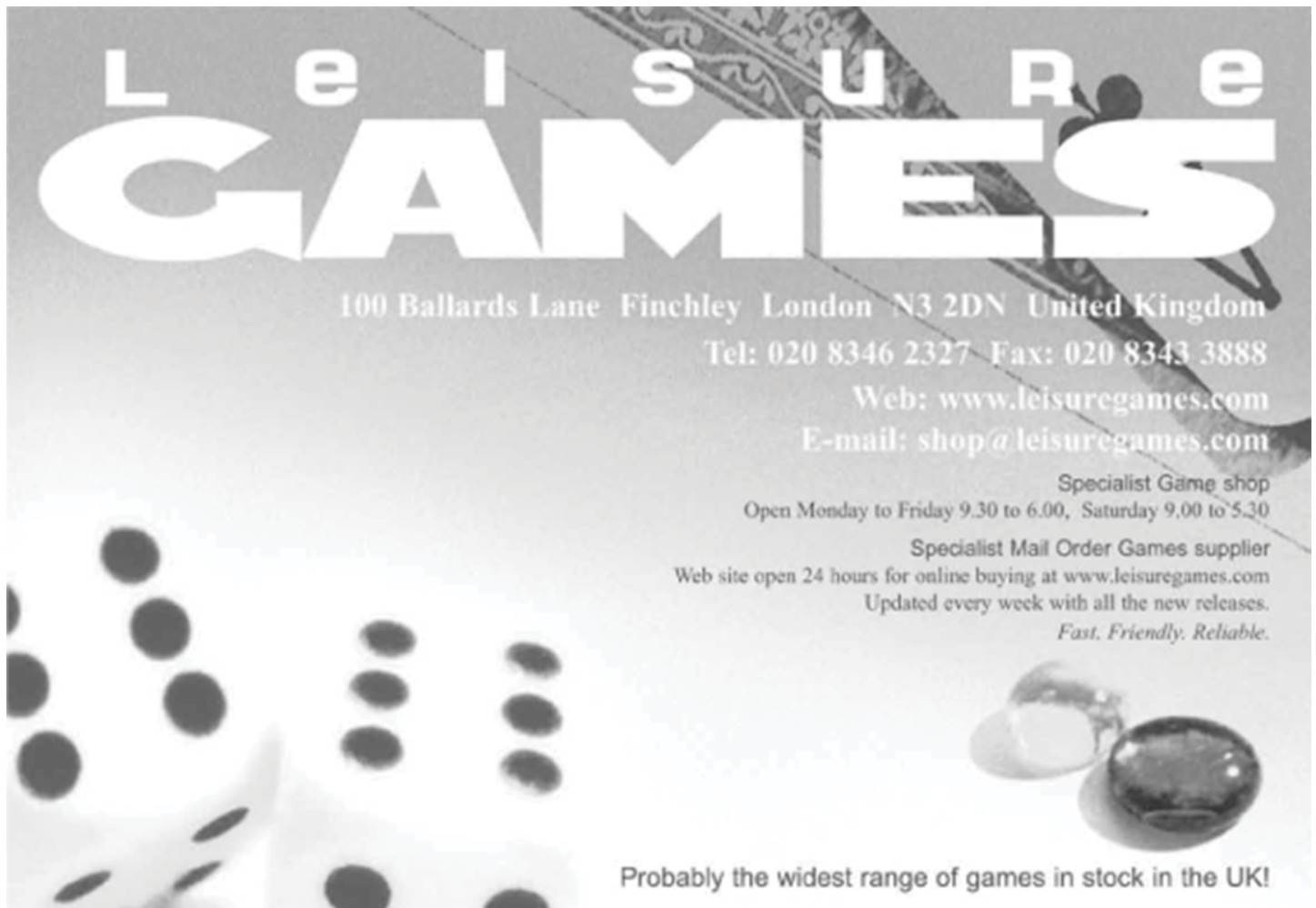
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The New Age of Console
The Sony Playstation

PATRICK KLEIN's corner: taking a look at consoles ...

SO, WHAT a lot of people don't know ... When *Nintendo* and *Sony* started working together in the 80s, they sought the creation and successful execution (in the good sense) of the Super Disk. The Super Disk was to be spawned for us as an attachment for the Super Nintendo.

Sadly Sony and Nintendo parted company and the Super Disk technology was never used or introduced. However in 1990 Sony began researching and development. Thanks to Ken Kutaragi in 1991 Sony was able to release a new version of the Super Disk, with obvious new modifications.

Two hundred compatible Playstation consoles were created. These consoles were not only compatible with the Super Disk, but were also able to read information on CDs holding audio information and also CDs holding computer generated graphics and video.

When they released the self named Playstation Slim line (born the PlaystationX) the compatibility for the Super Disk had sadly been eradicated. But this paved the way for the CD-Rom based games, which has benefited Sony greatly! And set off the next-gen of gaming software!

With the release of big game titles like **Tomb Raider**, **Final Fantasy** and more Sony soon became the household favourite!

With time they grew as you would expect, replacing the PsOne and PsX with the bulky, yet still rather cool looking (at the time) Ps2. To many people this was known as the dream-machine. People just couldn't get enough of it, the capacity for imagery had grown immensely, games were looking more real, playing longer and disk use was decreasing! All great points!!

This was first released in 2000 but there was a massive shortage. By 2001 things were back on track and there was almost 'one in every house'. In 2002 Sony decided to adapt to compete with Microsoft, by releasing games that would show the ability for Online Playing and internet compatibility. 2004 saw the release of the Slimline Ps2 in Black, soon followed by the Silver and Pink editions, opening up to a whole new market which is/was Girls! With the release of girly games as well, nothing us men would see as majorly action packed ... but still enough to keep them happy!

No more being moaned at for playing FIFA all the time and ignoring them, they were playing Barbie and Bratz, which was enough to keep them happy at the time. (I know, it sounds like I'm being mean to girls, but they were happy enough! Let it go!)

Then FFX-2, **Final Fantasy** sequel to FFX (10 for those who don't do numerals) Girls everywhere screamed with excitement, and many now are hooked on the non girly versions of the game, giving us boys more than a run for our money!

In 2005, Sony outdid themselves - surprisingly enough! The PS2 became the fastest game console to reach a staggering 100 million units shipped worldwide! That took them just over five years, which beat their own record with the PsOne!.

And now we have the Ps3, a very welcome addition to any household.

Coming in either 40,60,80,160 Gig capacity in PAL areas, and even a 20 Gig for NTSC (America, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Burma etc.) 60Gig being the one to get , given its 110% backwards compatibility allowing you to play and *save*. (Finally) PsOne & Ps2 Games! Always a mission to do before unless you could find one of the 'lesser spotted memory card convertors'. Just a simple button click creates a separate internal memory card obliterating the need to spend a fortune on them anymore!

Graphics are looking amazing! People in games are looking more human with every cut-scene. The online gaming capability is getting raved about all over the world too! It rarely freezes up, it rarely crashes out, it's 'WOW'.

The only sad thing is that the Ps3 does almost everything, leaving not much to explore. One cable will make it HD compatible, a small device can be attached to it to make it a freestanding freeview TV box, it has a remote, or the controller as always can do a pretty good remote impression, I really think that 'everything has been covered' has been said this time, and done! So all that's left to say is well done Sony! We shall wait for the ten years you have forecast this Ps3 will last us for, and eagerly await the release for the Ps4. People are already talking about it!

Just keep doing what you keep doing ... and all will be fine!

Not so Free to Play

Dark Ages: MMO with a Retro feel

PATRICK KLEIN reports a degree of frustration …

Thus began the investigation into the nature of the world. Elements were no longer partners for play and imagination, but were tools for discovery. Those that began the discipline, though, found no peace in the answer. Human magic was born; along with it men gained a fatal glimpse of the nature of things outside the local harmony.

Hy-brasyl split. People horded nature; for the power found therein. A few harnessed magic and ruled thereby. The new rulers ground stones into potions and advanced the art of war into more deadly swords. Agricultural flourished for the purpose of supporting armed assault; all to horde the power locked in the elements.

The first ill-star was recorded. A star was seen streaking the sky, and it was noted as a herald of doom. Perhaps such stars had scribed the sky before, yet never was one watched intently for signs of good or ill fortune for one's neighbour. Hideous altars were built toward the stars and toward the north, Kadath, where it is said resided the worldly home of the Gods.'

