

FLAGSHIP

THE INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE FOR GAMERS

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to watch***

Automobile

Aion

***Superhero
Roleplaying***

Ice Hockey

***General gaming news,
views and reviews ...***

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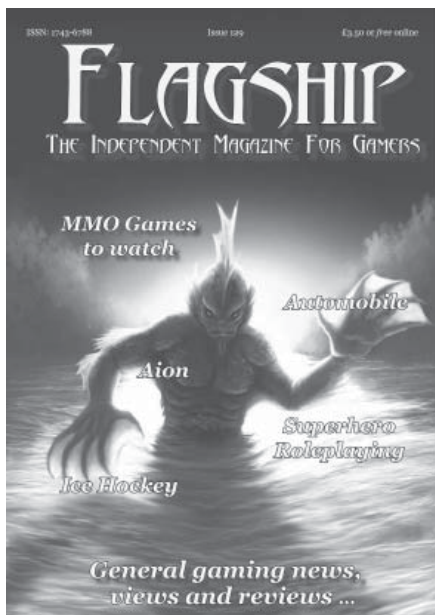
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Report from the Bridge

AS THE SUMMER draws to its end, I'm delighted to sweeten the approach of autumn by bringing you *Flagship* #129. After what I hope was an enjoyable summer break from work for you, here is an issue presenting our usual wide range of material. It's been fun to gather so much about so many types of game in our pages.

Among our varied articles, we've a first-impressions review of *Agema Publications'* new turn-based game, **Struggle for Empire**. What else? Plenty! We've an article describing some forthcoming MMOs, which sound mouth-watering. We also welcome the first of a new series that will extend our coverage: it's a detailed article about miniature wargaming. Shannon Appelcline continues his discussion of super-hero games and Jonathan Degann provides another insightful article about game design. Pevans reviews **Automobile** and describes some new games, while Eric Ridley describes **Cubiko**, **Monkey Dash** and **Ramses' Temple**. We've also got some material about sports games, when Dave Panchyk contributes an overview of ice-hockey games. This issue's interview is with the designer of a new cardgame.

I tend to find the darker evenings depressing, myself, but they do offer us all good opportunities to cosy up indoors and play games. So maybe autumn won't be too bad, if it allows us time to progress towards victory...

Carol

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**Contributions
are always welcome!**

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HERE WE ARE with **Flagship 129**, the second issue to appear for free on our website as well as coming out in print. Remember, we'll now assume that you're happy to take the website PDF if you don't tell us that you prefer print: it won't be a problem for us to mail subscribers printed copies if you want them.

I'll resist the temptation to claim to be an especially up-to-date and modern editor by issuing Flagship on our website: 'modern' isn't a word that produces automatic fanfares for me.

Besides, I prefer print myself. I like clutching pages that I can turn over and work my way through at leisure. I don't believe that reading a PDF will give me the same joy as reading a series of printed pages. It's printed copies that attract attention at conventions, too.

I've always been a ferocious reader. Apparently my first words ever were, 'Read book me,' though I expect I was asking for *Sunny Stories* as a toddler rather than the thrills of *Crime and Punishment*.

Flagship isn't a novel, of course, and aims to convey information as well as to entertain, so the internet seems a useful means of doing this. Our first check of the number of downloads of issue #128 indicate that we've doubled



our readership already! Will a PDF alter the nature of what we produce, though? Will it reduce our in-depth articles to a collection of short paragraphs under snappy subtitles? Will we grow distant from you, our readership? Let's hope not! Keep in touch with your views as we work away. So far your feedback has been supportive.

You will all know that internet discussion is not always a well-humoured business. (Look at the BBC's 'Have Your Say' forums if you don't believe me!) Participants tend to react first and think later.

The tone can be confrontational. I suspect that internet pseudonyms don't help in this respect. We'll continue to allow you to use pseudonyms for articles as long the editor (ie me) knows your real name, but we'll need a real name

for *Rumours* comments and

any kind of voting. As always, I'm prepared to publish unfavourable comments from you about the games you play, but may still offer Right-of-Reply to the firm concerned, if I think that this is fair.

All of this seems more-or-less Business As Usual and I hope that you won't find unwelcome changes in our approach.

Above all, I'm confident that we'll continue to present games from their players' point of view. Do tell us about the games that you play and what you think of them all! I'm a friendly creature and I really value your feedback ...

Feedback

It has always been part of my vision for Flagship to include you, the reader, as much as possible. For this reason, I value Feedback as a way of discovering your thoughts and opinions about every issue - and indeed, every aspect of the magazine.

When I first took over as editor, we used to receive numerous typed and hand-written letters, both favourable and otherwise. These days email is more usual, and more immediate! Some of you prefer to use the website Forum to discuss issues raised in Flagship - and I welcome this new development. the advent of email meant that I no longer needed to decipher and type up hand-written epistles. Then, as now, everything that reached us was considered and taken on board, even when not published.

Please continue to keep in touch, by whatever means you prefer - I still receive hand-written letters, though happily quite decipherable! As ever, I want to keep Flagship as your

Carol

Questions for this issue

- 1—Please rate this issue from 1 (half-baked) to 10 (heart-warming).
- 2—Which articles/sections did you most enjoy, and why?
- 3—Which bored you, and why?
- 4—Would you recommend Flagship (a) to friends and family, (b) to fellow players, (c) to no-one, because... ?
- 5—As well as turn-based games, we try to cover as many other types of game as possible: does this work? (a) no, I'm only interested in the games I already play, (b) I'd be interested in more coverage of --- games, (c) I never read anything about --- games, (d) you should go back to your PBM roots! (Please fill in the blanks.)
- 6—I play games (a) to occupy my mind, (b) to meet and interact with new friends, (c) to meet and interact with my old friends.

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

Media Eye

Is gaming becoming respectable?

CAROL MULHOLLAND on recent coverage of games on TV and in the papers ...

THERE ARE no hostile clergymen to write about this issue, hooray, and for once we've various news items that don't seem to belittle our ethics as gamers. It seems almost too good to be true!

Plenty of castles exist in games, as you'll know. Now, the BBC has reported that a genuine ruined castle has been fully restored in virtual form by a programmer from **Second Life**. The castle in question is Invergarry in the Scottish Highlands, which suffered the double wammy of being reduced to ruin by Cromwell's troops in 1654 and then ruined again after Culloden in 1746. In real life it survives only as a crumbling ruin, but fortunately the architect's drawings from its 1700s rebuilding still survive and the Second Life programmer has been able to use these for his virtual reconstruction. This seems a useful idea, which will no doubt be used for further historical reconstructions. We've no information about whether Invergarry has dungeons beneath it, however.

www.secondlife.com

In September the *Guardian* newspaper ran an article arising from a report by the US Games Retail Association that older gamers are continuing to play video games rather than dropping out and being replaced by a new generation. Video games have long been associated with young players, but now we don't need to feel ashamed of our more creaky taste for them. Of course, this isn't a new discovery for *Flagship* readers, who'll play all types of game, but it's good to see that video games are being acknowledged as appealing to all age groups.

www.guardian.co.uk

Online games do, however, still seem to be regarded as too addictive to be safe. Do you remember that this was a concern for the Chinese authorities? Well, now it's possible to obtain treatment. At a price. The *Daily Telegraph* reported on August 22nd that a 19-year old youth obsessed by **World of Warcraft** has been admitted to an American internet retreat. According to this report, there's a 12-step programme of treatment lasting 45 days. The full deal costs a hefty £8,800, but will include camping and wilderness adventures. Treatment is also available for out-patients. More recently, too, there was a programme on ITV advocating treatment for youthful addicts: parents were urged to supervise the amount of time spent by teenagers.

So do you feel that you are spending too long in virtual reality, yourself? As a second youth perhaps, if you've passed your teenage years? Well, google the *ReStart Internet Addiction Recovery Program* in Washington State to find out whether the cure will be more painful than the disease...

On September 26th, the *Telegraph* ran a short piece by

their Head of Technology, Shane Richmond, entitled *After 25 years I'm still proud to be a gamer*. Hooray for Shane! He describes how it was *Elite* that first attracted him to video gaming, because 'Its open-ended nature made it hugely addictive.' Apparently 'the average age of a gamer in Britain is 36'; that's for a male gamer, as the average age for a female gamer is 38. He ends with a neat twist: 'Before gaming, we had hobbies—and hobbies were awful.'

We've also had news of a report from the journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour* of a study at the University of Missouri which indicates that players of violent multiplayer games are more aggressive towards strangers than towards their team mates. Even more heartening is a study by Christopher Ferguson published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, which indicates that youth violence is more likely to be encouraged by depression and 'association with delinquent peers' than by playing violent games. While we may think that these conclusions would be obvious, it's good to see some evidence appearing.

Almost all of the items this issue have, for once, been reasonably optimistic. To end with another upbeat note, the *Telegraph* featured an article on September 7th saying that a study of more than 600 children aged six to 16 seems to show that children's intelligence can be boosted with brain-training computer games. Dr Tracy Alloway, a psychologist from the *Centre for Learning and Memory in the Lifespan* at Stirling University, reports that specially designed games improved the ability of children in the study to solve mathematical and verbal problems: indeed, the children's IQ levels rose by as much as ten after the course.

The psychologists at Stirling developed the game, which they've called *Junglememory*, themselves. It has 30 levels of increasing difficulty, in which users must remember numbers and patterns that flash up on the screen and then go on to use the numbers in a different task. The tasks took around 15 minutes a day and the children had to play for at least four times a week over eight weeks. Dr Alloway states that 'We believe that nearly all those who played the game have shown some kind of improvement.'

How nice to hear game-playing regarded as an aid to intelligence. As players ourselves we all know that playing games can help to do this, but the media do generally regard games at best as a frivolous activity and at worst as a damaging one ...

As we go to press, the *Guardian* newspaper laments a lack of humour in recent computer games, writing:

'Humour was once an integral part of the gaming world. It was the magic ingredient that turned games with limited graphics into treasured possessions. But with graphics becoming ever more realistic, games have turned serious and humour is scarce.'

Do you agree? Let us know!

Ten MMO Games to Watch

Online Potential - Times Ten!

From close to the front-line, we welcome the opinions of 'MORG' ...

POTENTIAL is a funny word, and compiling a list of ten games that I feel currently have the most potential was a more difficult task than I first anticipated. First, I tried to come up with a list of games that simply have the most potential in a general sense. However, potential, and how much a game has, is a subjective thing, so I chose to present the ten games that I personally feel have the most potential. That's why you'll undoubtedly notice that I've left something off that you feel should be on there certainly before at least one of the games that I chose. I mean, just off the top of my head, I know that there are arguments to be made for: Jumpgate Evolution, Mortal Online, Champions Online and others. If you feel passionately that one of these, or another game should have been on my list, feel free to take some time not just to tell me that I'm an idiot, but to tell me why.

Remember, potential isn't a measure of what a game is, it's a measure of what a game could be.



Stargate Worlds

I'm going to start this entry by saying that I am a big fan of the *Stargate* franchise. Those characters in that universe entertained me for over ten years, and the idea of being able to go virtually into that same universe and have my own adventures made my socks roll up and down.

I have not, however, been living under a rock. I am well aware of the trouble that the game is in. I fully realize that there is a rather severe deadline looming and that the game will, in all likelihood, die before we have a chance to know it. I don't know if this fate was accidental, circumstantial, or the result of an incompetent foul-up or twenty and in the end, it doesn't really matter. It still cheeses me off.

It wasn't just the Stargate franchise that filled this game with potential, there were also some neat features I would have liked to see: The game's combat that made proper use

of tactics and cover, the mini-game system that gave non-combatants something interesting to do, the advanced AI that was clearly at work, the Archaeologist role... There was lots to look forward to here.

So, in the event that any potential investors are reading, or that anyone might be reading from MGM, I will say this: Players are ready for a Stargate MMO. There were a lot of good ideas here and while certain factors conspired against it this time, this project, in some form or another, is worth continuing and I strongly urge you to find a way to make that happen.

All Points Bulletin (APB)

The folks at Realtime Worlds, the company that put out the sandbox style single player Crackdown, are taking their kick at the MMORPG can with All Points Bulletin, more commonly referred to as APB.

I have to be honest, when I first heard about this game, I really didn't see the appeal. It looked to me like it was going to be just another GTA-looking game with a slightly more advanced multiplayer mode. As the game has moved through development, I'm happy to report that it looks like more than that.

I am a big fan of the proposed cops and robbers style of RvR (but we can't call it that because a certain someone thought it would be fun to copyright the term), where bad guys commit crimes, and they are matched up with good guys whose job it is to track them down. This, in my opinion, is the next logical evolution of the GTA / Crackdown / Saint's Row style of games. Give people what they really want: the ability to put the hurt on other players with the full support of design and story, not just something knocked off at the last minute that tries hard to

use single player design and tools in a multiplayer world.

Also, from what I've heard about the game's character customisation, this should appeal to even the clothes horses among us.

The Secret World

Funcom's follow-up to Age of Conan is coming in the form of the shadow-world-behind-our-own-world, Buffy the Vampire Slayer meets Call of Cthulhu game known as The Secret World.

Now, I know right from the get-go that there is a contingent of people out there who are going to say 'I'm not going to touch this game as long as Funcom is attached.' It's the same group of people that made those clever Failcom logos and t-shirts after the Age of Conan launch. To you folks I say, ok, cool. You're welcome to your

opinion and I support voting with your dollars. Fight the good fight. To the rest of us, I think we're looking at a game that might turn some heads.

As of right now, there isn't a lot of detail available, but what I do know, I like. I like, for example, the fact that this game is being made without the restriction of classes or levels. It's a risky proposition, but the setting is right for it. Classes make logical sense in high fantasy, but not so much on the streets of Manhattan.

I think, for me at least, it's the setting itself that I see potential in. The world and basic premise have been a long time in begging for an MMO incarnation and if (and it's a big if) this is handled correctly, Funcom could be looking at a game that could hold player attention (and subscriptions) over the long term.

EVE Online

I know that right now some of you are sitting at home saying, 'Morg, you silly man, EVE Online isn't an upcoming game. Some guys from Iceland launched it like six years ago.' To those of you out there I say first, watch your language, and second, just because a game is older doesn't mean it can't have potential.

Yes, this is going to be the only launched game that makes my list. It isn't that other launched games don't have potential. That's the beauty of MMOs, there's potential everywhere. The thing is that EVE Online simply drips the stuff. If EVE Online were a sponge that wiped up potential, you'd have to wring it out a few times before you used it again... Or maybe even replace it with some kind of ShamWow of potential. Let me explain why:

Three words spring immediately to mind: Walking in Stations. For years now CCP's developers have been teasing us with this little titbit that, when launched, will change the face of a game that until now has kept its players inside of their ships. If done correctly, it's going to be a little bit like adding another whole game over top of the one that currently exists.

'Sure,' you'd say to me next, 'that's a bit of potential, but dripping? That might be a bit of hyperbole.' I would of course answer first by complimenting you on your vocabulary use and second by telling you that the developers (henceforth known as Devs) have hinted at other exciting aspects that could be added to the game including, but not limited to, the idea of planetary exploration. See? Potential... loads of it.

World of Darkness

I honestly tossed around the idea of whether or not this game should make the list. After all, not only is there very little known about the upcoming World of Darkness MMO, but I'm not even sure what the timetable for it might be. Then I thought about the fact that it's an MMO based on what is arguably the

second most famous pen and paper RPG franchise of all time.

When CCP and White Wolf merged back in November of 2006, the MMO world got excited about the fact that White Wolf's universe would be moving into the online community. There's lots to

like about a franchise that deals with some of the most classic ideas of the horror genre and it's no wonder that people got excited. It isn't, however, the setting or the IP that raises the game's potential

in my eyes. In my opinion, it's the company behind it and the circumstances that surround that game that fill it with potential.

CCP is well known for taking the idea of sandbox MMOs very seriously given the nature of its only other MMO release, EVE Online. One has to assume that if they are going to invest time and resources into a second MMO that they wouldn't deviate too significantly from the formula that made them a success and the idea of a new sandbox game steeped in the lore of the World of Darkness should be enough to get anyone excited.

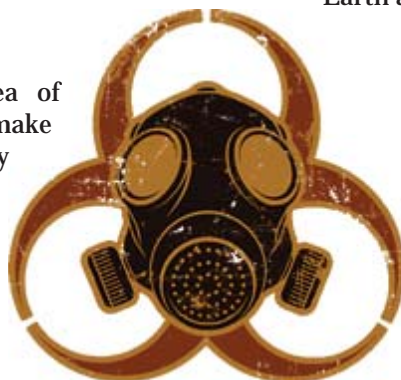
Fallen Earth

Icarus Studios has been around for a while, touting an MMO that takes place in the aftermath of a plague that wipes out much of the world's population.

The game itself makes the list of games with potential partially because of the setting. A post-apocalyptic MMO is full of possibilities, giving players the opportunity to eke out an existence in a universe that really couldn't be much further removed from the fantasy realm of elves and dwarves. Then, of course, there are the features.

Fallen Earth promises to show us a game that takes a new approach to classes where players don't have to commit right from the beginning, having a chance to interact with the world before making a concrete decision. That doesn't rock your world? Doesn't give you tingles of joy? Well maybe you're one of the many MMO fans who feel that crafting systems have gotten the shaft in recent years. Maybe you're one of those people who have been hoping for a game that would give it an important role rather than making it a half-forgotten sideshow as others have done. Whatever the case may be, Fallen Earth promises to deliver meaningful crafting.

These features, along with a few others, make Fallen Earth another of my MMOs with great potential.



Global Agenda

When the MMORPG.com staff went down to attend E3 this year, we gave our Editor's choice award to Global Agenda and the folks from Hi-Rez Studios. With launch coming ever closer, this sci-fi MMO has grabbed my attention in a number of ways and has more than enough interesting aspects to score highly on my potential-o-meter.

When Dana Massey got a hands-on at E3, he came back to work talking about two aspects of the game specifically: The first were jetpacks. Global Agenda will allow players the use of jetpacks as a travel and combat mechanism, but the catch is that players won't be able to use their guns while using their packs. The second revolved around the way that the game presented melee combat in its FPS skin, a feat that isn't easy to pull off. Still, while those aspects are pretty interesting and will certainly add something new and interesting to the game, but that wasn't what really grabbed my attention in terms of potential. For me, the real potential is in the genre.

I have said for a long time that there is a great deal of potential in marrying the MMORPGs with the FPS genre. Show me a game that promises all of the depth of story, character and environment of an MMORPG combined with the fast paced action and overall skill requirements of an FPS, and I'll show you a game with the potential to do something special.

Aion

I know that there are going to be people out there who feel like I placed Aion too low on my list. After all, it is the game that some have been touting as the long awaited competitor for WoW. There will also be those of you out there who feel like I placed Aion too high on my list with thoughts that it doesn't really offer anything new to the genre. For my part, I think I've placed it perfectly partially because of the controversy that seems to be surrounding it at the moment. It seems that the closer an MMO gets to launch, the more polarized the audience becomes.

I say that Aion is full of potential for a number of reasons. The first is its approach to race in a fantasy setting MMO. Looking to the principle that players want some degree of uniformity to their races, but want aesthetic

difference, the team has compiled an incredibly detailed character creator that will allow players to create an elf or a dwarf or really almost anything else if they so choose. It's actually an interesting way of stripping away the veneer of statistical racial difference in high fantasy games.

That brings me to the idea of flight. Personally, I like the way it's being handled with this game. By making flight a limited ability, the developers are able to take full advantage of extraordinary combat potential while at the same time controlling the distances that players move. PvP is also an interesting aspect of this game and, if done properly, could really go a long way toward capturing a niche crowd that hasn't been impressed with recent offerings in that direction. The real potential in this one, though, is that it has so many people fired up. When that

happens, games tend to have a successful launch in terms of immediate numbers. If, and I stress if, Aion is able to impress the many people who will undoubtedly pick it up in the early days it may just live up to expectations.

[Aion is reviewed on page 20 of this issue.]

Star Trek Online

I started this list off by saying that I'm a big fan of the Stargate franchise. Well, being a bigger nerd than anyone rightfully should be, I'm an even bigger fan of the Star Trek franchise. Not that I'm alone in this. Alongside Star Wars, Trek is probably the most recognizable sci-fi franchise on the planet. To say that there are a lot of people anxiously waiting to be able to jump in and actually experience their favourite universe is an understatement.

When Cryptic announced that they had secured the project after the collapse of Perpetual Entertainment, all eyes and expectations turned to them because everyone, whether or not they are a fan of Star Trek, sees the potential that lies in this particular IP. The unfortunate truth for Cryptic is that in order to make a game, design decisions need to be made that aren't always going to be popular with the game's entire would-be audience. Still, they have forged ahead, and will bring us a game that includes two factions: Federation and Klingon, NPC crews, customizable ships, alien race creators, an ever-expanding universe and more. Each of these decision, popular with some, unpopular with others, are yet to be seen. They all





have the potential to come together to make a great Star Trek game. Will they live up to the potential? Only time will tell.

Star Wars: The Old Republic

The Old Republic started out as the worst kept secret in the business and when someone finally admitted that Bioware was indeed working on an MMO based on the successful Knights of the Old Republic franchise, there was much rejoicing. As time has gone on, and details are slowly (like glacially slowly) coming to light about the game, more and more people are beginning to express their doubts.

One of the biggest complaints that I have heard about this game is actually something that I would classify as the aspect that carries the most potential, and makes

TOR my number one most anticipated game: a focus on story and character.

The complaints are pretty easy to see: if there is a focus on individual character and individual story in a persistent world, how will a community be fostered? How will the game be anything but a single player game with lots of other people running around? How will the game retain players over the long term rather than a single play to max level and then an end? The list could literally go on for pages, but here's the cool thing: No one right now outside of Bioware actually knows what the answers to those questions are. It is possible that, now stay with me, a company that has the experience and reputation of Bioware might actually have thought of these

questions as well and found ways to address them. There is so much potential in the idea that a company may have found a way to actually present an MMO where individual decisions matter and a story, not a constant desire to level drives players through the game that there really wasn't much choice but to say that Star Wars: The Old Republic has the most potential right now of any game currently in development.

Of course, there's an almost equal chance that the naysayers are right and that no answers to these issues have been found. That's really the beauty of potential. No one knows if it will be lived up to or not until they can see it with their own eyes.



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Stepping on the Gas

A review of Automobile

PEVANS takes the wheel of this new boardgame ...

THE LATEST from Martin Wallace and *Treefrog*, **Automobile**, is about the early years of automobile manufacturing in the USA. As you'd expect from a business game, it's quite complex, but the learning curve isn't too steep. What's more difficult is mastering the game. The aim is to have the most money after the four turns that comprise the game. Players start with \$2,000 and it is quite possible to end up with less than that.

The first thing that struck me on opening up the box was the garish colour scheme. The game divides the market for cars into three types. The mass market is denoted by a colour scheme that's mostly black with blue edging. The mid-market uses yellow-orange with a mottled pattern and the luxury market is shades of light blue to silver. It's certainly distinctive, but I'm tempted to advise playing this in dark glasses.

Everything happens on the large board. Around the edge this is a series of large spaces, each illustrated with a model of car and outlined with the appropriate colour scheme. The models start in the top left corner with the basic Duryea (mid-market) and wrap round to end with the luxury Cadillac 452—a car that's crying out for the addition of a couple of heavies in fedoras toting violin cases. The Model T Ford is in the top right corner in its original colour: dark blue.

These spaces are where players build factories—wooden blocks in their colour. The cost of each factory is shown in the space and goes up around the track as, effectively, technology advances. Building further along the track requires research and development. The currency for this is 'R&D' cubes: players start with a small number of R&D cubes and pick up more during the game. Players also have a 'parts factory' block. This reduces the cost of building cars in the factories it is stacked with.

Players use their factories to make cars. A table on the board shows how many cars can be manufactured—depending on the number of factories and the type of space—and how much they cost. Players have a heap of wooden cars in their colour and place the appropriate number with their factories to show what they've produced. Note that players have to spend cash to build factories and more to produce cars—that starting money

doesn't go far.

Once players have made some cars, they need to sell them. First, they can unload some production through distributors. Areas on the right hand side of the board, one for each type of car, are where players can place their wooden 'distributor' pieces. When a distributor sells a car, the piece is moved to one of the limited number of squares for the type of car sold—as the game goes on, more squares are available. Any unused distributors return to the player and, worse, they get 'loss points' for them. As with many aspects of this game, you want to get more in play, but will be penalised for using too many.

Most sales, however, are made through the game's main market. Numbered tiles denote demand in this market. Each player draws one or two at the start of the turn, giving them some information about demand. Total demand is, of course, all the players' tiles. At the start of the game the mid-market is the only type of car with any demand. Over the four turns, the mass market takes over and a small market for luxury cars appears. Producing cars that don't sell is a quick way to be an ex-car maker—just ask, well, lots of people. In the game, as well as losing money by not selling cars, players get loss points.

The way cars are sold gives players an incentive to build new factories in advance of the other players. For each type of car, sales start with the most advanced factory, then the second factory of that type, then the third and so on. This cycle repeats until all the cars have gone or total demand has been met. If there are more cars than demand, the least advanced factories will be hit worst and take most losses.

In between making cars and selling them, players have the opportunity to take 'executive decisions', which may help them avoid being left with unsold cars. One of the actions available here is to close the factories on a space. The players get their factory pieces and most of their capital back. This provides a way of re-cycling your capital into new, more advanced factories. Closing factories also reduces players' losses: they hand back half of their loss points.

The other executive actions enable players to sell more cars from a factory space: either by spending R&D cubes (adding new-fangled things like starter motors to their cars, perhaps) or selling at a discount. This gives players an interesting decision: is it worth selling more, but making less money, or taking the loss from not selling? Remember that these decisions have to be taken before the demand tiles are revealed. What you do will also depend on what the others are doing—and the turn order is significant here.

The final section on the board shows seven people who were significant in the early automobile industry. At the start of each turn, players chose one of these and gain R&D cubes and/or a special ability. The sequence of characters is also the player order for the turn. Take Ford, for

Automobile at a glance ...

Automobile is a strategy game for 3-5 players (no suggested age, but probably 12+) and takes about two hours to play. It was designed by Martin Wallace and is published by *Warfrog* (as part of the *Treefrog* line). It is available in shops at around £30/€35/\$50. It gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. A version of this review was first published in *To Win Just Once* issue 98 (September 2009).

example, and you'll be going first. You also gain one R&D cube and can build an extra factory. Choose Chrysler, on the other hand, and you're moving last. You get two R&D cubes and the opportunity to get rid of some loss points (not so significant in the first turn—though going last can be useful).

How you progress ...

I haven't actually described what happens in a turn yet, so let's have a look at how all this is put together. First, players take a demand tile or two. Next, they choose a character for the turn, setting the turn order for the rest of the turn. This is not a trivial decision as it's really deciding just what you're going to do this turn. In turn order, players then take an action: they do this three times. The five actions available are: building factories, making cars, closing factories, taking two R&D Cubes or placing distributors on the board. Once everybody's taken their three actions, players use their distributors to sell cars.

Players then get their chance to take executive decisions. The order in which players pass sets the order for choosing characters next turn. So it can be useful to get that first choice, too. Only after this are the demand tiles revealed and the main selling takes place. The turn completes with one last thing: losses. Players get loss points for their factories that aren't the most advanced of their type. A couple of special abilities allow players to get rid of loss points. Then they pay for their losses, the cost increasing each turn.

Complexity

Phew! There's a lot in this game and, as I said, it's complex. However, at heart it's relatively simple: build factories, make cars, sell cars. Then count the cash. Two things make it harder. The first is the relentless advance of technology, giving the advantage to the players with the best factories. The second is the loss points that come with this. Loss points cost cash. Not too much at the start, but it quickly racks up.

On top of that, you have to deal with the other players. The limitations on every thing you do—and particularly each turn's demand for cars—mean you have to take into account what everybody else is doing. If everyone else is making mid-range cars, should you be? More subtle is the competition for placing distributors and thus ensuring some sales. This then has a knock-on effect on how/when you sell cars in the main selling phase.