DARK AGES is an Online *free to play* (read small print: with option to pay for extras). Like all RPGames it has a knack of drawing you into its game play and story, but with this one it seems pretty hard to get the story book to open up!

You start off the game in a room (above an inn) standing in just your underwear, clicking around like a mad man; I eventually 'Woke Up' and was able to get dressed. Then I clicked on some books I found on the floor, which led me to a couple of tutorials, again the standard RPGame type we all know and love which tells us how to equip, un-equip, get dressed, yadayada.

To be honest, this game could have been one of the good ones, but it has been sadly spoiled. It has a seemingly good plotline, even if it is hard to get it to play out. The graphics are better than some 2D worlds we know online (I personally love the detail to the houses and surrounding areas,) and it is very low lag! It also has a *very* simple download and set up, the client used to play the game took me about 20 seconds to download and install, is 100% safe and cost nothing! *Result!*

You get a choice of becoming a Warrior, Monk, Rogue, Wizard or Priest, basically the same choices as with any game. 'Bash 'em with a sword, take 'em down with your hands, steal their stuffs and run off giving them a slap on the way, blast them with some magic or heal your friends!'

The downfall with this RPG comes when you leave the Inn and start to get on your way. Depending on where you go and what you try to do, you get various different responses.

'Normal?' I can hear you thinking. Well, yes, if it's 'You must leave here at once traveller' but when it's a message saying 'You cannot do this task before you register' and 'You cannot perform this task as a free member', then you start to get slightly annoyed. It keeps pointing you in the direction of payment, but the emphasis onsite is that *you can play for free*; however, with all these obstacles, I find it hard to believe that anyone *really* can! I found after my time in there that there is an ever-diminishing amount of things you can actually do without paying!

So off I toddle to the website and attempt to register; only I can't find a link anywhere! You would think in this day and age that a registration via the client which allows you to log into the game and start playing, would be connected to the website meaning you register here and you're registered there. Oh no, too simple.

Anyway, I use my brain and figure out that the *Account* button must be where to go, (I mean a simple register/login here would have done but …) So that's where I went!

'Step 1: Purchase a Registration Coupon at the Coupon Shop'

'Erm … Free to play … my left butt cheek!

$9.95 per month! That's what they want off me to wander round in a ragged shirt with a poor excuse for a dagger, no magical abilities and very bad hair (the only bad point with the graphics).

Like I said, spoiled! Could have been the makings of a *great, free* Online RPG. Oh well …

Superhero Roleplaying

A History: part one

SHANNON APPELCLINE looks at the first decade (1977 to 1987) of a popular genre …

ONE OF THE surprising stories of the industry's beginning is how long it took superheroes to catch hold. **Dungeons & Dragons** was published in January, 1974, and was becoming increasingly popular within a year. There were pretty quickly games in new genres, starting with **Boot Hill** (western, 1975), **En Garde!** (swashbuckling, 1975), **Starfaring** (science-fiction, 1976), and **Metamorphosis: Alpha** (science fantasy, 1976). Yet it was still another year before the first superhero game came out.

You've probably never have heard of it. It was called **Superhero '44** (1977), or later **Superhero: 2044** (1977). The later, more professional edition was published by Lou Zocchi, an important force throughout the history of RPGs.

Superhero: 2044 was a somewhat strange choice for a first superhero game because of the fact that it didn't really represent comic books. Instead it was set--as the name implies--in the future. The game was never particularly well loved nor well supported, with just a single supplement ever being published, a big map by *Judges Guild* called *Hazard* (1980).

The next superhero RPG was more on target, and that was Jeff Dee and Jack Herman's **Villains and Vigilantes** (1979), published by *Fantasy Games Unlimited* (FGU). Not only did the authors place their game in a more standard modern 4-color world, but they also did their best to adopt the conventions of that world. Characters, for example, started out as the players, then randomly gained powers thanks to accidents or mutations, just like heroes in the comic books.

V&V could have been the RPG that really broke open the superhero genre for roleplaying. Unfortunately, it had two flaws. First, the designers were young and inexperienced--as was common at FGU at the time, since owner Scott Bizar was publishing freelance submissions. Dee would later comment that he and Herman were the youngest designers in the business and that it showed in their first game. Second, at that time FGU was not supporting most of its RPGs. Bizar, with his wargaming background, felt like games should be complete as published, and not need supplements.

V&V did moderately well, and it was definitely the most popular superhero game pre-1981, but it was ultimately held back by these other issues.

Supergame (1980), another early release, mostly distinguished itself by allowing players to create their own characters from the ground up. Like V&V it was unsupplemented, and thus it wouldn't see any real success until its second edition (1982), by which time it would be riding the coattails of the first *hit* superhero game, **Champions**.

The birth of Champions: 1981-1985

Champions (1981) by newcomer *Hero Games* had several things going for it, which would ultimately make it the first hit superhero RPG in the industry.

First, it was a second-generation superhero game, ultimately derived from Superhero: 2044 which designer George MacDonald modified until it was no longer recognizable. This alone made it a modern game, but *Champions* also looked elsewhere for new and innovative game design ideas.

Second, and probably more important, Champions was one of the earliest games centering around point-based character creation. Herein it developed ideas originally seen in Steve Jackson's **Melee** (1977), but also expanded them by, for the first time ever, supporting the idea of 'flaws' which allowed players to create characters with problems, then use the points thus gained to make their characters more powerful.

The purchasing system was also very extensive, allowing you to purchase powers, then modify them in numerous ways, then describe them, which thus supported a very wide variety of comic-book-like powers--ultimately exactly what a super-hero game needed.

Hero Games released Champions with almost-guerrilla marketing at *Pacific Origins 1981*. The game generated huge buzz, sold well, and Hero Games immediately followed up this success with the publication of two new supplements, *Enemies* (1981) and *The Island of Dr. Destroyer* both out by the next big con, on Labor Day.

Actually supporting a superhero line was another first, and thus another factor that pushed Champions to prominence. How much this broke the super-hero genre open is evidenced by the way in which everyone else started falling over themselves to get superhero games out.

A few older companies revived their superhero lines. FGU put out a second edition of Villains and Vigilantes (1982), then diverted from their earlier business model by heavily supporting it through much of the remaining lifetime of the company (1982-1986). Supergame put out its second edition (1982) and a few supplements (1983-1984) in the same time period.

Companies new to the superhero genre also jumped on board. *Chaosium* put out the brand-new **Superworld** (1983), based on their BRP system, but it soon faded from sight; designer Steve Perrin would later do work for Champions. A few smaller companies put out new games over the next couple of years as well, but they would ultimately be overshadowed by the aforementioned games and a few others just on the horizon. In the meantime Hero Games continued as the top superhero RPG producer for the next couple of years. V&V competed with them in total product publication, but ultimately not in market share. Hero continued to polish their game with a few new editions of the rules (1982, 1984) and supplements for adventures, enemies, and organizations.

However by late 1985 the Hero Games staffers increasingly came to realize that they weren't businessmen, and that the company would do much better if someone

else did their marketing and publishing. In 1986 they would thus sign a deal with *ICE* wherein Hero Games would prepare the products and ICE would publish them, a decision that was probably helped along by the fact that the market was growing increasingly competitive, as we'll see momentarily.

Licensed Heroes: 1984-1986

As Champions increased in popularity, another idea was starting to move through the RPG industry: licensing properties. SPI kicked it off with Dallas (1980), but it was when *Chaosium* put out the definitive horror license, Call of Cthulhu (1981), and ICE started putting out Middle-earth fantasy supplements (1982) that it became clear that this was an area of growing importance for the industry.

In the early 1980s, *Marvel* comics were hot, thanks in particular to *The Uncanny X-Men* by Chris Claremont and John Byrne, which was then enjoying such ground-breaking story lines as *The Dark Phoenix Saga* (1980) and *Days of Future Past* (1981). Thus it's no surprise that a roleplaying license for the Marvel superheroes became increasingly sought after. At least four different companies were negotiating for it, including: FGU, *Games Workshop*, *Mayfair Games*, and *TSR*. Eventually, TSR got it.

Their release of **Marvel Super Heroes** (1984), by Jeff Grubb and Steve Winter, was the first attempt to create a simplified super-hero roleplaying game that would better draw in comic fans who had never played roleplaying games before. Marvel Super Heroes did this with numberless character stats and a chart-based universal task resolution table. The result generally met the goal of simplicity, though within two years TSR decided that they needed to put out a more advanced version of the game for gamers, resulting in the **Marvel Super Heroes Advanced Set** (1986).

Though none of the simplified super-hero systems has ever attracted a notable portion of the comic book audience, Marvel Super Heroes nonetheless did well for TSR. It was their most supported line ever, other than the *D&D* games, with almost fifty books published over the product line's lifetime. It ultimately eclipsed old games like Champions and Villains and Vigilantes, but at least Champions continued to sell strongly, perhaps due to the different focuses: Champions was more about individual creativity while Marvel Super Heroes was about using the creations of a comic company.

Meanwhile, every other contender for the Marvel license did some RPG work on their own.

Mayfair was the most successful, getting the 'second best' license for **DC Heroes** (1985). Their game wasn't as

simple as Marvel Super Heroes, but it was remarkably elegant, centering on a brilliant way to measure task difficulties: everything from character stats to weights to distances was measured in Attribute Points, or AP, which were all exactly equivalent. 14 APs of flight could fly 14 APs of distance in a phase, while 6 APs of strength could pick up a 6 AP weight. The AP scale was also exponential, allowing for dramatically different power levels. Like Marvel Super Heroes, DC Heroes was well supported.

Finally, *Games Workshop* had acquired a game called **Golden Heroes**, previously published independently in Britain. They'd been hoping to publish a new edition with Marvel's heroes, but after that fell through, they published it as was in a new edition (1984). Unfortunately it didn't have enough to distinguish it, being neither the first mover nor a notable license in the genre. It ended publication just a year after its introduction, in 1985, as GW was slowly moving into miniatures.

FGU, the last negotiator for the Marvel license, still had their own Villains and Vigilantes line. They did manage a license a few years later for a small press comic-book called **The DNAgents**. They published one supplement, *The DNAgents Sourcebook* (1986), just before FGU closed down, making Villains and Vigilantes the first *major* casualty among the superhero RPGs. Legal wrangling has since kept any edition of Villains and Vigilantes off the market.

Meanwhile, by the mid-1980s another trend was sweeping the comic book world: the black and white comic invasion. Everyone suddenly started publishing their own b&w comics, and comic book stores started carrying them all, hoping for the latest hit. This whole trend was led by *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984), the license for which was snapped up by *Palladium Games* before the rest of the industry even knew who the turtles were.

Palladium was just then publishing a new superhero RPG called **Heroes Unlimited** (1984). It was based on the Palladium Role-Playing System--as all the Palladium games increasingly were--but like Golden Heroes it was another game released without a real audience.

Contrariwise the compatible game **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** (1985) did an excellent job of selling to the new TMNT audience by accurately detailing the Turtles' world and providing rules for mutation, psionics, and other systems necessary to play out the universe of the comics. It quickly caught on and was one of Palladium's most popular games over the next several years.

Thus by 1986, the superhero scene had entirely changed from its state just a few years before. Where once there was a booming collection of independent superhero games, now only Champions survived, with licensed giants Marvel Super Heroes and DC Heroes taking up most of the field. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was also a big hit, but as would increasingly be the case for Palladium, it was a hit for a somewhat younger demographic than the rest of the RPG industry.

Carol's Logbook

Established & new Turn-Based Games

Elvaria, Epoch of Might, Twilight Earth, World of Lagas, Legends, SuperVillain and MEPBM: The Untold War ...

TWO LONG-ESTABLISHED games, **Legends** and **Serim Ral**, now offer their new players the advantage of an Apprentice rating, which will give them the chance of learning a game without the risk of being picked on by established players. This seems an excellent idea and we hope that it will help to introduce newcomers to these excellent games.

Some hopeful news is that two favourite games, **Rimworlds** and **Quest of the Great Jewels** are being worked on for playing as MMOGs. Early days yet, of course, but both games were great successes in their earlier turn-based forms. We wish their programmers every success!

Let's begin our specific coverage of turn-based games with some good news for those of you who enjoy wargaming. *Jason Oates* has now started a new game of **Company Commander**: this has been eagerly awaited and there are still places if you apply speedily. The start-up is £10 and includes two turns. Further turns are £6.50 with adjustment at £5.00. Although this may seem quite a high price, you do get a lot of detail in your turns with plenty of decisions to make. Jason doesn't have a website yet ('one step at a time,' he says), but can be emailed at:
   jasongm@thegame.oom

Derek Rainey of *Dracs Games* reminds us that he's still in business after 22 years, running his two horse-racing games, **A Day at the Races** and **Fallen at the First**. They are both available as PBM and PbeMs, with the magazine available to download from his website in PDF format. Congratulations are due to Derek for his long service to his players:
   www.dracsgames.co.uk

We've been running Paul Curtis's series of articles about the fantasy wargame **Serim Ral** from *Incubus Designs* and must add here a couple of news items: new players to the Incubus game now start in the game with Apprentice Banners. Carrying one of these will entitle you to free play, which could last for as many as ten turns depending on how well you progress. When they see your banner, es tablished players will recognise that you are learning the game and (hopefully) give you some slack. Also, they'll get less experience for attacking an Apprentice.
   www.incubusdesigns.com

Mindless Games have closed their football game **Master of the Dugout**, because of licensing issues, but the good news is that they're now celebrating their 20th year

of running games. Congratulations, Andy and Cara! A party is planned! Past players and GMs will be welcomed. Mindless also plan to start a new game of their version of **Serim Ral**. The startup is free, assuming that you have a rulebook or can receive on by email. DM Andy says, 'it'll be old-style, since this is the only style we have, so we can all reminisce to the sound of turnsheets dropping through the letter-box.'
   Mindless are also looking for an alternative game to buy or licence; they're 'prepared to give it an overhaul, facelift and some TLC.'
   They've been having some problems with their website recently, so if you're interested it's best to email Andy at:
   andy.mindless@ntlworld.com
   or contact him through the Serim Ral group on Facebook.

Another fantasy wargame, *Harlequin*'s new game of **Legends**, *North Island Campaign 72*, is now well under way with all the factions looking fairly evenly matched. We're told that 'there is still a little bit of space to squeeze a few more positions onto the map if you are interested in joining it before King's Peace ends. Late starters do get a slightly accelerated start, so should find themselves on an even footing.'
   The next Legends game will be an 'Explorer Special' version of *Twilight Crusade.* Interestingly, this game has no victory conditions and peace for a year and a day. This 'offers new and experienced players the chance to try out unusual tactics without anyone laughing at their cave Ogre attempting to influence elf maidens "just to see if it can be done".'
   Players are discussing what the next competitive module should be, with *Crown of Chaos* and *Immortals' Realm* as the most likely candidates. *The One Ring* has also been suggested, but Harlequin plan to wait to see how the first two games of this module develop, 'as a number of players are wondering if Tom Bombadil is just "too tough"... We'd like to see how the first two games develop a bit more (and thus what needs tweaking) before we start OR3.'
   Full details of all the modules can be found at
   www.harlequingames.com
   If you are new to Legends, it's worth noting that players

in their first games are given the title 'Apprentice', which entitles them to plenty of GM help and protects them from all the other players. If you have any questions about Legends, they will be answered by emailing:

pbmharlequingames.com

The latest news about **Middle-Earth PBM** concerns progress with the *Kinstrife* module. GM Clint announces that 'We're presently testing 200 new encounters for the game and we're enjoying them immensely. We expect the Beta test to start in May and then lead to a full game launch in the summer. Check out MEPBM on *Facebook* as well, for sneak previews of some of the new art we have commissioned.'

www.middlearthgames.com

There's further news about Microcom's **The One Ring**, which was first publicised in our last issue. Still in playtest, this is to be a *Facebook* application of a game based on Tolkien's novels. Sam Roads reports that 'We've added a month on our launch schedule after delays caused by endless minutiae concerning getting the law exactly right with the official Tolkien licence in a Facebook context.' Frustrating, no doubt, but the good news is that 'This gives us a month longer with testing and as such we'd like to make a *Special Offer* to readers of Flagship. We're holding a very small alpha test, and we suspect that Flagship readers are exactly the right kind of people for it. Given we have over 6000 people signed up for the Facebook game and expect to only allow 50-100 in the Alpha test, we want to get people with a breadth and depth of gaming experience—which is what we feel Flagship offers. Flagship subscribers should email *mark.stuckey@mgames.com* if you are interested in seeing the future of social web gaming.' Go on, give it a try! It's not too late!