Automobile is a clever, challenging business game that gives players difficult decisions to make. At its heart, it is a simple game of producing goods and selling them at a profit. However, the game includes both capital costs—building factories—and running costs—making cars. It models supply and demand with a dash of uncertainty. The competition between players can be as cutthroat or as gentlemanly as the real market—and the option of discounting to gain sales volume is a real threat. As in the real world, if one manufacturer is discounting, can the others afford not to? I recommend playing the game in the spirit of the car-making pioneers: decide what to do and go for it! You may not win, but you'll have a good time.



Ice & Steel

The Gaming World of Ice Hockey

DAVE PANCHYK examines the gamer's side of this popular sport ...

A WOODEN ball, a cube of India rubber, the gnarled root of an apricot tree. Straight paddles, curved sticks, old tree branches. People tall, short, light-skinned and dark. Some combination of the competitive and sense of play has brought humans together as far back as ancient Egypt to play some iteration of the game we call hockey.

Ice hockey is today the most popular of these, the strange mix of the games of Canada's First Nations peoples and those of European immigrants—one sees hints of Ireland's skirling and Scotland's shinty in the sport that then raced outward to every nation sporting ice during its winters.

Interest in ice hockey is growing in Great Britain: the sport's national team has done well in recent years (and sports a wicked-looking jersey), and a lot of people are taking an interest in the Elite and Premier leagues. The Hull Stingrays have a new player/coach, Sylvain Cloutier, who is determined to make the playoffs this year. Aren't folks in Hull always in need of something to make them feel hopeful?

We gamers play simulations, we play turn-based games, console games, role-playing games. The game of hockey becomes itself the subject of a game. Some are easy, some very in-depth and cerebral; it's almost certain there is one to suit anyone's level of interest and patience.

The simplest of these is the console or computer hockey game—actually, scratch that. In the age before ubiquitous gaming consoles, there was rod hockey: a game table in which one turned, pulled, and pushed separate control rods for the players. They stayed in well-defined slots for their positions: the goalie, two defensemen, a center, and a left and right winger. These obliging players never went out of position, but the strategies available were as two-dimensional as the hockey men themselves, frozen in eternal action poses, sticks extended.

The computer and console games add many things to

the virtual hockey experience. One of these is physical contact. As furiously as the rod-hockey players might fan at each other, they could never take out their frustration with big hits or even a fight.

'I went to the fights last night...

...and a hockey game broke out.' It's a funny joke, at least the first time one hears it. Perhaps even the first half-dozen times. After that, though, true hockey fans cringe, realizing that the kernel of truth in it can't be put in proper context without a tedious lecture. This is that lecture.

Physical contact is undeniably a significant part of hockey.

Much as in football, it is meant to stymie an attacker by getting them "off the puck", although much harder

hits and a wider range of activities are allowable. There is

a line, however, that the referees must spot the players crossing, and some players attempt to draw penalties by playing up the offense against them. The frustration that might build up during a game is often released by the catharsis of a fight.

When two players tacitly agree to fight, the resulting skirmish is as ritualized as a bout of Mongolian wrestling. The players throw their heavy gloves to the ice and grab the shoulder of the other's jersey as they try to land blows to the head. The referees stop the fight once one of the two has been maneuvered to the ice surface.

There is strategy behind the use of hits, checks, and even fights; raising the morale of one's own team, intimidating the other team, warning off the opponent's enforcers or "goons" if they're going after star players. High scoring forwards aren't expected to be very physical, but it's appreciated as a nod to the stars of old-time hockey if they



are in addition to producing goals. Sidney Crosby got in one game what was called a "Gordie Howe hat trick": a goal, an assist, and a fight.

Small wonder, then, that digital hockey games have included fighting, implementing it almost as its own mini-game.

As for the rest of the game...

Hockey games for gaming consoles (computer versions are generally just "ports" of such games) have for the most part improved over the years, striking a balance between playability and an experience that "feels" like a hockey game. Electronic Arts' series of NHL games sets the overall standard; sadly, there generally aren't many competitors for on-ice action games.

The NHL series addressed an increasing demand for more simulation of the back-office matters as well as micro-management of coaching strategies. More than wanting to create their own players or play as the member of an international team (Kazakhstan, anyone?), players wanted to make their own team and ride it through multiple seasons, hoping to create a Stanley Cup-winning dynasty.

The simulation element has always appealed to a wide variety of sports fans, and hockey fans are no different. One lamentable loss was *Eastside Hockey Manager*, which went through some corporate-owned incarnations before being shuttered. The original version lives on, however, letting one draft and trade players, set offensive and defensive lines and strategies, and quick-simulate the results of games.

In the off-season, simulations keep hockey fans alive.

Turn-based takes a turn

Players of turn-based games are familiar with the name of Ab Initio. One of their offerings is *Slapshot*, an incredibly deep simulation game. Here one takes over the roster of an NHL team, affecting player development as well as on-ice strategy and a number of back-office franchise decisions. One is given a rich array of statistics to work with, and a

large number of player attributes to consider and affect.

Slapshot uses an elegant kind of currency called "losing points": one's failures enable one to make improvements to future performance. It's not a total leveler, just enough to keep the entire enterprise fair, which is what every real-life sports league hopes to attain.

A number of online, web-based games take on a number of the simulation aspects, but none does so more thoroughly than *Slapshot*. As with any professionally-run game, it's not free, but that's more of a guarantee that the other players will stay involved with the game as a vested interest, and that the game will continue to run and be active a year from now.

Shire Shrikes 2, Rivendell Ravens 0

Ice hockey, or one of its stick-and-ball progenitors, can make for a novel interlude in a role-playing game campaign. Civic pride often rests on sports teams' failures and successes; who can say it's not the same in fantasy worlds? Player characters may find themselves in the middle of an intrigue--match fixing, skullduggery aimed at hockey players, and the like. Worse comes to worst, the characters are thrust into the game itself and expected to play (and win) with no knowledge of the game, and very high stakes if they lose!

Ice hockey is a dynamic sport that evolved from a nearly-universal game. One can find clips of gameplay on a number of different sites. As it finds more fans worldwide, it is almost certain to catch the fancy of gamers able to appreciate the on-ice action or off-ice decision-making of some of the games mentioned here.

Important links:

EA Sport's NHL '10: nhl.easports.com

The original *Eastside Hockey Manager*: fhockey.com

Ab Initio Games' *Slapshot*: pbmsports.com/slapshot.htm

The bmibaby Elite League: eliteleague.co.uk



Slapshot

Your chance to be a professional hockey coach,
all from the comfort of your own armchair.

* *Slapshot* gives you the chance to coach a hockey team in competition against dozens of other coaches through the UK and the world.

* You play from the comfort of your own home, either postally, or via the internet, whichever you prefer.

* You sign and draft players, choose lineups, and take your team through a full regular season and into the playoffs. Each round of games (5 per round) is every fortnight, so plenty of time is available for planning and analysis.

* You control everything, and you determine the success (or failure) of your team.

* Many other sports games available: American Football, Baseball, Basketball, Football, Cricket, Rugby, F1 Motor Racing.

Ab Initio Games

For rules, set-up details
and first three games send
£5.00 (payable to Ab Initio
Games) or contact:

Danny McConnell (FO), Ab
Initio Games, PO Box 605,
Bromley, Kent, BR2 0YQ
danny@pbmsports.com
[http://pbmsports.com/
slapshot.htm](http://pbmsports.com/slapshot.htm)

Struggle for Empire

A Turn-Based Game of historical expansion

JOHN TINDALL offers a preliminary report on Agema's latest game ...

YOU ARE THE leading figure of one of 37 positions: a semi-historical nation-empire (such as Britannia, North Amerika or Nippon), a trading company (such as the Honourable East Indea Company) or a missionary society. The movies *The Man Who Would Be King*, *Zulu* or *55 Days At Peking* give some idea of the era. Each game-month you will issue orders to up to twelve 'leading characters' chosen from eleven specialities (broadly military, political, diplomatic, economic, espionage and religion), who carry out your commands as best as their personalities and circumstances allow. Your character selection is critical, since virtually all initiatives will require the presence of the appropriate character. My choices included two Admirals (without whom navies can't move), two Generals (to move armies), two trade directors (who boost trade returns) and two engineers (who build infrastructure). Why two? Consider this: if an Admiral character is kidnapped or killed whilst overseas, his entire Naval Squadron is immobilised until another Admiral gets out there and assumes command. Since building a brand new character takes ten game-months to create, a back-up seems prudent.

Another important consideration is increasing your nation's international Prestige, which equates to the number of orders you can give. Prestige varies depending on how respected the GM thinks your Nation is: such things as national growth (through conquest or trade) or humanitarian efforts might be factors. For example, Osterreich proposed a treaty to reduce the traffic in slavery. She then took the 'protected' the port of Mogagishu – a major slaving centre and has provided freed slaves with blankets and other aid for their journey home. With these and other initiatives, Osterreich's Prestige has grown from six to a more usable ten. However this approach also has its

critics. One player I know of dropped out after an extended period of unease, saying the GM 'can adjust your prestige based on how he decides he wants to handle that turn and I actually ended up paying real dollars for less gaming. It's a game system I'm not used to I suppose.'

'Gold is the sinews of war' and in **Struggle for Empire**, tax and trading revenues stream in from home and abroad to fill your Treasury. The wealth streams right back out again to pay troops, fund engineering projects, research improved weapons, influence native rulers, foment dissent and so forth. Trade revenues can be further increased by assigning a Director of Trade to improve returns, so with around 60% of Osterreich's revenue coming from trade tax with Europe, Director von Rothschild was immediately assigned to look after it. He seems to be doing an impeccable job so far but just to confirm this, my Agent is gently enquiring about his character and expenditure, just in case he's taking a commission he shouldn't be...

Military aspects

Home Countries are not able to be invaded, so unless you have to send in the troops to break up a general strike (maybe an enemy Agent is fostering discontent?), most of the action will occur overseas. Movement is as you'd expect – army units (infantry, cavalry, artillery) are attached to a General, who embarks them on naval transports (under the command of an Admiral), then they sail or steam from sea region to sea region until you reach your destination. Land units can then move by road, rail or foot to build, fight, conquer or influence their way for the greater glory of your Empire. Within the first game-year, there's not been a lot in the way of armed conflict as Nations have been moving into position. Britannia saw action first, with the relief of Governor Gordon under siege in Khartoum. British naval vessels transported a mixed force of Her Majesty's army up the Nile, which put the Mahdist besiegers to flight. The report of the combat in the games newsletter *The Britannic Times* was quite atmospheric. Once a province is part of your Empire, native units may be created, albeit naturally inferior in arms and quality to those of the Home Country!

Although the focus may be on foreign fields, a creative player should find interesting opportunities in the Home Countries. For example, Agents, Engineers, Agitators and other characters could initiate such things as a rumour of insolvency, the construction of a trans-European canal, incite the unions to strike for higher pay... all without having to cross the briny deeps.

The Moderation

Richard Watts' 20 years experience as a GM seems to have given him a good feel for the balance between playability, reality and challenge and this allows a wide range of potential actions. Atmospheric, creative play seems to be rewarded. For example, Osterreich launched the 'Grande Lotterie von Osterreich' - a National Lottery that was not

Struggle for Empire at a glance ...

Set in the 1800s era of colonial expansion, *Struggle for Empire* is a play-by-email, human-moderated, turn-based, open-ended game. It is run by *Agema Publications* (www.agema.org.uk) who also offer the long running **The Glory of Kings** (see *Flagship* issues 76, 86-89, 114, 126 & 127). The rulebook and fortnightly turns are £6.00 each (payable via Paypal or by cheque). Players are free to set their own objectives but the rulebook suggests 'your main aim is to dominate distant lands and thwart the plans of your enemies'. In addition to your Home Country, there are five regions for said domination: The Wild West, China, Indea, Afrika, and the Orient. And there's plenty to dominate: Afrika for example has around 50 provinces. The game was launched in early 2009 and positions are still available in Game 1. There is a discussion forum for the game at:

<http://agema.darkbb.com/forum.htm>

covered by the rulebook but had historical precedents. As I had hoped, there was a significant boost to national income, but Richard riposted with a campaign by the 'Catholic Purity League' urging the populace not to succumb to the evils of gambling. This required some creative thinking to mitigate: eventually the leading opponent was persuaded to serve on the Lottery Fund Committee for a nice annual stipend!

The outcomes of your orders are incorporated in either the atmospheric game newsletter (for 'public' events such as combats or engineering projects) or your 'National Affairs report (for more private activities such as your Agitator's efforts to foster discontent in a troublesome rival). The newsletter *The Britannic Times* is a great part of the game – it's fun to read and interpret such items as Netherlands' naval blockade of the Transvaal, the Italian count kidnapped by (NPC) Sultan Muhammed or the web of alliances being created by Britain and the Honourable East India Company. Speaking of which, alliances are not necessary for success since your goals are self-determined. However like most games, having someone to plot with usually makes the game more interesting. Regrettably the discussion forum appears to be little used.

Nevertheless, there are a few aspects with which I struggle (pun intended). The Prestige limit on orders mean that you won't be able to do everything you wish, which is most keenly felt on start-up since there is no 'bank' of prestige points to initially position characters or units.

Next, the revenue report does not detail how much

you have invested in trade, so if you invest all your surplus cash (for higher returns), then your Treasury balance shows GBP 0 and you have no idea how much is in your 'trade account'. The GM notes that this is not an issue if a specific amount is invested, instead of 'sweeping' the lot.

Finally, building most units takes ten turns. Units start with five Cohesion levels that drop by one every time a unit moves into a hostile (or even just neutral) territory. That means that after five moves, the unit is effectively useless. You can activate a reserve unit and transport it to the region of operations, or build a replacement unit (ten game-months). Whilst possibly realistic, players who are used to building a unit or building in one turn may find the delay frustrating. It also means a disaster or problem can't be remedied overnight but has some lasting impact for a few turns, which the GM suggests gives the game a better 'real life' balance. It also rewards success since opponents can't stage immediate comebacks and this gives you a better chance to exploit victory (assuming of course that your own forces aren't too exhausted to manage it! This aspect therefore rewards the sort of players who think several moves ahead. Overall, the good points greatly outweigh the bad.

My suggestion is that *Struggle for Empire* will appeal most to patient players who enjoy long term planning, self-determined goals, creative play, role-playing and quality GMing. Glory to Emperor Franz Josef and Osterreich!

THE BATTLE OF HAFIR

General Creed gave the order. "Infantry forward! At them with the bayonet, don't let them get away!"

He snapped shut his eyeglass as the Royal Scots and the Queen's Own marched past the small knoll where he sat on his horse, all four battalions in their red coats making a splendid scene to this onlooker's eye. Their left flank rested on the Nile, and over to the right A Section, 1st Royal Horse Artillery had unlimbered and was already popping away at the Mahdist positions. Behind that battery the only cavalry squadron of Creed's expedition, A Squadron, 2nd Dragoon Guards, the Queen's Bays, sat motionless.

The Mahdist cavalry, in squadron strength, rode off westwards, abandoning their gunners to their fate. The guns, two batteries worth, had been making ready to limber up but now the Mahdists in something of a flap once more unlimbered the artillery pieces to get ready to face the coming assault while under fire from the RHA.

If this were not enough pressure, Admiral Steele sent upriver the three gunboats HMS Mohawk, HMS Fancy and HMS Thistle to engage the Mahdists. This enfilade fire caused chaos, and caused the fire aimed at the RHA and British infantry to be erratic and ineffective. All the while the British regular infantry were moving closer, silent beneath the unfurled regimental and King's colours except for the ruffle of their drums. Despite all this the Mahdist fire at last managed to cause some damage to the Royal Scots, but it was all too late. Very soon the British were all over the position, bayoneting the gunners who were quickly dispatched, bringing the battle to a swift end.

Those artillery pieces captured intact were spiked in order that they could not be used again and because they could not be embarked by Admiral Steele's transports for want of space.

The troops were then once more embarked, with some difficulty in the case of the cavalry and artillery, and taken to Khartoum. However, once there Steele was dismayed to find no proper port facilities, and so disembarking Creed's force proved tricky.

A sample Combat Report

The Ridley Files

Cubiko & Ramses' Pyramid

ERIC RIDLEY bounces balls and builds with Lego ...

AS A BEARDED, serious gamer, I enjoy serious weighty games that challenge my ability to manage resources, balance multiple actions and preferably are set in the middle ages. The more variable action points and player deal making the better. Then along comes a game like **Cubiko**. Released at the UK Games Expo 2009, Cubiko is a game that is about as simple as they come. It is on par with Tumblin' Dice for its straight forwardness. But lets not get ahead of ourselves...

Sitting at a table in a corner of the UK Games Expo was a middle aged man with a box of home made games beside him. The white boxes were piled high on his demo stand and people gathered round to see what was going on. An older man (his dad) stood nearby and encouraged passers by to take a closer look. That middle aged man was Gavin Birnbaum and Cubiko was his first game design. We eagerly moved next to him to see what he had to shill. He explained that the game was a variation on noughts' and crosses. My beard stood on end at the very notion of this kind of violation to my love for market trading. Mr Birnbaum went on to produce a bouncy ball from his box, telling me that this was the main game piece for his game. WHAT, a bouncy ball.? How could any one produce a game with a rubber ball as a randomizer. Any gamer worth his salt loathes the very notion of having something as random as a dice in their game box, but a bouncy ball is just too far! With gritted teeth, I sat down to listen to the rest of the demo.



Each player starts with three cubes. The board is a metal frame with a piece of cloth set over it. The frame creates a grid on the fabric of 3x3. A standard noughts' and crosses board. Each turn you take your rubber randomizer and attempt to bounce it from the table into a square

of your choice. You place your cube into the square the ball landed in. get three cubes in a row or all three of your cubes in one square and you win. Simple. A wrinkle is added when any square that your opponent bounces the ball into results with all other pieces being removed from that quadrant. The game is playable by up to four players.

After the demo concluded, I was grinning wide and found myself asking 'how much'. Ten of your British pounds was the reply. I was aghast to find myself rooting into my cowhide and pulling out a crisp tenner. I paid, and walked off strangely happy. Since then I



have played the game over 60 times with all manner of players and numbers. And to the last man they all enjoyed it and played multiple games. One of the games brilliance lies in its brevity. Everyone who plays it enjoys it. Its light its fun and it plays fast. With the ability to remove your opponents pieces from the board there are tactics (albeit not complex ones) and an air of competition as you strive for the best bounces.

This is the very definition of casual gaming. Each game takes only a few minutes and anyone who has at least one arm can join in. at the same time Cubiko manages to be what all games should be, fun. It captures the interest of all who see it and I have never had any one say 'no, I cant be bothered' when I suggest playing this game. Ten pounds seems very reasonable for this amount of fun. The only problem you may have is finding a copy. it's a self published title and Gavin makes them on his kitchen table, or so he tells me. The game will have been on display at Essen this year by the time you read this, so who knows if it will get picked up by a large scale publisher, I certainly hope so.

Cubiko

Designer: Gavin Birnbaum

Buy direct from the website from £15.40

www.cubiko.webs.com

ODDLY ENOUGH, I was walking through *Toys R' Us* the other day bemoaning the fact that they didn't sell any 'proper' games these days, not even light ones by the likes of *Gamewright*. Then, like a bolt from above, in a flash of dazzling light, a game by *Reiner Knizia* appeared on the shelf in front of me. Reiner is my hero of the gaming world. I have dozens of his excellent games, have won a *Knizithon* at *Gencon UK* (no easy feat) and have even had the immense pleasure of meeting the man. Not only was this a Reiner game but one that I've never played before. But wait, it gets even better... Wait for it...It was made out of Lego! I kid you not. Lego have just released a series of games made from their iconic bricks. They range in price and complexity but **Ramses' Pyramid** is at the top end of this scale weighing in at £20 and coming in a relatively big box.

The game has to be constructed and full instructions are included for you to do that. If you are a Lego fan then building the set is almost worth the price in itself. It comprises a large pyramid, each level of which is removable and rotatable (the ability to

do this is part of the game mechanics). The set comes with eight mummy figures, of the toilet paper rather than the maternal variety I should add, four player figures and one Ramses figure with crown. These are not full size Lego figures but rather half size, non articulated ones. This makes no difference to the game play, but it would have been nice to have seen the pieces as fully realised Lego men.

Players are tasked with climbing to the top of the Pyramid and seizing the crown of Ramses. To do this, you must first take a walk around the base of the building. Roll a special die, move, and then either take one of the jewels you happen across or peek at one of the hidden jewels underneath a Lego rock. Once you have completed your walk you can attempt to scale the structure. Again, you roll a die at the start of your turn and climb up level by level. However, you can only move to a level that you have either stolen the gem for or can show to the other players where a gem of that colour is hidden under one of the rocks. You can climb up to a maximum of three levels per turn. Some dice rolls cause the mummies at the top of the pyramid to creep down the levels. If you ever find yourself on the same level as one of these undead terrors you are thrown back to the bottom of the pyramid.

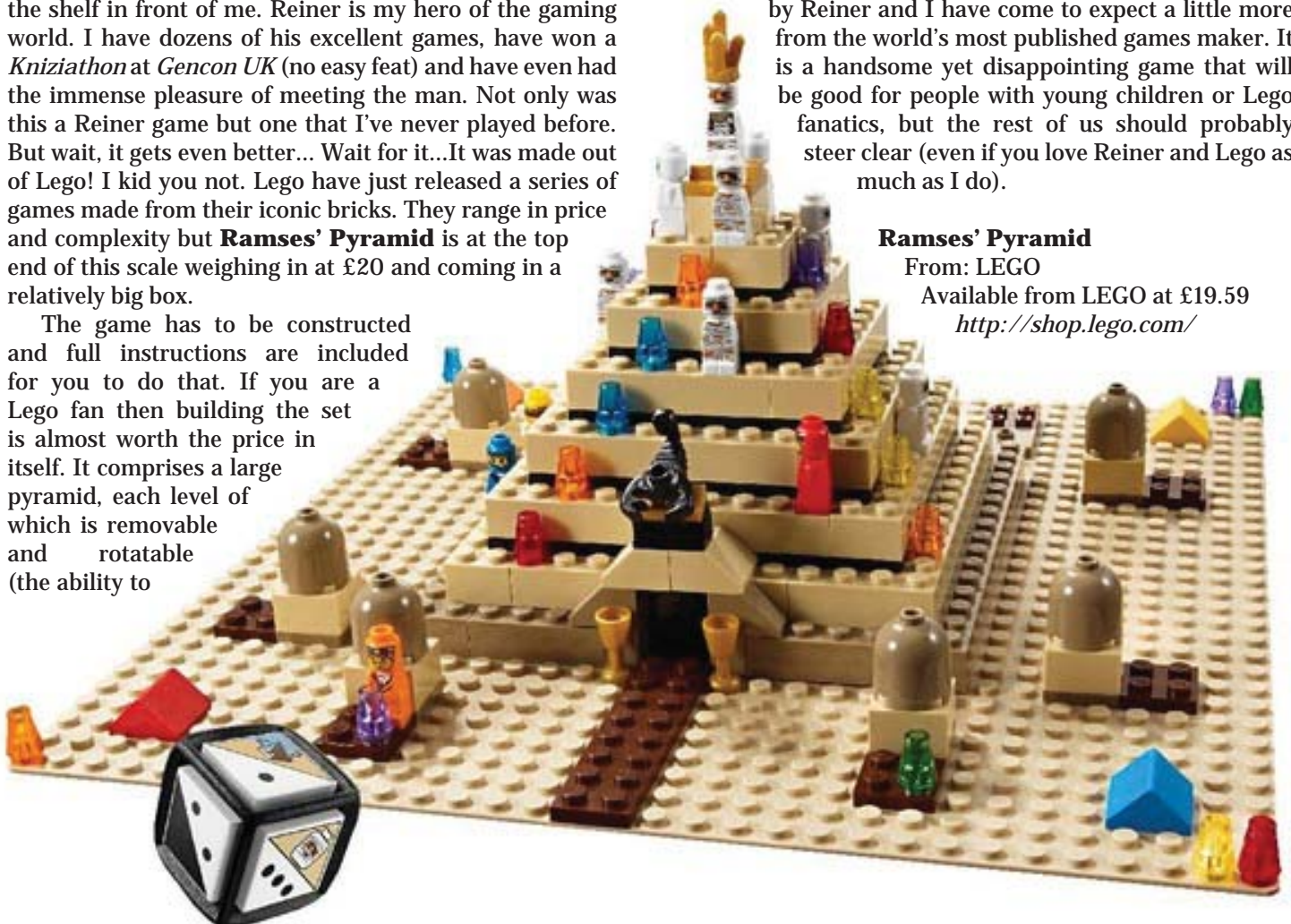
At its core, the game is a memory variant with a very elaborate board. There are some strategic choices to be made, but they are few and far between. Roll a die, move a piece is the basis of your turn. The whole thing looks amazing, but is as shallow as a picture of Jennifer Lopez looking into a mirror. The game is fairly clearly aimed at younger players as it only seems to be available in toy shops and no 'hardcore' game outlets. Still it's designed by Reiner and I have come to expect a little more from the world's most published games maker. It is a handsome yet disappointing game that will be good for people with young children or Lego fanatics, but the rest of us should probably steer clear (even if you love Reiner and Lego as much as I do).

Ramses' Pyramid

From: LEGO

Available from LEGO at £19.59

<http://shop.lego.com/>



Play-by-Mail and Wikipedia

FLAGSHIP asks for your help with updating this online resource ...

*EXCELLENT though it is for its speed and overall coverage, does **Wikipedia**, the free online encyclopedia convey an accurate account of Play-by-Mail/turn-based gaming? Flagship has a long tradition (26 years!) of acting as a guardian of PBM, and we feel that it's important to get this kind of information right. Wikipedia entries are put together and edited by users and readers, so Flagship would like to update what is re-produced below, but for that we need your help!*

Here is what is featured on Wikipedia at present. If you think you can improve it at all, do let me know by letter or email using the contact details on page 3. We will then collate all the suggestions, and update the page. You are the players, who best know this subject ...

Play-by-mail games are games, of any type, played through postal mail or e-mail. One example, chess, has been played by mail for centuries (when played in this way, it is known as correspondence chess). Another example, Diplomacy, has been played by mail since the 1960s, starting with a printed newsletter (a fanzine) written by John Boardman. More complex games, moderated entirely or partially by computer programs, were pioneered by Rick Loomis of Flying Buffalo in 1970. The first such game offered via email through a major online service was Quantum Space from Stormfront Studios, which debuted on AOL in 1989.

Play by mail games are often referred to as PBM games, and play by email is sometimes abbreviated PBeM -- as opposed to face to face (FTF) or over the board (OTB) games which are played in person. Another variation on the name is Play-by-Internet (PBI) or play-by-web (PBW). In all of these examples, player instructions can be either executed by a human moderator, a computer program, or a combination of the two.

In the 1980s, play-by-mail games reached their peak of popularity with the advent of Gaming Universal and Flagship magazine, the first professional magazines devoted to play-by-mail games. (An earlier fanzine, Nuts & Bolts of PBM, was the first publication to exclusively cover the hobby.) Bob McLain, the publisher and editor of Gaming Universal, further popularized the hobby by writing articles that appeared in many of the leading mainstream gaming magazines of the time. Flagship later bought overseas rights to Gaming Universal, making it the leading magazine in the field. Flagship magazine was founded by Chris Harvey and Nick Palmer (now an MP) of the UK. The magazine still thrives, albeit under a different editor over twenty years later.

In the late 1990s, computer and Internet games marginalized play-by-mail conducted by actual postal mail, but the postal hobby still exists with an estimated 2000–3000 adherents worldwide.

Postal gaming

Postal gaming developed as a way for geographically sepa-

rated gamers to compete with each other. It was especially useful for those living in isolated areas and those whose tastes in games was uncommon.

In the case of a two player game such as chess, players would simply send their moves to each other alternately. In the case of a multi-player game such as Diplomacy, a central game master would run the game, receiving the moves and publishing adjudications. Such adjudications were often published in postal game zines, some of which contained far more than just games.

The commercial market for play-by-mail games grew to involve computer servers setup to host potentially thousands of players at once. Players would typically be split up into parallel games in order to keep the number of players per game at a reasonable level, with new games starting as old games ended. While the central company was responsible for feeding in moves and mailing the processed output back to players, players were also provided with the mailing addresses of others so that direct contact could be made and negotiations performed. With turns being processed every few weeks, more advanced games could last over a year.