Sam adds 'We've completed an incredible six solid hours of narration recording, which took over 50 hours recording in out Academic partner (the University of Glamorgan)'s impressive Atrium building. Also, we've sourced the lovely Celtic Harp music of Chris Knowles and Ben Walker, and combined the Gallic landscapes of Julian Tainmen-Pierrat with Linda Pitman's iconic map of Middle Earth for a truly sumptuous movement screen.' Exciting news, eh?

We can update this coverage with the news that the Beta test version has been going well. The various bugs and imbalances which a playtest inevitably shows up are now in the process of being ironed out. Sam Roads says, 'The playtest has been an unmitigated success in that we've found some bugs. I don't know what we'd have done f the game had been bug free. Probably all just sat around drinking tea and discussing Balrogs and their ability, or otherwise, to fly.

'Testers have so far only given the game good ratings, which is heart-warming, especially as the current game is not balanced to our satisfaction, and almost certainly means every game will end in a loss for the Free Peoples.' No doubt this'll be fixed before much longer ...

www.oneringgame.com

www.facebook.com/pages/Lord-of-the-Rings-Game-The-One-Ring/23767274954?ref=ts

Dispatches
Strategy & Adventure Games

CAROL MULHOLLAND with recent news about a range of games …

DO YOU REMEMBER Dave Panchyk's recent favourable review of the vehicle-based MMOG **Dark Wind**? It's a strategy wargame from Sam Redfern of *Psychic Software* in which players aim to out-do each other by driving cars. Well, we've just had a press release describing a turn-based tactical variant of the game, for which you don't need to be a persistent player. You can choose one of 47 wilderness maps and set the turn time and date, with only invited players taking part. There's a wide choice between different types of chassis, weapon and engine. It sounds a useful variant for readers who are used to turn-based games:

> *www.dark-wind.com*

While on the subject of turn-based games, many long-time readers will remember the turn-based fantasy wargame **Quest of the Great Jewels**. Indeed, I remember that I helped to 'postbox' UK players' orders for this to its US moderator at one time. Well, it's early days yet, but there's talk of this appearing on the internet eventually. Good news for fans of a much-praised game! Similarly, it seems that an online version of **Rimworlds** is also being composed. It's good to hear that these popular games from the past stand a good chance of being revived. By switching them to online play, they'll be able to accept players world-wide. Expect to hear more news about them in due course …

Moving on to card games, *Warrior Elite* have sent us an update on **War for Edadh**, which Eric Ridley reviews for us in this issue. Up to now, they've concentrated on selling the game over the internet, but now they're distributing it to retailers in Europe and North America, so you should be able to find it in your local games shop. Further news is that Warrior Elite are planning the first expansion for their game and there are also plans for a loyalty scheme, *Legion of Edadh*, which will reward players with exclusive cards.

> *www.warriorelite.com*

Rick Loomis of *Flying Buffalo Inc* has been busy attending US conventions, with the big one – *Origins* – from June 24th-28th in Columbus, Ohio, USA. Rick has produced a special **Poker** deck for Origins, which sounds as if it'll be an interestingly collectable souvenir of games and gaming for 2009 (we hope to feature in it as Flagship). He's now taking orders for being included in next year's pack, so get in touch with him if you're interested: it's a pack that'll go out to keen gamers, so a good opportunity for publicity.

Also, Rick is now offering packs of his **Nuclear War** card game, though he warns that you'll need to order copies promptly, before they sell out.

Have you ever fancied appearing in a **Lost Worlds** setting? Flying Buffalo offer you the chance to do this for a mere $49.95! They'll send you a list of all the poses, so you can take your own pictures. Send them to FBI on a CD and they will turn it into a PDF from which you can print out as many copies as you like, in b&w or colour. 'If you look good enough, we'll even ask your permission to sell *your* book online to other LW fans…' Worth considering for your gifts next Christmas?

> *www.flyingbuffalo.com*
> *www.originsgamesfair.com*

Electronic Arts are putting out some initial publicity for a videogame they're planning to launch in 2010, **Dante's Inferno**. Yes, as the title indicates, it's based on part of the famous Italian mediaeval poem and EA's Jonathan Knight argues in favour of the adaptation by saying 'Guys like Shakespeare and Dante would probably be working in videogames today, because they're all about testing the new technology of the time—whether the theatres in London or the Printing Press.' A fair point, maybe, though I suspect that most of Dante's thoughtfulness will be omitted from their 'third-person action and adventure' game. Apparently the action mainly consists of punishing and absolving shades. There's a colourful trailer up via *Google* on the internet. You can find it under:

> *www.dantesinferno.com*

While on the subject of theology, I'm interested to find that a videogame version of Philip Pullman's series of novels, **The Golden Compass**, from *Sega*. It was timed to come out with the film and apparently it's based on the film rather than the books, which means that much of the controversial stuff has been excised. Personally, I found the first of the three novels gripping but the third disappointing, as is so often that case with the third book in a series. Still, the prospect of having one's own personal daemon sounds an appealing feature.

> *www.sega.com/thegoldencompassgame.com*

A sad piece of news is that *Dave Arneson*, who created **Dungeons & Dragons** with *Gary Gygax*, died of cancer on April 24th. Our sympathies go out to his family and friends. We publish an obituary on page 33of this issue.

I went to the *UK Games Expo* on June 5th - 7th, and was glad to meet many of you there. Perhaps Games Expo isn't as vast as *Spiel* (in Essen, 22nd - 25th October), but there was plenty to try out and enjoy. Check out the website to see details of the ratings that were compiled there…

> *www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk*
> *www.merz-verlag.com/spiel/e000.php4*

One of the games that I didn't actually get to see at Games Expo was Francois Morin's **Runabag**. It seems worth mentioning because it's a relay race for frogs, which will surely appeal to some of you, especially if you have a young family to amuse. It's for two to four players aged 6+, check:

> *www.instrumentsmorin.com*

The Mighty Pen

Your views and queries about game issues …

The Future is On-Line

Having put some thought into the things that cause delays to publishing and the problems you face on an almost issue by issue basis I'm convinced it's time to shift format. I think that in order to face your challenges head on, producing the magazine in PDF format and distributing it online would solve a lot of issues for you and also bring a number of benefits.

Using such a method to get Flagship to us means your magazine production is all electronic, so you no longer need to chase around different printers trying to get more competitive quote. It also makes last minute additions / changes possible should other things delay release so that when it arrives with us consumers we have an up to date magazine.

You will also open yourselves to a lot more international readership by distributing via the internet which in turn leads to more contributions, so no more times when contributions are lacking.

A PDF version of Flagship can be in full colour throughout, which makes it more striking for us readers and indeed more appealing for advertisers. It also means you can produce the magazine you always wanted to without being confined by production costs.

A lot of gamers are now used to getting information on the games they play online and hence traditional magazines are in decline. Flagship has a very niche market and one that is getting smaller all of the time. In the UK Flagship's potential readership has declined steeply over the past few years as more and more move away from PBM, traditional RPGs and games and get their fix online.   However just moving to online distribution and a more international audience massively opens up your potential readership. If you also expand your coverage of online gaming just a little more your potential readership expands exponentially.

An example of changes to gaming in general is the launch of sites like *king.com* and *miniclip.com*, small 'coffee break' games where quick fix gaming is possible. There is also a wealth of old computer game available online (**Dungeon Keeper** for example) that are now available copyright free. It's a gamers' paradise out there and although in some ways it's a shame we don't need to get together with people face to face any more, this is the age of convenience gaming and Flagship needs to follow its shifting audience.

I for one hope Flagship is around for many years to come and hope that it moves with us all as our gaming habits change.

Alan White

[Thanks, Alan. This is indeed the way that we're planning to go, though I don't plan to abandon paper altogether. It's worth mentioning that Colin and I do both have different, long-term medical conditions which can cause inescapable delays…]

Reviving Games?

I've happy memories of PBM games that I used to play, so was sorry to gather from your website that many of them seem to be no longer available, like the 'Vengeance' games and 'Delenda est Carthago'. Can anything be done to bring them back? Maybe on the internet?

Jack Sharwood

[Quite a few firms are offering email turns now, which is progress. However, turn-based games do take a lot of work, especially the hand- and mixed-moderated ones. I think both the ones you mention were mixed-mods And the financial payback isn't substantial. So I suspect that many of the GMs you fondly remember have found less exhausting ways to get their gaming fix - not to mention an income! There are, of course, plenty of turn-based games still around. Why not try out some of these?!]