Game themes are heavily varied, and may range from those based on historical or real events to those taking place in alternate or fictional worlds.

Inevitably, the onset of the computer-moderated PBM game (primarily the Legends game system) meant that the human moderated games were pushed into the “non-profit-making sector” of the industry[citation needed].

Mechanics

The mechanics of play-by-mail games require that players think and plan carefully before making moves. Because planned actions can typically only be submitted at a fixed maximum frequency (e.g., once every few days or every few weeks), the number of discrete actions is limited compared to real-time games. As a result, players are provided with a variety of resources to assist in turn planning, including game aids, maps, and results from previous turns. Using this material, planning a single turn may take a number of hours.

Actual move/turn submission is traditionally carried out by filling in a turn card. This card has formatted entry areas where players enter their planned actions (using some form of encoding) for the upcoming turn. Players are limited to some finite number of actions, and in some cases must split their resources between these actions (so that additional actions make each less effective). The way the card is filled in often implies an ordering between each command, so that they are processed in-order, one after another. Once completed, the card is then mailed (or, in more modern times, e-mailed) to the game master, where it is either processed, or held until the next turn processing window begins.

By gathering turn cards from a number of players and

processing them all at the same time, games can provide simultaneous actions for all players. However, for this same reason, co-ordination between players can be difficult to achieve. For example, player A might attempt to move to player B's current location to do something with (or to) player B, while player B might simultaneously attempt to move to player A's current location. As such, the output/results of the turn can differ significantly from the submitted plan. Whatever the results, they are mailed back to the player to be studied and used as the basis for the next turn (often along with a new blank turn card).

While billing is sometimes done using a flat per-game rate (when the length of the game is known and finite), games more typically use a per-turn cost schedule. In such cases, each turn submitted depletes a pool of credit which must periodically be replenished in order to keep playing. Some games have multiple fee schedules, where players can pay more to perform advanced actions, or to take a greater number of actions in a turn.

Some role playing PBM games also include an element whereby the player may describe actions of their characters in a free text form. The effect and effectiveness of the action is then based on the judgement of the GM who may allow or partially allow the action. This gives the player more flexibility beyond the normal fixed actions at the cost of more complexity and, usually, expense.

Play-by-Email

With the rise of the Internet, postal gaming and postal games zines have largely been replaced by e-mail and web-sites. Play by mail games differ from popular online multiplayer games in that, for most computerized multiplayer games, the players have to be online at the same time. With a play by mail game, the players can play whenever they choose, since responses need not be immediate; this is sometimes referred to as turn-based gaming and is common among browser-based games. Some computer games

can be played in a play by mail mode: one makes one's "move", mails a file to the opponent who uses it to make his or her "move" in response, and he or she then mails something back. Several non-commercial email games played on the Internet and BITNET predate these.

Play-by-web

An increasingly popular format for play-by-email games is play-by-web. As with play-by-email games the players are notified by email when it becomes their turn, but they must then return to the game's website to continue playing what is essentially a browser-based game. The main advantage of this is that the players can be presented with a graphical representation of the game and an interactive interface to guide them through their turn. Since the notifications only have to remind the players that it is their turn they can just as easily be sent via instant messaging.

Some sites have extended this gaming style by allowing the players to see each other's actions as they are made. This allows for real time playing while everyone is online and active, or slower progress if not.

What is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is a multilingual, Web-based, free-content encyclopedia project, written collaboratively by an international (and mostly anonymous) group of volunteers. Anyone with internet access can write and make changes to Wikipedia articles. There are no requirements to provide one's real name when contributing; rather, each writer's privacy is protected unless they choose to reveal their identity themselves. Since its creation in 2001, Wikipedia has grown rapidly into one of the largest reference web sites, attracting around 65 million visitors monthly as of 2009.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play-by-mail_game

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window with the address bar displaying http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play-by-mail_game. The page content includes the Wikipedia logo, navigation links, and the main article text. A notice at the top of the article states: "This article does not cite any references or sources. Please help improve this article by adding citations to reliable sources. Unsourced material may be challenged and removed." The article text defines play-by-mail games, mentions examples like chess and Diplomacy, and discusses the history of the hobby, including the role of Gaming Universal and Flagship magazine. A table of contents is visible on the left side of the article.

I'm Sorry, I've Found Someone Else

MORG discovers Aion, and leaved World of Warcraft ...

WHENEVER a new big MMO is announced, people start to talk about how it is going to kill WoW, how it will come in and take away all the subscribers. However, I think by now most people have realized that the strengths of World of Warcraft (WoW) those which allowed it to grow so large as an MMO, were the exact reasons nobody could ever steal away massive quantities of the subscription base. WoW has an entire culture built up around it, so many people invested in it, that attempting to just supplant them all at once and shovel them into a new culture, a new MMO that they have nothing invested in, is an impossibility. There is no doubt that games have chipped away at some previous subscribers of WoW, but most often the new MMO turns out to be highly niche-based rather than a new, all-encompassing world. Even with all these new MMO games coming into the market, Blizzard loves to point out that their subscription base continues to grow.

I have played WoW since its release. I have loved the game for years. Even before the release, during the WoW beta which I never got into, I would follow the forums daily. You could call me an early addict. My love for WoW started to wane about half way through the TBC expansion; Guild drama, real life, major game overhauls such as the raid numbers issue, and general burnout from playing the same game for three years. I started to shop around, looking for other MMOs to play: Age of Conan, Warhammer Online, Dungeons and Dragons Online, Lineage 2, Lord of the Rings Online, and many smaller production MMOs. None of them had sufficient grab to take me away from WoW.

Then along came Aion. I am not suggesting that Aion is a WoW killer, just that what I used to love about WoW feels so prevalent in Aion. I must admit that I originally thought nothing of the game. To me, Aion was just another MMO on some random website with pretty screenshots. Perhaps I have been spoiled by Blizzard in that regard, but the scarcity of anything existent on many game websites turns me off. One of my friends, on the other hand, became engrossed immediately and pushed me to research the game further. I started watching the class videos on AionOnline.com, and the graphics looked amazing in motion, not just the perfect screen shot capture. I later learned that it was actually being produced by NCsoft as their next big thing, rather than an MMO from some company I had never heard of, and that made me perk up. Addition: After writing this article I headed back to AionOnline and discovered that they have recently updated their website. It is now fleshed out and I suggest anyone who has not seen the updated site should check it

out.

After participating in the Aion beta, I have decided to give up WoW. There is not just one reason for my decision, nor can it all really be confined to a list such as this one. Everyone has their own opinions, but these are my major reasons for finally deciding to commit to a new MMO.

Combat

Aion uses a combo system where certain abilities are chained together and the player must decide whether they want to go for more damage, protection, or something else such as a debuff or a knock back. Age of Conan touched on this, but their combat system was based around getting off the same sequential attack in order for a devastating ending while trying to not get interrupted in the middle. Aion, on the other hand, gives the combo chain a couple branching options, giving the player both flexibility and a choice in how to use their cool downs. Aion's system is much more engrossing than WoW's. Obviously WoW is an older game and Aion's combo system is built on top of the same structure WoW uses, but the higher level of interactivity is a much needed plus. Hopefully Aion's dungeons and raids will really work to complement the game's combo system.

Niche Gaming

As I mentioned above, one of WoW's strengths over its competitors was how the game was all-encompassing. Recently, WoW feels like it is turning itself into a niche game. The only PvP that matters is 3v3 arena, the only PvE that matters is 25 man hard modes. WoW feels like it is trying to smash two different niche games into one. Aion, on the other hand, feels all-encompassing: it has the same draw that Vanilla WoW did. In Aion, PvP and PvE are not fighting each other, they just sort of flow together. While that is one of the great traits of an MMO in its youth, Aion looks as if the game was built around such a philosophy and will hold to that philosophy in the future.

PvP Combat

WoW's PvP system has degenerated to arenas. World PvP was too hard for Blizzard, so they got rid of it. Wintergrasp was too hard for Blizzard, so they got rid of it. Battlegrounds were too much fun for Blizzard (WSG and AV anyway), so they took all the fun out of those. Battlegrounds were originally a place for enjoyable PvP, but were then turned into just another part of the grind. Blizzard turning their PvP system into a quality e-sport has ruined large scale PvP battles. They did succeed at making an e-sport, to a



point. While anyone can watch an FPS tournament and know what is going on, watching a WoW tournament takes some serious knowledge about the game. It succeeded, but it still ruined WoW PvP.

On the other hand, Aion PvP is open world, large scale battles in the Abyss, a large PvP zone. There are not any forced arenas for progression (there is an arena players can mess around in), and players actually have room to maneuver. One of the worst things about WoW arenas is the lack of space. Aion does have a 'battleground', but it is a PvPvE battleground that revolves around achieving a PvE objective against the Balaur NPC race while preventing, or attempting to interrupt, the other side from doing the same thing. The PvPvE concept for balancing servers is a great draw as well.

Turnover

You make a good profit in a restaurant by getting people in, fed, happy, and out. Turning over the tables so you can get people who are finished eating out, and fresh customers in. WoW takes this turnover concept and applies it to game content. Raids turn over every few months, arena seasons turn over every few months, players are supposed to be happy with the continual churning.

Unfortunately, it is very mechanical and rather rapid as well. Before the majority of the interested player base can finish collecting their arena set, a new one has come out. Before the majority of the interested player base can complete a raid, a new one has come out. The raid thing did not happen for Naxx, but it does for Ulduar. With all the turnover, you end up with a system where time invested does not feel worthwhile.

WoW is an old game trying to put out enough content to satisfy customers. This type of practice is not a bad thing on their part, it just is not that enjoyable to play in. Aion on the other hand is a new game. They are in their first incarnation, not their second expansion, and they do not feel like a giant machine copy-pasting content. WoW feels incredibly rushed and un-Blizzard like these days.

The New Kid

Aion is a new game for me, and that sensation, of exploring a new richly crafted world, is wonderful. Taking the boat or zeppelin to Northrend felt this way, but the feeling disappeared shortly after. With Aion, because it is a new game, the sensation just sticks with you. There is no way to

fault WoW for this, but it is one of the reasons I am leaving the game. Aion is deep enough that I want to explore it. I want to see where it takes me. Most games cannot accomplish the feat of making the player want to see what is coming next. The same can be said regarding graphics and atmosphere. Aion's graphics are top notch, and with them the game paints some amazing locations. It isn't really Blizzard's fault, and honestly many WoW zones are still beautiful. Stranglethorn Vale and Winterspring come to mind when I think on the most beautiful locations in WoW. The amazing graphics of Aion will eventually wear off, but the landscapes will still be just as picturesque.

Moving On

And those are my five reasons. I did not list raiding as a reason because I have not gotten to experience any of it in Aion. WoW is still a good game for hard core raiding, from what I have seen, anyway, but I have not been able to muster the dedication. As it says in reason number four, the way Blizzard appears to manufacture content these days has destroyed any drive for me to experience the raiding that they have to offer. I do enjoy raiding, but it requires more pre-planned time than I am willing to set aside.

The way I see it, one of the hardest things for any WoW player to leave behind are the other people they have met while playing. There is a not so hidden obligation that you have to be there. You have to show up, or else you will let everyone down.

WoW has remained so large because of its community, but it feels more and more fractured as time goes on.

Blizzard is in the process of tearing down one of the last walls of inherent community with their new faction change. At one point in WoW's history, you could feel a part of something. You were Horde or Alliance. You were in this guild or that guild. You were on this server and not that server and we do it better over here! All of the ties that made a player feel as if they were a part of something have been removed, and all that is left are the relationships players have made with each other. A guild is not even a great source of community anymore. So many of them collapse then regroup, only to fall apart again. As a player's community grows smaller, they disappoint fewer people when they leave, or they can even bring all of their closest friends over to a new game with them.

<http://na.aiononline.com/>



Plough the Fields & Scatter

Facebook Games: Farmville

COLIN FORBES continues his series looking at the games available on Facebook ...

EVER FANCIED owning a farm with white picket fences, a big red barn and a lovely farmhouse? If so, then **Farmville** could be for you. To summarise, Farmville is a *Facebook* game application that plays within your web browser. You can grow, harvest and sell your crops (both arable and arboreal) as well as raising livestock. The income generated can be used to upgrade your farm, by buying an ever-increasing range of new seeds, trees, livestock, buildings and decorations.

Getting started

Farmville is one of several Facebook browser farm games, in this case from a large stable of games by designers, *Zynga*: whose other games include the widely admired **Mafia Wars**. It is free to play.

When you start Farmville for the first time you will create a male or female farmer: you can set things such as hair skin and facial features at this stage. I have to say that I would have liked a few more options for my avatar here, as the choices are rather limited at present. I'd love a battered straw hat so I can be Old MacDonald! It's possible to change your farmer's appearance as often as you want by simply clicking on him or her within the game.

Once your character has been 'born' you will have a few plots of land that you can work on. It may not seem much, but believe me, it's breaking you in gently! Farmville is both a single player and a multiplayer game in that it works ok solo, but is much better if you play and interact with your Facebook friends. This makes it much more fun and enables a number of features which make it easier to advance in the game. Don't worry about not having a whole pile of Facebook friends ... there are groups you can join to meet and befriend other Farmville players.

Ploughing your first furrow

Your new farm has several beginner plots of land that you can work on. Use the green hoe tool at the bottom of your screen to plow land you wish to grow crops on. To grow crops you need to buy seeds at the market: note that

you can only buy seeds that match your current level. New seeds are released from time to time, in addition to special seeds which may be available for a short period only: for instance, at the moment one can buy the right to plant Sweet Potatoes by making a small donation to a charity. Each seed type will tell you how long it takes to grow, with some crops ready in a few hours and others ready in a few days. Once you buy seeds you simply place your cursor over the plot of land you wish to grow the crop on and your seeds will automatically plant there for you. If you want to try different seeds, repeat the process on a new plot of land. You can continue to add plots of land until you run out of coins.

Reaping what you sow

Once your crops are grown you should harvest them as soon as they are ready, because they will wither if you let them sit for too long and you won't get any money. For example, if you plant a crop that is ready in one day, after two days the crop will die if you don't pick it. If you want to change your land, use the red shovel icon to remove plots that have already been plowed. The magnifying glass will allow you to zoom in and out of your farm and there is a full-screen toggle next to it to view your game in that mode if you want.

Plowing the land, growing crops and then harvesting them is very easy in this game. You may want to use some type of organization for your crops once you have dozens of fields so you can harvest them more easily.

Money really does grow on trees!

At the top of the screen you will see how many coins you have. You can gain more coins by harvesting your crops and once you do that the coins will automatically deposit into your account. You can also win some coins in a lottery that takes place each day (you are entered into it automatically). You can purchase coins with real money if you want and pay by credit card or *PayPal*. To do this, click the 'get more farm coins' text at the top of your game screen to

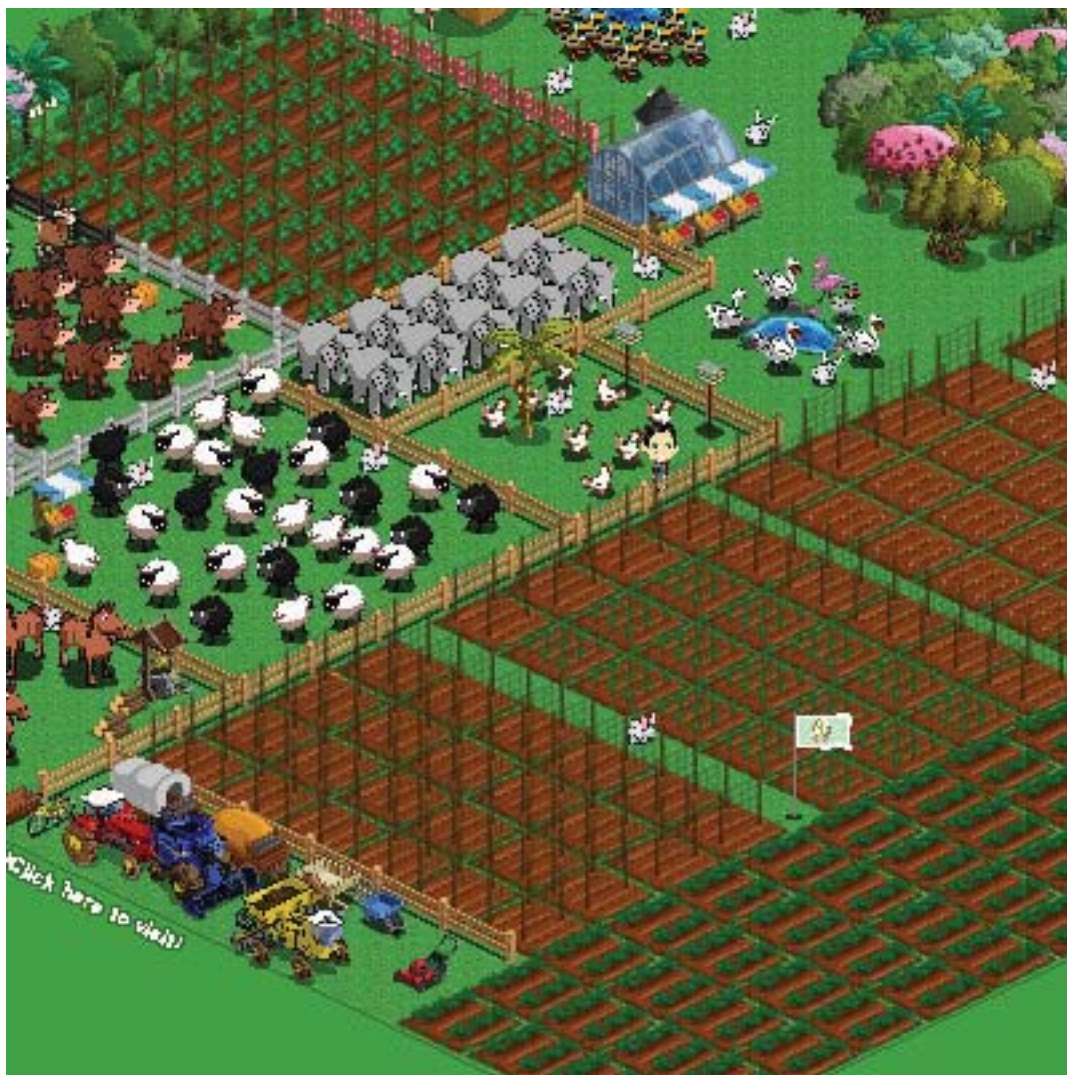


The local Farmers' Market

The market is where you can buy seeds and items to upgrade your farm. You only have access to items at your current level but new items such as different crop types will unlock as you progress through the game. You will need Farmville friends to gain access to many of the higher end options like buildings, elaborate decorations, and larger farms.

At the market you can also buy animals (currently cows, chickens and sheep) which you can harvest for goods once they are ready. The many other types of animal are only available as gifts from friends (ducks, goats, pigs, horses, rabbits) or as random events (different colour cows, black sheep and ugly ducklings). Some of these are only available for a limited time. There are many decorative items such as hay bales, carts, buildings, fences, and trees that you can purchase for your

farm - or receive as gifts from friends. As you gain levels you will also receive some of these items for free.



purchase coins. You can also complete advertiser offers for more coins for your account which you will find under the credit card and PayPal options.

There is also something called 'Farmville cash'. This accumulates slowly as you gain levels, and may be used to purchase decorations and non-essential fluff for your farm, such as a flag to show where you are from.

Neighbours, everybody needs good Neighbours

At the bottom of your screen you will find several 'add neighbor' icons. You want to fill as many of these as possible - eventually! Initially set yourself a target of ten. Once achieved this will mean you will be able to buy the first Farm expansion - ie make the farm bigger. Once your friends accept your invitation, they will join your Farmville community and may be visited by your avatar.

Not only is farm visiting fun in itself (see what your friends are doing on their farm) but it brings advantages. During some of your visits your avatar may complete a simple quest like removing weeds from your friend's farm, or chasing off crows. You will gain a small amount of experience and gold. Additionally there are ribbons to be won by visiting friends, and many other ribbons which may well provoke a certain competitive streak in you as you compare your Farmville achievements with those of your friends. Having Farmville friends will also allow you to build a larger farm and exchange free gifts that can be used to decorate your farm. You can leave a message directly on your friend's farm by using the message icon located next to your farm's name.

Game Play

Despite the simplicity of the game, Farmville is actually a great deal of fun to play. I have tried a number of Facebook games over the past year, and thus far this is one of the few I have stuck at for more than a month or so.

Farmville is perfect for the casual gamer who doesn't have much time in a busy day to do much gaming. It is very easy to learn and is even a game that a smaller child could play along with a parent. The graphics in the game are fine and do the job adequately. There is a soundtrack but it is the same tune played over and over again which you may (will!) tire of quite quickly, so be aware of the mute button. The animal noises are entertaining for a while, but grow annoying after time - though perhaps not for a child.

I have spoken (well, typed) at some length with a couple of parents whose children have a small Farmville farm, and with a teacher who recommends it to her primary children as a harmless internet exercise that is at the same time fun and educational. One mother sets aside 20 minutes each day to spend time with her young one, learning about milk coming from cows, apples from trees etc. I just hope they haven't rescued any lost brown cows - as these give chocolate milk! Oh and ugly ducklings obviously turn into swans!

You can take a photo of your game with the photo option and send it to a friend so they can see your progress. To get the most out of the game you should try to find

as many friends as possible to join and be your neighbors in the game, it just makes the game play better for everyone and you can compete to see who can build the best farm. The ribbon system gives you something to strive for when deciding what to build on your farm, as does the new Crop Mastery system.

Farming Future

Officially, Farmville is in beta testing. This does not mean that there are bugs, in fact I haven't come across any glitches except the occasional connection problem and a tendency for the game to yell at me to slow down sometimes: go click-mad and it will need to re-load to get back in synch.

At regular intervals, usually every week at the time of writing, some new addition or tweak is made to the game. Recent innovations have included a limited edition gift (Baby Elephants which produce Circus Peanuts), limited edition crops, the addition of a combine harvester to speed up harvesting and the Crop Mastery system. I am not sure what effect this latter will have on gameplay, as it is so new that I have yet to advance a level in any of the crops!

Most intriguing of all, is the statement in the game manual to the effect that 'buildings in the future may have game effects on the farm.' At present they only award experience when bought. Maybe in the future grain silos will impact on grain production, fruit stalls will increase fruit prices and barns will improve pig rearing ... oooh, the possibilities!



Reflections in the Farm Pond

Farmville is an easy game to play that is fun for all ages. Don't expect deep and complex strategy, but do expect to pass a happy half hour over a cup of coffee or during a lunch break. To get the most out of the game invite your Facebook friends to be a part of your Farmville community - or join one of the Farmville fan groups. Grow some crops, raise some animals and plant some trees as you compete to see who can become the ultimate Facebook farmer.

Disclaimer

No animals were harmed during the writing of this review. In fact, no animals are ever harmed in Farmville! Pigs give you truffles, horses give horsehair and rabbits give angora wool. Wheat, on the other hand, is mercilessly slaughtered as soon as it's tall and golden!

Tips For Beginners

Plowing the land uses up game coins, so watch how much you plant: you want enough cash left over for your seeds.

Some crops grow very quickly and will die if you can't harvest them on time. Pick longer growing crops if you're going to be away from your computer for days at a time.

Visiting your friends' farms and completing the occasional quest there will help you gain experience.

Make use of the gift system and send items with your new friends who might not have much on their farm yet.

Trees will continue to grow fruit after harvesting; you don't have to buy a new one. Similarly, animals return few coins, but cost nothing to upkeep. Neither trees nor animals wither and die over time.

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Introducing Miniature Wargames

DEV SODAGAR looks at the leading systems in the first of a new series ...

THIS WILL BE the first in a series of articles looking at what systems and miniature ranges are out there. In terms of limits of my search I will only look at systems that either come with unpainted miniatures made for the player to paint or are clearly designed for this style of miniatures. If people would later like me to go on to explore the Collectable Miniature and Pre-painted Miniature systems out there, let me know and I shall do my best. The articles are also likely to focus on the non-historic side as this reflects my own interests, again if people would like me to go down other paths let me know.

In this first article I will be looking at what I describe as the Miniature Wargaming 'Big Three'. These are Games Workshop, Privateer Press and Battlefront. I have chosen these because for people new to the hobby, these are the most readily available systems both in terms of stockists and people to play against. I will focus on the systems currently available from each of these companies, but I may also refer to games that are no longer available: in these instances I will make it clear that they are now OOP.

Games Workshop

By far the biggest of the miniature wargaming companies, they have hundreds of dedicated stores worldwide and can be found in most other gaming retailers. Their domination of the market has led to them branching out into board-games, RPGs and even video games with the likes of the Dawn of War franchise. In the world of Wargaming their main systems are Warhammer (currently in its 7th Edition) and Warhammer 40,000 (5th Edition). Other systems that they currently support include Lord of the Rings and its massed combat variant War of the Rings. They also have a range of games that were once well supported but are now relegated to the realms of their 'Specialist Games' market.

Games Workshop are known for their high prices and although it is true that they are not cheap, their starter boxes are mostly reasonably priced and the boxed games in particular are very reasonable. Games Workshop does price according to the rarity of a troop so if you are only going to have one in a large army, it will be a lot more expensive than something you will have a lot of (even if there is no more plastic or detail in the model). This policy, com-

bined with the fact that the average trooper will cost as much for a plastic version as it will for a metal equivalent by many other companies (about £1 for a standard 28mm figure is my rule of thumb, £5 for a fancy 28mm figure), and Games Workshop's determined efforts to keep non-Games Workshop miniatures out of their tournaments has left many wargamers less and less happy with the company. All these points are valid; however, for my money I consider Games Workshop to be the cheapest of the big three (in the UK at any rate) and they are doing what any company of their size should to maximise profits, which is after all the reason for a company's existence. This leads me on to two very important points about purchasing: if you want a style of figure, there is almost always more than one company offering it. Look around, use ebay or online stores if they offer a discount (many Games Workshop stockists online offer discounts of up to 40% as standard). Basic starter sets contain two armies of about 500pts each; however, most games you see (particularly in tournaments) are 1500 – 2000pts so there is an obvious need to get more figures to 'play properly'.

Warhammer

More properly known as Warhammer: Fantasy Battles, this is unsurprisingly a fantasy game with different races battling for control of the Warhammer World. The setting is highly developed with each race having its own history and homeland: the world has been explored in greater depths by the various editions of Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay.

The starting box set, titled The Battle for Skull Pass, contains a large collection of dwarves and goblins along with the complete rules and almost everything you need to get started (you will need clippers, glue and paints for the miniatures). The set even comes with a few pieces of basic scenery. The game uses d6 for determining all the randomised factors in the game (some of the d6 have special sides – artillery and scatter) all included, with a standard matched fight needing a 4+ to succeed. An example would be if you are striking an enemy with toughness 4 and you have strength 4 you need a 4+, if however your weapon adds +1 to your strength (making it 5 total) then you need only a 3+ to succeed. Once you hit, you try to wound and then if the enemy has a save they can attempt it... This results in a lot of dice rolls. Further confusing matters is the issue of this being a massed combat game with units often as high as 20 or 30 men in strength, you will roll for units together (assuming they all have the same stats) so you may roll 30 dice if firing a large unit of archers or gunners... that is a lot of dice. I often find it is best to do this in a dice tower or face having your army decimated by giant tumbling dice.

Warhammer 40,000, Games Workshop's main Sci-fi game, 40k (as it is known by many of us) is set in the 41st millennium with a very comprehensive universe into

Dev Sodagar at a glance ..

I discovered miniature wargaming some 15 years ago when I was seven. As with most of my generation I entered the hobby through the juggernaut that is Games Workshop. Like many gamers, I discovered girls and dropped the hobby. I have returned about five years ago and have looked into increasingly diverse and often obscure companies and manufacturers ever since.

which the game is set (this is one of Games Workshop's real strengths as a company).

Mankind have an empire stretching across the galaxy that is in slow decline under the gaze of an emperor who is in stasis after receiving a fatal wound. Most of the mechanics are near enough identical to Warhammer with few enough variations that a player can easily pick up both games in the space of a single afternoon.