A gamer's return

I've had to drop attending regular RPG sessions after I had children and could no longer spare the time. But, hey, I expect to be able to start trying out games at home with my two kids soon and I'm really looking forward to this. Do your readers have any suggestions for the best games to start playing with young children?

Martin Peters

[I'm sure that readers will be able to offer their suggestions – many of them must be parents. I favour Ludo and Snakes&Ladders as family games, myself. My advice is: Be sure to let the children win occasionally, but not invariably.]

Is it worth going to conventions?

I keep busy with my job and my social life. I can't really spare the time to go to conventions, though I'm keen on playing board games. What am I missing? Are gamers all loonies when you see them close up?

Mack Robinson

[Every games convention is a chance to meet fellow enthusiasts, so you lose any feeling of being on your own. I'll admit to being a loony myself, though not an especially scary one. Conventions are also good places to discover what's new, so you'll have a chance to impress your fellow board gamers with a fresh discovery. The atmosphere is a friendly one, so why not talk someone from your busy social life into coming with you?]

Rumours from the Front

Your uncensored comments on games

Comments received from: Richard Bakker, Andrew Collins, Andy Compton, Donna Desborough, Colin Forbes, Paul Green, Alyson James, Dave Mitchell, Bill Moore, Carol Mulholland, Myette Nystero, Alex Scheider, Sascha Stamm, Anders Stenmark, John Tindall, Robert Treadwell, Alan White

MMOGs

Aion: Tower of Eternity *(Ncsoft)*
Paul Green - 'Aion is a highly polished and largely conventional MMO, blending the ornate artwork and large-scale player-versus-player endgame of Korean tradition with the more vibrant world, storyline, and rich questing of World of Warcraft. Eight classic character classes belonging to four archetypes; two factions warring with each other; a third, AI-controlled race in the central Abyss; a Stigma system that allows you to equip skills from other classes, and combo-chain combat; the power of flight and a pretty pair of wings for everyone at level 10.

I saw and heard a few interesting things about Aion at GDC, and got to try it for a while myself. A striking demo of the character-creation system proved that it combines the drop-dead, pop-star looks of Lineage or Guild Wars with the insane, slider-tweaking detail of an EverQuest II to great effect, and with a little imagination, isn't just limited to creating feather-cut fops and slinky temptresses. In fact, the Elyos race could convincingly be adjusted to look like either the dwarf or elf archetypes of fantasy tradition.

Aion's world is an inviting place to be. That's a critical hurdle for an MMO to clear - you're asking players to spend months, years in this world, after all - and not managed as often as you might think. Will it stand or fall come the next hurdle: full launch in September? With a little more content, this one could cross the finishing line.'

World of Warcraft *(Blizzard)*
Robert Treadwell – 'Having come late to the party, so to speak, I am slowly finding my feet in this game.

The graphics and such blow the mind and with the help of friends who have their own Guild I am slowly finding my feet and enjoying the quests and interaction with both NPC and PC characters.'

Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning *(Mythic Entertainment)*
Dave Mitchell – 'Not to be confused with the now defunct Warhammer Online, this is the translation of the Warhammer universe into the online space by Mythic Entertainment. The game focuses heavily on Player vs. Player combat, or more specifically, on Mythic Entertainment's brand of PvP referred to as Realm vs. Realm combat or RvR. While the PvE aspect of Warhammer Online doesn't really hold a candle to say, World of WarCraft, WAR does spice up the PvE gameplay with the addition of a new system called Public Quests. Public Quests are quests that anyone can take part in by simply walking into the area of the game world in which they are located. Once a player steps into the public quest area, the objectives for the current stage are shown on the UI and the player need only assist in completing them to contribute.'

Andy Compton – 'WAR was a husk of the game it is now when it launched. Mythic has gone above and beyond in addressing the issues present within the game and adding new content to boot. In the past few months, we've seen several large balance and bug fix patches, two new classes, a handful of new scenarios and events, and lots more. I've played many MMOGs and I don't think I've seen any company move as fast on the issues as Mythic has. That isn't to say the game is perfect: if you've read this far I'm sure you know that already. It's important to keep in mind that Rome wasn't built in a day, and even World of Warcraft wasn't perfect at launch. Is WAR the game it should have been at launch? No. But it is well on its way, and I would have no reservations recommending anyone still on the fence about the game to check it out now. There is a lot of fun to be had in Warhammer Online, if you're willing to deal with a few snags as well.'

Chronicles of Spellborn (*Spellborn International*)
Alex Scheider – 'Spellborn is a must-try MMOG, if just to experience the combat and skill mechanics. The game is clearly incomplete, more so than most MMOG launches, but has content sufficient enough to take you to the level cap, and developers paying great attention to their players' concerns. You won't find the most engaging PvP experience, or even a fully realized endgame PvE experience, but the barrier to entry is also quite low. There is no box to purchase, you simply download the game, and should you be curious to see how far the rabbit hole goes you're only out 15 bucks. The Chronicles of Spellborn is a true-blue themepark MMOG, and I have no reservations recommending anyone to try out the rides at least once.'

EVE Online *(CCP)*
Alan White – 'Wormholes have started appearing all over the universe which when ventured through reveal the existence of a new and powerful race, the Sleepers. The Sleepers' ships and technology are more advanced than anything we have seen and hence they are coveted by

all. Many a fight has broken out between players in their attempts to gain wealth and power exploiting these new territories and technologies. The new *Acrophya* expansion to Eve Online has brought many new technologies and the feeling of true exploration as you venture into the unknown with a few scan probes on your ship and hope to find something of value. Of course you can equally find a pirate waiting to blast you to hell and loot your ship.'

Andrew Collins – 'EVE has been going from strength to strength in 2009. It broke its previous peak concurrent user record of fifty thousand players earlier in the year, and now Apocrypha, the tenth free expansion for EVE Online, is upon us. While the previous expansion, *Quantum Rise*, was a little light when it came to new content, Apocrypha is bristling with new features and upgrades. One of the first things that current players will probably notice upon logging into their shiny new client, are the effects. Every effect in the game, from lasers to shield boosters, has been completely redone. It's been more than a year since CCP introduced their Trinity engine, and gave us enhanced ship and structure models, so it's very nice to see the effects finally catch up with the rest of the game. Shadows have also been upgraded, with ships and objects now casting proper shadows.'

Colin Forbes – 'I joined EVE with a friend a couple of months ago, and would love to recommend it unreservedly. It looks good, is great fun and there is an astonishing depth to the game. However, the learning curve is definitely on the steep side, and the dream of reaching a stage where you feel you are more than a minnow in a huge lake can sometimes seem to be just that, a dream. However, stick with it and try to join a friendly Corporation who will give you the help and advice which you may well need as a new player. Flagship readers are welcome to send an in-game message to me (Asgornius) and I'll be happy to give whatever pointers I can.'

Lord of the Rings Online *(Turbine)*
Donna Desborough – 'Across the wide lands of Middle-earth, the Free Peoples must face the threatening Shadow growing in the East. All of Mordor is stirring as Sauron dispatches the Nazgûl to hunt for the Ring. The rumour of war brings forth many eager adventurers who will find their place among the great events of the Third Age. About six months ago, Lord of the Rings Online's first expansion, *Mines of Moria* was released. I've always liked Turbine's interpretation of the Dwarven interior areas. One of the

main reasons my kinship hall is in the dwarf region is because I liked the look of it best. So when Mines of Moria was announced as the next expansion I got excited just to see what it would look like. Turbine do not disappoint. As you'd expect, the mines are extensive. There are twists and turns and ups and downs that will have you spinning in circles trying to remember if you've seen that rock before. It's brilliant. I've never been in a mine, but this is how my imagination always pictured the confusion of tunnels. Even while you're wandering around in circles you'll want to stop often to look around in admiration. Even though you're underground, regions aren't pitch dark. Of course some places are better lit than others, but Turbine has a deft hand at choosing when and where to place their lighting. Overall I'm very impressed with Mines of Moria. Visually it has exceeded expectations. In relation to the quests and grouping I think they have struck a very good balance. I am heartily enjoying this new addition to the game.'