The starter box, called Assault on Black Reach is very similar to the Battle for Skull Pass set, containing about 500pts each of Orks and Space Marines (heavily armoured humans); unfortunately this set contains no scenery, although the figures are arguably slightly higher quality in their sculpts. The set once again contains what you need to get off the ground, but as with all Games Workshop's starter sets, there is a distinct push to get you to pick up more. Games Workshop have also developed a set of rules designed to cater to even bigger 40k armies of 3000pts+ called Apocalypse. These rules include bigger tanks, some airships and even a range of titans (mechanical bipeds several storeys high). Over the last few years the popularity of 40k has really taken off with the birth of Dark Heresy (the RPG for the setting) and several video games: this seems to have had the effect of making the base game more popular as well with more people playing it than its Fantasy brother.

Lord of the Rings (and War of the Rings)

Games Workshop has definitely struggled with this game. They paid a huge sum for the license around the time that the films were being released. However, shortly after the films had been and gone, it seems the interest in this game went the same way. Since then Games Workshop have struggled to make ends meet with this game. It was a total departure from their previous games with figures being accurately proportioned (rather than the oversized hands and faces you tend to see in 28mm figures), making models even more delicate than usual and to a painter of my skill, next to impossible to paint to a decent standard. The game itself also has subtly different rules to the Games Workshop standard with each turn order being resolved separately and heroes being 'very' heroic, by which I mean that, as in the films, it is not unfeasible to pitch a horde of goblins against Aragorn or even Frodo (so long as it is not too big a horde!). The cost of heroes is correspondingly higher than a standard figure to represent this increased power and ability. This makes it ideal for pitting the fellowship against the hordes of Moria or the Nazgul against the stalwart defenders of Osgiliath. Unfortunately, one of the differences from the Games Workshop MO is not the use of fewer modifiers, which has always been what slows games down the most as players check the benefits of halberds over swords and if a spear gives +1 to hit or to damage etc etc.

Privateer Press

This American company produce a range of miniatures including two main systems Warmachine and Hordes as well as Iron Kingdoms, Monsterpocalypse and the new Grind. As well as these games Privateer Press have an excellent paint range called P3 and a creative card game called Infernal Contraption which is a very fun two-player game in which you compete to create a machine from a scrap parts pile. Monsterpocalypse is a Collectable Miniatures Game

(in the same vein as those released by Wizkids under Wizards of the Coast). I won't cover this game as it comes with pre-painted miniatures, but is an excellent game worth trying out. Iron Kingdoms is an RPG that is set in a world of the same name. This is the same world that Hordes and Warmachine occur in, a dichotomy of steam power and feral forces.

Warmachine is a skirmish based miniatures game that focuses on the more technological aspect of Iron Kingdoms; it sees warriors called warcasters pit themselves and their mechanical 'warjacks' against each other in a struggle for power. Hordes is another skirmish game but reflects the more primal aspects of the Iron Kingdoms, where warlocks lead their creatures and followers into combat. Despite the differing names and the apparent very different styles, these two games are effectively the same and provide an entirely interchangeable game that allows you to pit beasts against warjacks. The systems are still in their first version of the rules. However, Privateer Press has been testing a 2nd edition for release in the coming 18 months. The games use d6 for everything in the game similar to Games Workshop systems, however the game design with activation allocation and fewer dice rolls facilitate a much faster game play style. Despite this, the games also go into greater depths in many ways with hits getting allocated to different body parts which reflect characters' continuing combat ability. This can slow the game a little in the later stages, but with relatively few figures on the table on each side, it is not a big issue and with some thought, the characters' stat cards and some board markers can really help track things. The other real advantage of these two systems is that the rules and some demo cards can be found on the Privateer Press website for free, giving you everything you need to try the rules and play a few basic games.

All this does come at a price however, and a steep one, especially for those of us in the UK. As this is a skirmish level game, the figures are about 32mm and very highly detailed, but will set you back about £3-£4 for a standard figure and as much as £30 for some of the bigger 'heavy' warjacks. The starter boxes of three-four figures will also set you back about £30. This is heavy going with a working army setting you back around £100 for just a handful of figures. On top of this, despite a very nice sculpt, some of the figures (especially the bigger pieces) will need a lot of filling with putty to cover gaps in them when assembled. If you have the money or don't feel that it is that expensive, this game is a must: try it anyway (it is free to try after all) and then make your decision. As with Games Workshop, it is possible to find substantial discounts on the RRP by searching online stores and ebay. The games are heavily driven to tournament play in a similar vein to the CCGs, which means that many of the figures in your army will be characters. The games do see power creep as expansions are released. If you like to have an army that is themed and accurate to the game setting, you will be losing a lot of games. This is a game that likes power plays and combinations.

It is also worth mentioning Grind: although not yet released there are rules on the Privateer Press forums and information about the game itself. This is similar to Games Workshop's Blood Bowl game, a violent ball game. The box set will come with a load of modular plastic Warjacks (a departure from the metals Privateer Press has previously used). It is also rumoured that the parts won't be on

sprues, dramatically reducing the time it takes to prepare them for the table top.

Battlefront

A relative newcomer from New Zealand, this company only has one game system at the moment, a WW2 15mm scale wargame called *Flames of War*. The company has achieved huge success in a short time with their latest achievement being the purchase and relaunch of *Wargames Illustrated*, one of the biggest wargaming magazines on the market. The best value for money of the big three, due partly to the smaller scale but also to a better price point. An infantry platoon can be purchased for £12 and a tank platoon would set you back £20-30. Being a smaller scale the sculpts are correspondingly less detailed; however, the tanks are very sharply sculpted and look superb. The rulebook is excellently laid out, starting with a brief history of the war, some information on how armies are organised and a lot of excellent contemporary photos. There is also a good painting section, guide to getting started with an army, rules for aircraft, night-fighting, recon & street-fighting, scenarios both historic and abstract, a guide to campaigns and a quick reference sheet (albeit a rather text-heavy one)

To represent the changing circumstances throughout the course of the war, the game divides it into three periods, early, middle and late wars, with separate intelligence handbooks (army lists) for each. The game is still relatively young, being still in its first edition and with much still to release; it is however hard to see the game incorporating power creep as it endeavours to be historically accurate. The different periods do employ different troops to reflect evolving technology and so any late war army would have an advantage over an early war force, but that is not the point of the game. Players are more likely to purchase three armies so they can play in the three different eras or simply get a large range of figures to enable play in many different scenarios throughout the course of the war.

The game is very similar in mechanics to the Games Workshop formula: roll to hit on 1d6, (no roll to wound), then armour save on 2d6. After this there is a fire power check which determines how a vehicle responds to the damage (does it blow or do the crew bail). Bailing is a more crippling form of pinning where the crew have jumped out in case the tank is gonna blow and wait before getting back

in. Morale too is very similar, however to represent the aspect that real people aren't that keen on getting blown up there are also motivation checks in some situations that determine if figures will act. Another thing to note is the emphasis on terrain that this game has. Roads do not go through fields, and tanks quickly turn fields to mud. This means that it is easy for both troops and vehicles to get bogged down and the rules reflect all this. There is even a set of random terrain tables for different conflict areas.

Honourable Mention: Rackham

There is one other company that had a reasonable market presence in the UK gaming scene and that is Rackham. Recently Rackham has switched format, from the traditional metal figures that you paint yourself to pre-painted plastics. On top of this their UK distribution started being handled by Fantasy Flight Games who have recently also acquired the significantly more profitable Games Workshop non miniature lines. As a result of this conflict and the unpopular pre-painted figures, Rackham's lines have seen a significant decline. The systems are AT-43 (Sci-fi setting) and Confrontation (Fantasy). All of this has effectively killed off what was once a pair of very good and well developed games. There is still a lot of product being released in Rackham's native market of France and some in the US so that the game continues an underground following here in the UK. More than anything this demonstrates the precarious nature of the wargaming industry, showing even industry leaders can quickly falter and fail through nothing more than a couple of poor choices.

These are my opinions of what these companies have to offer: none of these games are unplayable and so it comes down to what kind of game you are looking for. If you are after tournament play, then Warmachine and Hordes are the way to go (although I'd advise waiting the 18 months for the release of second edition). If you want historical or are on a tight budget then I'd suggest *Flames of War*. If you want to find lots of players, a truly immersive world, a dedicated shop around the corner then the Games Workshop systems are the best solution. Whatever you choose, painting and wargaming are both excellent hobbies that are well worth taking up. If you are intrigued by this article, try out the starter set of whatever system most interests you and get gaming!



Subtlety & Silence

Creating Sound Effects for Games

ROB BRIDGETT considers an oft-neglected side of gaming ...

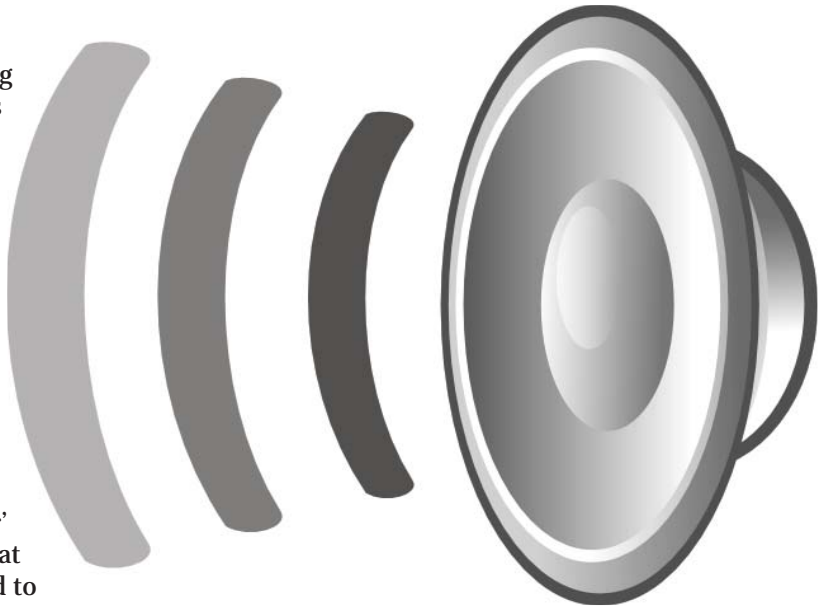
THE UNFORTUNATE thing about current thinking in game-audio, with all its allusions and aspirations to film-sound, is that it seems to have consistently neglected one essential element - that of subtlety. The dynamic peaks and troughs of film sound have such power in drawing in an audience that the impact of loud, spectacular sequences in a film are dramatically magnified by preceding silence.

Perhaps the problem does not lie with the actual thinking behind game-audio, which is on the whole ambitious and creative, but rather with the practice of producers and developers forcing audio to be as loud as possible at all times. How many times have phrases like 'more bangs per buck', 'beef-it-up', 'more, louder, faster, harder' been heard at audio meetings? It is these notions that reflect a trend in evidence since arcade machines had to audibly play for gamers' attention next to one another in crammed arcades, a trend that literally aims to overwhelm the senses, the unfortunate results of which today have the effect of flattening the entire game sound track to a constant normalised level. Unfortunately this direction shows no signs of abating, and allows for none of the dynamism evident in film sound.

Well-placed silence and subtlety will allow the parts of the game that need to be larger-than-life to be more powerful due to their contrast next to these areas of silence. Also, the ability to wander around a virtual environment in the sections of a game where not much is happening and to simply listen to the subtle environmental sounds is extremely enjoyable and engaging. A few games have achieved this; Sony's **Ico** maintains superb subtlety throughout, even in the combat sequences, sound and music are never over the top or too 'in-your-face' and one is never tempted to reach for the volume control.

Again, in terms of purely subtle sound design, **Final Fantasy X** offers a stunning example of low-key sound effects. The visual magic effects are quite frenetic, yet rather than go in for overkill in underscoring these visual effects with a pyrotechnic equivalent, the player enjoys subtle whooshes and beautifully enveloped explosions. Clearly producers, sound designers and musicians need to see the entire game as a whole, and need to be aware of this macro-structure at whatever stage is being produced.

The maximisation and over-compression of sounds and music is another area that represents a move towards the elimination of any headroom for subtlety and dynamism. If we were to compare generally how the waveforms from a film soundtrack and a game soundtrack look, the visual difference is striking. Of course games are not films, we are dealing with a medium in its own right, which should be allowed to develop in new directions uncharted by cinema. Just as cinema moved away from theatre and opera, so interactive entertainment must find its own aesthetic path. But that is not to say that the influence of



film is not present, and being felt more and more each day. There still remains a dramatic difference between these two media in terms of sound, one only has to compare the rich subtle and yet brutal dynamics of the cut scenes in **WarCraft III** to the same game's flat-lined in-game effects to realise how far there is to go.

Cleverly constructed montage of silence potentially has more dramatic effect than the biggest and loudest sounds. The structuring of how silence works in conjunction with sound is similar in a way to the film editing practices espoused by Eisenstein nearly a hundred years ago: in that expressive power is only gained when these elements are edited together and deliberately played against one another. These techniques can be clearly seen in the horror genre of films, in what one could call the oldest trick in the book, where a lone teenager creeps through a creaky house, the high pitched strings build and build and - phew it was only a cat - then, in that moment where the audience is catching their breath with relief, *that* is when the enemy strikes. It is this playing with silence and tension, building and releasing that helped define the horror genre in the 1980s.

One of the most under quoted uses of silence is in TV advertising: whenever a commercial comes on that uses complete silence, the contrast with the rest of the over-compressed sound output is intense (ever noticed that TV commercials are generally a lot louder than the programmes?). Invariably an audience will stop what they are doing, and stop their conversations when a silent commercial comes on, and all their attention is given to the TV. Perhaps it's because we think that there is something wrong with the set, the fact it has gone silent, but the psychology behind this has been fully exploited by only the most daring ad agencies. And although interactive entertainment is championed as distinctly 'non-linear' there is still a great deal of opportunity to design and play with these kinds of tensions.