Vanguard: Saga of Heroes *(Sony Online Entertainment)*
Sascha Stamm - 'SoE decided to finally add new content called 'Pantheon of the Ancient'. First of all it was bout time to release that add-on. It was introduced in December 2008 as a Christmas gift, then it was scheduled to the 2nd anniversary of VG in February and finally it came online on 21.05.2009. It isn't the complete new add-on, it is just the first part of possible three parts. SoE have focused for now on new group content. Solo and raid content will follow later but as usual, n SoE haven't said exactly when. It seems new raid content will be released first before new solo content. This is consistent with SoE's statement after buying the game, that would be a group/raid orientated MMORPG.

The new quests I have tried so far are well made with a nice background story. On the other side of things, a great deal of already-existing content, mobs and chunks have been changed. Mobs originally built for soloing and questing in level 40-48 are no longer killable by solo players, yet the quest related to kill those mobs wasn't updated. Additionally, Rangers have had the range of their bows reduced As I play a Ranger, this is not as welcome as the rest of the new material!'

Myette Nystro – 'The early quests are very well balanced but nothing new. Kill X number of these creatures, loot X number of drops from mobs, and return to the quest giver. This will all sound very familiar to any MMO veteran. The quests make you cover a growing expanse of your home, and by the time you exhaust all of the quests, the last one you get sends you off to another region, where the cycle starts over. However, it cannot be denied that quests pay off in other big ways, namely, lots of experience. One of the ironies of EverQuest is that quests didn't give you diddlysquat for experience, but you could do them over and over again to make up for it. Vanguard, like WoW, won't let you do a quest again, but since you're given a decent reward for it at the start, there's little need.'

Andrew Collins – 'Vanguard presents a very interesting dilemma. On one hand, the game itself has enormous potential, and each aspect is very entertaining and sound. It presents a complicated and deep gameplay experience for gamers who have become bored with the less complicated

games toward which the industry has been moving. It both improves on the state of the industry and innovates. On the other hand, Vanguard isn't complete. There are still a regrettably large number of bugs, and the recent expansion has not been particularly well implemented. I get the feeling that SoE have a very small 'team' working on this game. If you're a player familiar with MMORPGs, are looking for a more complex game, and are willing to put up with some rough spots, then you should definitely give Vanguard a try. The world is vast and beautiful, the mechanics are engaging, and the community is excellent – though the support is unspeakably bad, which is a shame because Vanguard has the potential to be one of the best MMORPG experiences out there.'

Second Life *(Linden Labs)*
Colin Forbes - 'In terms of my own use of this software and virtual world, Second Life does not qualify as a game. I don't *play* it, I use it as a social networking device, and a means to have some fun with creativity. It's fun to spend some time building a house or a piece of jewellery - or to DJ at a club. Too often I see a report in the media about a game, followed by the words '*like World or Warcraft or Second Life*'. Well, both are pieces of software used on a computer - but I would not seek to compare them beyond that.

TURN-BASED GAMES

Abnormals *(Madhouse)*
Robert Treadwell – 'This hand-mod is a super-hero based game in which your super-hero has a day's worth of action. My favourite characters have been involved in some interesting story lines. One called the Red Samurai is stuck with another super called The Sentinel in a police station under some sort of mind control.

Another of my heroes has been offered the chance to team up with other supers to hunt down another player's hero who has turned to the dark side.'

Abnormals - Cosmic Disruption *(Madhouse)*
Robert Treadwell – 'This is a Special, combining 27 heroes who have answered the call to save the earth from some unknown alien invaders.

At the end of the first ten-page turn sent to all, the heroes had been divided up into four teams and each had been set a task, be it crowd control on earth, the rescue team (saving people from the aliens on earth), the espionage team (find out who, what and stop them) and the last team, which has my character X-ray man, the space combat team, which has the job of fighting the aliens and giving the espionage team the time to do the job. When the turn ended, we had the alien space ship hanger doors open and fifty huge giant robots with weapons entered space...

Only time will show if the heroes even make it a good fight.'

Absolute Heroes *(Jade Games)*
Robert Treadwell – 'My team, the villainous Cyber Rats, are deep in things with some unknown person asking about them. The world in Neon City is anti-super-hero at the mo after a nuclear powered super went sub atomic and gave a load of people radiation poisoning. New Bhauku—a country of super villains is under alien subjection and none of the so-called super teams look like they are going to do anything about it. Maybe time for my team and other villain teams to kick some alien behind!

The GM (John Dee) keeps the action rolling and with aliens, werewolves and giant dragons just some of the interesting things in game, this hand-moderated super-hero game is fab!'

Dungeon World *(Madhouse)*
Bill Moore – '*Main Game*: Plenty going on in the world of Bereny, as usual. The capital Crownheart is now under siege from some rather nasty Helltroops, previously only seen in, well... Hell, actually! Newly crowned King Dirk, never one to leave his underlings to do all the work, has insisted on leading the defence himself. Which is nice, unless you happen to be the Royal Bodyguard. Not quite sure how they got here yet, but the mysterious Lord Lazar is the chief suspect at the moment.

Down in the southeast, at the site of the recently rumoured Deepwater Dungeon my Merman came to an unfortunate end, despite starting with a rather nice bow. Along with a number of friendly Lizard Men, he was overwhelmed by the mass of Psaurians (a rather *less* friendly Lizard-like race) who appear to have been guarding the sign indicating the whereabouts of said dungeon. After a rally from the survivors (including a newly set up lizard man from yours truly) they have been beaten back now by the survivors, and we may actually be able to discover the dungeon entrance now.'

Robert Treadwell – 'My Guild leader, Baroness Selas, is running the Royal Guild and with newly-crowned King Dirk we at last have a King to look after and follow. She is at the moment in the very frosty and frozen ice-haunt catacombs—in which the main courtyard just got a bit more slippery when some unknown adventurer in a newly discovered area decided to push that big red button with the label "Do not push". My barbarian has just completed the first of his wodesserain quest and now bears the mark of the wolf!'

Estate Position: 'My estate has been running like a well-oiled machine and then some nasty goblins and wolves appear and attack my wagons with all the latest crops in. Time to send out my loyal militia to deal with these things. Some new characters have appeared at our gates and I decided to hire an executioner, which gave me the option of an axeman or a gallows. I decided to go for a gallows and now one is set up earning some money. This, with my newly made dog kennels, which is producing guard and hunting dogs at an amazing rate, mean that my estate's bank balance looks better.

Bill Moore – 'Finally, after a titanic struggle, my Baroness has managed to defeat the werewolf marauding over our estate. This was mainly because I stopped being such a cheapskate and invested the 200 gold required to buy the cheapest of magical weapons, a +5 club. The Giant Magical Toothpick the GM had given to me for free, when he took pity on me for having to fight a magical opponent without magic weaponry simply wasn't up to the job. You get what you pay for, I guess. Hopefully the strong walls my fencer is now building will keep future distractions of this nature to a minimum.'

Robert Treadwell – '*Trader position*: My trader is happy trading on the southern road and is at the moment

looking into his shops. This is an option in game where fro an amount of in-game gold you can buy different shops, such as a baker, an armourer, a weaponsmith or a landlord for your own pub. These then become sub-characters, which earn a small amount of game money but are more for fun and role-play. My trader owns a bakers and has his eyes on setting up his first pub soon.'

Bill Moore – '*Kyr*: News has reached us Minotaurs that our true god, Lazranus, has arisen in the mysterious dhabad known only as Pyros and we now hurry back in that direction, to do homage at his feet. Trask, Kalib and I, Rockenfeller, are now heading west together from the City of Splendours back into the desert wherein the dhabad lies. Encountering a swampy area of much quicksand on its outskirts, we were ambushed by a Minor Sand Lich and his dancer slaves. The charms of the dancers obviously failed to work on our kind as they do on the feeble-minded humans and they were soon slain. Little to brag about in the loot, unfortunately, but Trask hopes to put the Skull Sceptre previously carried by the undead fiend to good use in Pyros. Hopefully it will give us better warning of any advancing enemies (it gives +2 vision)--Rockenfeller, Minotaur of Kyr.'

Bill Moore – '*Brokenlands*: Well, the Slythian Fellowship proceeds onwards once again. The "Temple of the Eye" proved to be fairly quiet. Well, except for a named Spine Devil Overlord. We would have tackled the beastie (no, really!) except for the fact that he was in a locked room and our last rogue seemed to have deserted us a few months ago. Bah! Still on to Infernia now and the pleasures of lava lakes and pools of boiling hot water. Ouch!—Brother Kharan, Slythian Fellowship.'

Bill Moore – *Steamworx*: Having been, er, hiding in a forest for about the last ten turns, my Engineer and Warlock finally decided it looked safe enough to come out. They promptly walked straight into a Freeland Pistoleer and a couple of the ubiquitous infected farm animals. Running back into the woods, my engineer's bow and steam gun dealt with the Pistoleer, at no small cost to himself. Now, however, the unadventurous twosome have come across one of the clefts which are a unique feature of Derwent. Over-mining has left the ground unstable in some areas and these mini-dungeons are the result. Might be worth a look, but without a Scout my two would be unable to open any doors or chests.'

Einstein's Lot *(Ulaidh Games)*
Carol Mulholland – 'My character tells Dr Newton that her companion Enehy is a vampire, but this revelation is greeted with interest rather than disbelief. So was the revelation a wise one to make? Enehy seems mildly flattered to be questioned about her memories and her language. Let's hope none of this interest is sinister...

GM Chris Morris writes well, but doesn't give much away...'

Lands of Androhil *(Robert Fry)*
Bill Moore – 'Having sold off all his bat wings and rat tails (I wonder what the alchemists actually do with all these things?), Dwarrin has headed down from the Dwarven city back into his old haunts, the ore mines. Just killing time (and a few more bats) now while awaiting his friend Cliara's return before they check out the mysterious

furnace area, deeper beneath the city.'

Lizards (Madhouse)

Bill Moore – 'Game CO1: Started a position in the 10-day version of this quick actioner. I did play a game in its previous incarnation a few years ago and thought I'd give it another try. It's a fairly simple and cheap game so it makes a nice change from the more complex stuff. Now on turn 3 and most of the neutral dens have gone and I've bumped into most of my near neighbours. The diplomatic activity is starting to get going and I now have to decide who is going to be my friend and who my enemy...'

Serim Ral (Incubus Designs)

Bill Moore – '*Game 26: Ancient Realms*: Now at turn 141, I've had to switch position due to the dropout of one of our largest allies. As our smallest player (with two cities) had just been more or less eliminated it made sense for me to move from a medium sized position (18 cities) and for him to replace me in the medium-sized position. Bit od a stretch for me, though, as now I have to mentally try to ignore the detailed stuff I was concentrating on previously and take a more strategic approach to the game. Seems to be going reasonably well so far, though I did manage to starve a few thousand horses and get one of my spies killed this turn. It doesn't actually take all that much more time to do, though, surprisingly, simply because the order limits are so tight—I've only gone from around 60 orders to 120 or so. On the plus side, we've finally managed to expel our enemies from Italy. Now I have to counter an insurgency in West Africa.'

'Game 35: Ancient Realms: And at turn 21 real war seems to have finally broken out. I've come under attack from three allied players, largely because they ran out of neutrals to assault. Pity, I was hoping it would go a few more turns before this happened as I was going to conquer the central cities of Hibernia first. Still, I can't blame them for attacking. My own God's alliance (Tabiti-Hestia) were their obvious rivals in terms of world power. Unfortunately, all but one of my allies are geographically quite far away and can only offer *aid* in support. This may get a little messy!'

Starweb (Flying Buffalo)

Bill Moore – '*SW-A1366*: This anonymous game is now at turn 16 and must be near to reaching its conclusion. My Apostle is still in there fighting, but at about 1200 points behind the leader doesn't look a favourite for victory. I've Planet-Busted most of the decently populated worlds of my jihad target and there's a general lack of good targets left on offer. Unfortunately, most people pick Pirates or Berserkers and neither of these types make good opposition for an Apostle. The Pirates have low-populated worlds due to their continuous looting and Berserker worlds are either robot-populated or they bust them themselves! Where's all those nice juicy Empire Builders or Artefact Collectors?'

Struggle for Empire (Agema Publications)

John Tindall – 'Struggle for Empire is an engaging game. If you think of the movies *Zulu*, *55 days at Peking* or *The Man Who Would Be King*, you have a good idea of the colonial era background of this game. After fewer than a handful of turns, there's been a last-minute rescue from cannibals, railroads thrust through India, heroic defences against native swarms and a protest by the Catholic Purity League against a national lottery! This flexibility is made possible by the deft and imaginative hand moderation of Richard Watts of Agema Games, who also offer the atmospheric Glory of Kings. The game is still half-empty I suspect, but I'm expecting a long, entertaining and challenging game.'

BOARD GAMES

Dominion (*Rio Grande Games*)

Richard Bakker – 'Wow! Has this game been fun! I have played the game twice so far and have not yet played the other games I bought. My friends who don't play board games very often keep asking me when we are going to play the game again and saying that that was fun. It is an easy game to learn and teach to others. On my second time of playing, it took me only a few moments to setup and a minute or two to describe how to play and then we were playing. The game has three phases: Action, Buy, and Cleanup. In the action phase, you play one of your action cards which may enable you to pick up more cards, play more action cards, convert cards into other cards, or increase buying power. In the buy phase you use your treasure to buy more cards. And in the cleanup phase, you put all used cards and your entire hand into your discard pile and then grab five new cards from your deck. When the deck runs out your shuffle the discard pile to create your new deck.

Now to make things a little difficult, you are only allowed one action and one buy per turn unless you play an action that gives you more. Because of this, you may have a few good actions in your hand but are only able to play one of them before you discard the others at the end of the turn. Victory point cards add another curve ball to the game. During the game, these cards serve no purpose but to reduce the number of playable cards in your hands. So throughout the game you have to decide when to start buying victory point cards or finding creative ways to get rid of the three victory cards you start with (my little trick). You also find out partway through the game that you have several cheaper cards that keep weakening your hand of only five cards, like the seven coppers you start with which give you only one treasure each. To upgrade those you use the mine card that converts a copper into a silver worth two treasure.

There are some of the basics. I have played it twice and already really enjoy it. I actually enjoy it as much or more than Settlers of Catan (one of my favorites) because it has seems to have a large appeal and is easier to teach and begin play with. It doesn't appear to be a game that someone can consistently win, which is good thing for attracting the non-boardgame fanatics.'

Pandemic (*Z-Man Games*)

Alyson James – 'I played this game at a friend's house, and now I can't stop thinking about it and *really* want it for my birthday! It's an intelligent game that requires high strategy from its players. The best part is that you work as a team to beat the game--its not about who wins, it's about beating the game. I've played it four times now, and the game won twice! It is *not* easy! You really, really have to

work together to beat it. It's very clever the way that it's set up, and I like the sciency aspect of it. It does require a lot of rule-reading in the beginning--it took us about two hours to read through the rules and play one game of it. But once you get it, it's addictive. Great fun!'

Space Alert (*Rio Grande Games*)
Anders Stennmark – 'I had some great fun with this game at a recent games convention. Your main task is to give instructions to your crew members under time pressure. At the same time you need to communicate with your fellow player about what you're doing. The game is a great exercise in cooperation and communication and fun at the same time. The only drawback is that it requires plenty of players (around four or five), and a CD-player. But with the right numbers of players and the right equipment it is highly recommended.'

Puerto Rico (*Rio Grande Games*)
Andrew Collins - If you think **Settlers of Catan** is a great game, then try Puerto Rico and Settlers will become just a decent game. Puerto Rico does so many things so good that is very difficult to beat; in fact it might possibly be the best modern game around in terms of many factors. Here are some great things about PR:
1) Everyone is playing at the same time during the game: due to the role mechanism used in Puerto Rico (although not pioneered by it, see **Citadels**, for example), every player is at all times taking actions and making decisions. Compare this to, say **Risk**, or even Settlers of Catan.
2) There is not a clear strategy to victory: which makes the game very unpredictable until the end, nobody knowing exactly who is going to win.
3) There are almost no direct conflicts among players, which makes it suitable for many gamers and non-gamers.
4) There is always a sense of progressing: maybe that's the joy of Puerto Rico: because very frequently no matter what a player decides to do, it benefits the other players, so there is a feeling of advancing, almost all time (again, compare this to Risk, or even Settlers, when the die is rolled and you don't benefit at all).
5) It doesn't cause a lot of stress to play (some people say that, for example **Tigris & Euphrates**, although a very well designed game, causes a lot of tension and stress). Of course this depends on the nature of the player and it could be seen as a weak point in Puerto Rico. But let me tell you, during the game there are many emotional moments when someone played (or did not play) the role you were expecting. And of course the end is very exciting also. Of course Puerto Rico also has some cons, especially the setup time. But who cares? It is worth every minute! But the best thing for you to do is to buy the game and see for yourself. It is really fun. Highly, highly recommended.'

Ticket to Ride (*Days of Wonder*)
Andrew Collins – 'I played 3 games of Ticket to Ride online last night (all 2 player games) in 45 minutes. I love the online version of the game (http://www.ticket2ridegame.com). It does all the hard work for you! Definitely one of the best online board game implementations I've played. Friendly website.'

Ticket to Ride: Nordic Countries (*Days of Wonder*)
Andrew Collins - 'The basic game is great, and this expansion is good - but it's overpriced. I imagine that Days of Wonder might justify this as a standalone set for couples with one kid. That's fine. But I have to believe that most people purchasing the game are already familiar with the Ticket to Ride line of games and are just interested in the new board. That's me. So it's a little disappointing that I had to pay so much for what amounts to a new board. Even the rules are only barely different from either the original game or the Switzerland expansion (there are ferries and tunnels, both, in this one, so you can grab locomotives as regular cards). This should have been packaged like the Switzerland expansion, with a new board and cards only. I'd even prefer that for how it'd fit on my shelves.'

Roman Taxi (*Bucephalus Games*)
Andrew Collins – 'My opponent for three games of Roman Taxi dismissed the design with a cutting non-review review: "It's a game." As in, the contents of the box meet all the qualifications of a game, and someone looking at these contents won't mistake them for anything other than a game, but that's as far as he'll go. "It's a game" is the verbal equivalent of a bored hand shooing away a non-existent bug, a teenager waving off a parent, a spouse shooing an unwanted partner. "How'd you like that movie?" "It's a movie." "What did you think of dinner?" "It was food." You don't want to watch it, eat it or – in this case – play it ever again.'

BROWSER GAMES

Kick-off (*Hive 7 - on Facebook*)
Colin Forbes - 'My obsession of the moment. This reminds me very much of playing Football Director on my Amiga, more years ago that I care to recall. Most Facebook based games are click and go, and then you get some sort of random result. However this is much more in-depth, and you can actually watch the match take place. Yes, I know, nothing like as lovely and all-singing, all-dancing as a PC game, but that's the point of browser games. This is something you can play around with during a coffee break at home or work. It's great fuin watching your friends run around, pass the ball, score ... and get fouled!'

Trigger (*Increpare Games*)
Colin Forbes - 'A horizontal shooter created by Stephen Lavelle, developer of intriguing experimental projects such as Opera Omnia and Rara Racer. The ship that you pilot is armed with only one weapon, but when used effectively it can destroy just about any mothership you might encounter on this dangerous mission.

Multiple enemy targets can be targeted at the same time by holding down the A key. When the button is released, all enemies targeted will be shot at automatically. To inflict more damage, simply chain together a couple of targets before blasting them all in one go. All enemy ships must be destroyed, or you would have to play the same stage all over again. The only occasions where this doesn't apply is during boss fights, in which there are four of them in total.

Note that the game is extremely difficult and challenging, and players who are easily frustrated should avoid this one! There are twenty-four stages to blast through.'

Feedback
Your comments on Flagship

CAROL MULHOLLAND sifts through the postbag concerning issues 126 & 127...

THANKS TO all of you who've sent us *Feedback* comments about the last two issues. These have been very welcome: thanks to all who've replied! We hope that you were all favourably impressed with both issues, but appreciate that we need to be on our toes.

For issue #126, I was told off by several readers for the way I prefaced **John Davis**' article about JRR Tolkien with my own opinions--'mean-spirited' was one description. Ouch! Sorry, guys and John: I shouldn't have been so ready to wade in.

The average rating for the issue was 7.7, with the articles about **Serim Ral**, **The Glory of Kings** and **Enchanted Isle** named as your favourites. **Bill Moore** praised the Serim Ral piece 'because it's been a while since you did anything on a game I'm actually playing in at the moment.' On the other hand **Mark Gordon** wonders if in-depth strategy articles such as this 'would not be best published only on the website'. **Stuart Connor**'s article on Independent Computer Games was applauded by **Jim Price** for covering 'games that sound like fun while being new to me.' We ran more interviews than usual,

but these were all regarded as interesting, though several of you, including **CD Lucas**, cautiously pointed out that 'because interviews do tend to present a favourable attitude, I wouldn't decide to pay for a game just from an interview.'

The rating for issue #127 was 7.9, with readers cheering the greater number of *Rumours* comments ('these are, after all, the heart of *Flagship*'- **Mike Audleigh**). Again, the Serim Ral, Glory of Kings and Independent Computer Games articles were praised, with individual votes also going to the various other reviews that we carried. Several of you are enjoying **Jonathan Degann**'s series of articles about game design, and the series of articles by **Shannon Appelcline** is also meeting with favour.

Pevans is praised for 'his knowledgeable confidence' (**A Brewster**) and **Eric Ridley** for his 'lively approach, which is always such fun to read' (**Mike Webb**).

No-one who replied objects to games dealing with controversial subject-matter: 'I'm not too fussed. If it's interesting fine, if not, don't print it. People have such weird ideas what's controversial anyway.' (**Bill Moore**) Around 25% of you will play web-games, Facebook games and mobile phone games, though web-games seem to be the favourite genre ('If anything takes my fancy, I'll give it a go!'–**Mike Webb**). Only 26% of you have been to games conventions, with those who haven't blaming shortage of time or family commitments. ('I used to, but life got too busy... Maybe when the kids have left home...'—**Jim Price**)

Many thanks to all who replied. Even if I've not quoted you directly, I've taken notice of what you've had to say!

WARPSTONE

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Feedback Questions for this Issue

1 - Please rate this issue from 1 (ghastly) to 10 (glorious).
2 - Which articles/sections did you most enjoy, and why?
3 - Which bored you, and why?
4 - Do you prefer coverage of games that (a) you've already played, (b) you're already planning to try, (c) games that are new to you?
5 - Do you usually choose games that you can (a) play within your family, (b) play with friends, (c) learn to play on your own?
6 - Do you play games during your holidays?
7 - Don't forget to nominate the three games that you most enjoyed playing in 1998!

[*We aim to publish feedback every two issues. Replies welcomed by mail to the UK office, or by email to:* carol@flagshipmagazine.com]
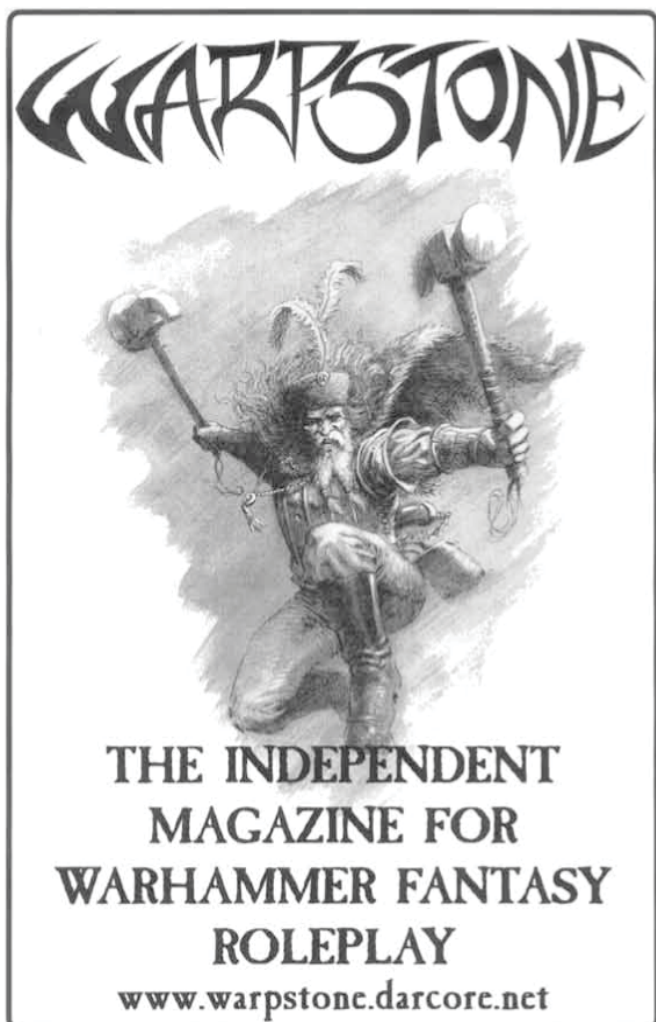
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