Crates & Monkeys

Monkey Dash: Two-player boardgame

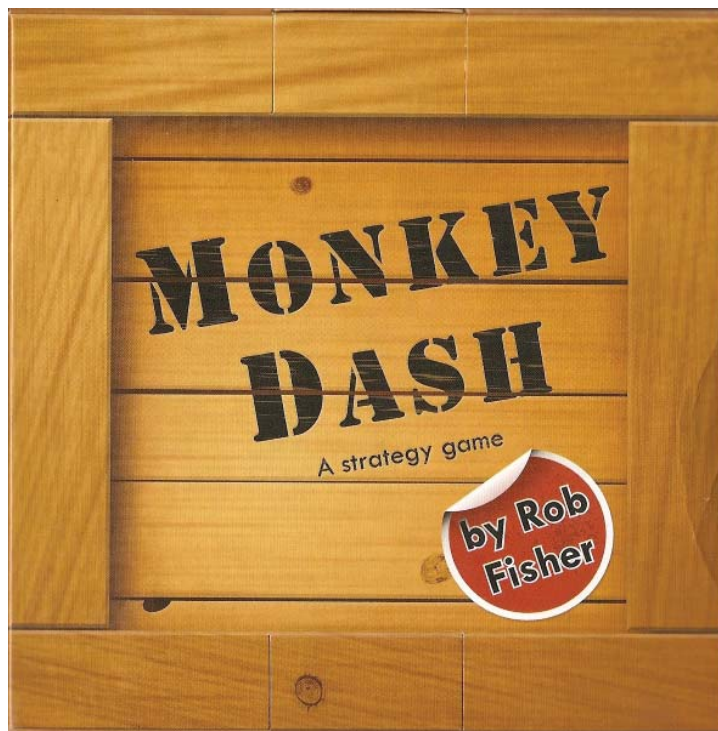
ERIC RIDLEY tries playing in a warehouse ...

PRESENTATION can get you a long way in this world. Just ask my fiancée, good looking and well dressed, but hiding a vapid nature and a mean streak a mile wide. So it seems like *Rob Fisher* has managed to hit a six with his game **Monkey Dash**. The box is immediately striking as it is an odd shape and is beautifully designed. It resembles a shipping crate and has a banana stencilled on the top of it. Most intriguing. You can't help to at least want to pick it up and look at the back.

The game sees you as a supervisor in a banana warehouse. Unfortunately your boss is coming round soon to pay you a visit and he hates monkeys. This would usually be his own business and nothing to do with you, except that today you have monkeys all over the banana building. It seems like a backward idea to have a fruit's main predator as a pet in your building that packs said fruit, but that's how this game rolls. Regardless of whose simian views seem reasonable in this politically correct world, the bottom line is that you have you get the monkey out of the warehouse before your boss comes or you are fired.

As a board game for two players, *Monkey Dash* comes with a board, a small deck of cards, six wooden crates, two monkeys, two supervisors and 6 bananas. All the components are nicely produced. The board is colourful (if green), the cards are decent and the pieces are custom and attractive. The whole lot is packaged in the aforementioned crate-shaped box and nestled within a clump of wooden shavings to make the whole thing seem even more authentic. As games go, this one is really very appealing to look at and hold. The only slight downside is that Mr Fisher has obviously made some mistakes with the instruction booklet as some examples in there have a different picture glued on top of the original (presumably after some type of mix up), but it is more or less inconsequential.

Each turn players get four action points to spend to move either their supervisor or their monkey around the board. The goal of the game is to be the first player to get the monkey from his nest where he starts the game, to the loading dock where he can be ejected from the warehouse. So not only are you a sycophant who hopes endlessly to please his own superiors but also have contravened several safety and hygiene laws by allowing monkeys in the work place. Then, to top it off, you raise the ire of the RSPCA by locking aforementioned monkeys out of the building and setting them loose in an urban environment. Although lamentable, these concerns are surely issues that need to be addressed in any further expansions, not this game. So how can you rid your workplace of your primate friend? Monkeys can only walk on top of crates (the wooden blocks in the game), because they dislike the cold temperature of the floor. Thus you must have your supervisor move round the room manoeuvring crates into position so your monkey can travel from one side of the room to the other and exit the building. Supervisors move orthogonally and



can shift crates around them. Line up a bunch of crates and your monkey can do the 'Monkey dash' across the crates.

The game plays pretty quickly, there is really not much downtime between turns at all. Most of the time you will spend your turn moving boxes into positions so that your monkey can move closer to the exit. Your opponent will often try to scupper you by moving said crates further away. The deck of cards that comes with the game gives players different actions and special moves they can use once. These can be very useful at the correct time, and sometimes swing the game for you. The downside to this game is that you can run into a stalemate very quickly. If your opponents spy that you are going to win, often they will just keep moving the crates that you need further away. When both players have the same amount of action points to use then this leads to deadlock. While the game is brilliantly presented, the fact that often plays can become quite dull takes the shine off the game. It is not necessarily a fault of pedantic players not allowing their opponents to win, but rather a design flaw that allows this to happen in the first place.

The game can be fun and the presentation certainly helps. But often the game deteriorates into move and counter move. I would like to love this game, but can't. I see what the designer was trying to do. And it very nearly works. It just falls a little short. Too short to be a recommended buy from me.

Facts:

2 players, £16, Rob Fisher, 25 mins per play.

Thinking Virtually

21st Century Roleplaying

SHANNON APPELCLINE continues with an introduction to modern RPG...

I'M NOT sure any more when exactly I got my first roleplaying game. I was in grade school or Jr. High--I'm pretty sure about that--and I know that it was a gift from my father. It probably won't surprise you much that the game was *Dungeons & Dragons*. My dad had given me the basic book--the old one, with the three holes drilled down the left side, and the really cheesy full-cover art.

My father really didn't know what he was in for. I'd been asking him for the game since Christmas, and so he finally gave in. On my birthday it appeared in a neat package. I'm sure I said "I bet it's a record" when I shook the flimsy, wrapped book. An old joke. (I don't think my father ever bought me a record.)

The book was wonderful, full of neat drawings and exciting ideas. But, I didn't know *what* to do with it. I didn't have anyone to play *Dungeons & Dragons* with.

The rules were over my head. And so my father--my wonderful father--took the rules he'd bought me in hand and began to carefully read through them.

Did I mention that my father doesn't enjoy games? That he isn't a big fan of fantasy? Both true statements. Nonetheless, he learned the rules for D&D--most of them anyway. He pulled out some of the graph paper that he usually used to draw circuit diagrams and mapped out a simple dungeon and populated it. And then he ran my first D&D game--my first roleplaying game.

The only thing I remember vividly was entering a room full of jagged rocks and stained bones. I stepped into the chamber, and the bones began to move together, forming into skeletons that menaced me with sharp and deadly swords. I tried to stab them with my own sword, but to no avail. (My dad had never quite made it through the combat system.) Things seemed bleak.

But then I was struck with ten-year-old inspiration. (Or eight-year-old or twelve.) I picked one up of the stones that littered the room and threw it at a skeleton. The creature shattered, no combat system needed. A few stones' throw more, and the ground was once more carpeted with bones,

and silence descended on the dungeon.

I wish I had the graph paper that my father drew that first dungeon map on. It was one of the coolest things that he's ever done. I should tell him that some time.

The Other Shoe Drops

My father never ran another D&D adventure for me, but that was fine because he'd given me the spark that I needed to get my own creative engine going. In the next couple of years I found a handful of friends who enjoyed playing roleplaying game too. *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Champions*, *Stormbringer*, *Traveller*, and *RuneQuest* stand out as a few of the games I played during those formative times.

But, much to my surprise, my dad's involvement with gaming didn't totally end--this was still one more first to come. My dad bought a computer while I was still young--shortly after that first D&D game I think, but I

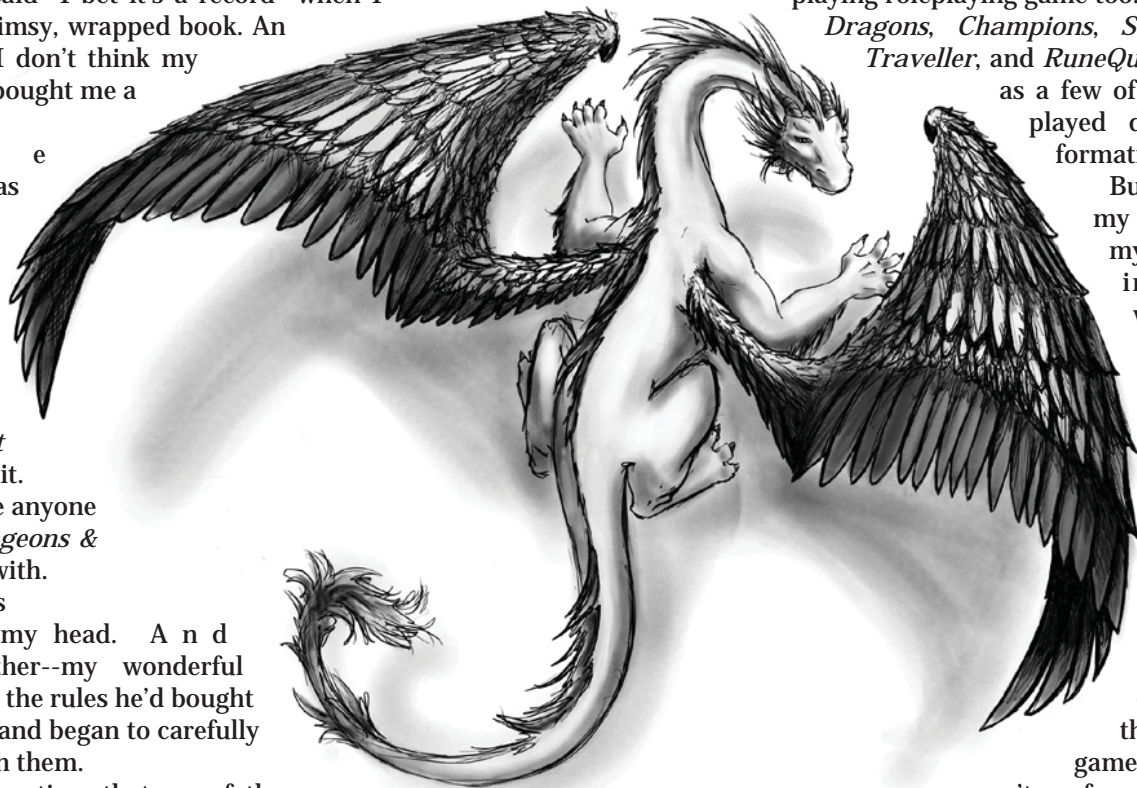
can't say for sure. It was an h89, an ancient monstrosity that came with a 100k floppy drive, 48k of RAM, and a green CRT monitor.

It was wonderful.

And not long after he bought the computer he bought a game. *Adventure*. The earliest of the puzzle-solving prose games. My first computer game. A few years later, at my specific request, he upgraded his computer to 64k of RAM so that it would run a new game that I was asking for. The first computer version of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

It was a primitive game. You explored a largely random dungeon that was displayed in text characters. You fought monsters, cleverly represented as letters of the alphabet, and won treasures.

The computer games of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Adventure* were both a lot of fun. They were experiences that were wholly satisfactory in and of themselves ... but they were also very different from their close kin, the tabletop roleplaying game that my father had purchased



just a year or two before. And that is where I plan to start next week, when I really get this column rolling. I want to discuss the differences between tabletop roleplaying games and online roleplaying games and how each may offer very different and unique experiences.

The Best of the Best: An Aside

Before I finish up, let me take a moment to talk about this column: its purpose, its hopes, its aspirations, all that good stuff. As you've no doubt noted, it's called "Thinking Virtually", and that's because I want to talk about the design of interactive virtual worlds. Which is to say online games.

Hold on! Don't click that back button!

I want to talk about online game design, but it's a discussion that I hope will interest many of the readers of rpg.net. Much of my focus is going to be on telling stories, and that has application to each and every game master out there. Some articles will be oriented toward online-specific game design issues, but I hope that those will interest many of you as well. Because, this column won't discuss just *any* online games. It'll talk about the design of online *roleplaying* games.

It's not quite the same thing as tabletop roleplaying games, as I've already noted, but I think there's a lot of common ground. And, I hope you'll enjoy seeing the discussion of roleplaying in a slightly different medium. As the future relentlessly washes over us, as we plunge blindly

into the twenty-first century, roleplaying *will* change. We might all slowly, some of us begrudgingly, move on to online roleplaying games of the type I'm describing. Or, we might take the lessons learned in the online medium and apply them to our own tabletop games. I'm not sure what will happen - the future is a notoriously difficult thing to predict, but I hope some of it will be embedded somewhere in this column.

So, Who The Heck is That Appelcline Guy?:

A Postscript

For some obscure reason I feel obliged to offer up my credentials, to let you know that I'm not just some computer guy. I've been involved in the RPG industry for about a decade. My first RPG sale was, of all things, an index of *Dragon Magazine*, which I made to TSR way back at the beginning of time (which is to say, 10 years ago or so). I've done work for *Ars Magica*, most notably *Tribunals of Hermes: Rome*, but for the most part I'm a Chaosium guy. Besides editing and doing graphic design for the *Call of Cthulhu* game for a couple of years, I also created *The Chaosium Digest* and ran it for half a decade. You could find my credits in scattered books, from *Taint of Madness* and *The Nephilim Gamemaster's Companion* to *Hero Wars*, and *Tales of Chivalry & Romance* - although most of that work appeared under my unmarried name, Appel.

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Mercedes or Yugo?

The Well Constructed Game

JONATHAN DEGANN considers game mechanisms....

SOME BOARD games seem constructed like a Mercedes and some seem constructed like a Yugo. Some games respond actively to every touch of the pedal and hug the road on every twist of the wheel, while some have trouble shifting and then bang around noisily from all the loose connections. In game terms I mean that some games have all of their mechanisms tightly tuned, where every rule presents an agonizing decision, and every decision affects your game, while some games are thrown together, with rules that hardly matter and frequent decisions that are barely relevant.

Even if the latter game 'basically works' it lacks the thrill of the feeling you get when a game has been trimmed and tuned. That's what The Well Constructed Game is: one which is not only fun, but which has all of its mechanisms tied together, effective, and purposeful. In this sense, The Well Constructed Game truly is a work of art - it has an aesthetic thrill that goes beyond its basic function of entertainment and competition. This artistry is very difficult to pull off and is the mark of a great designer.

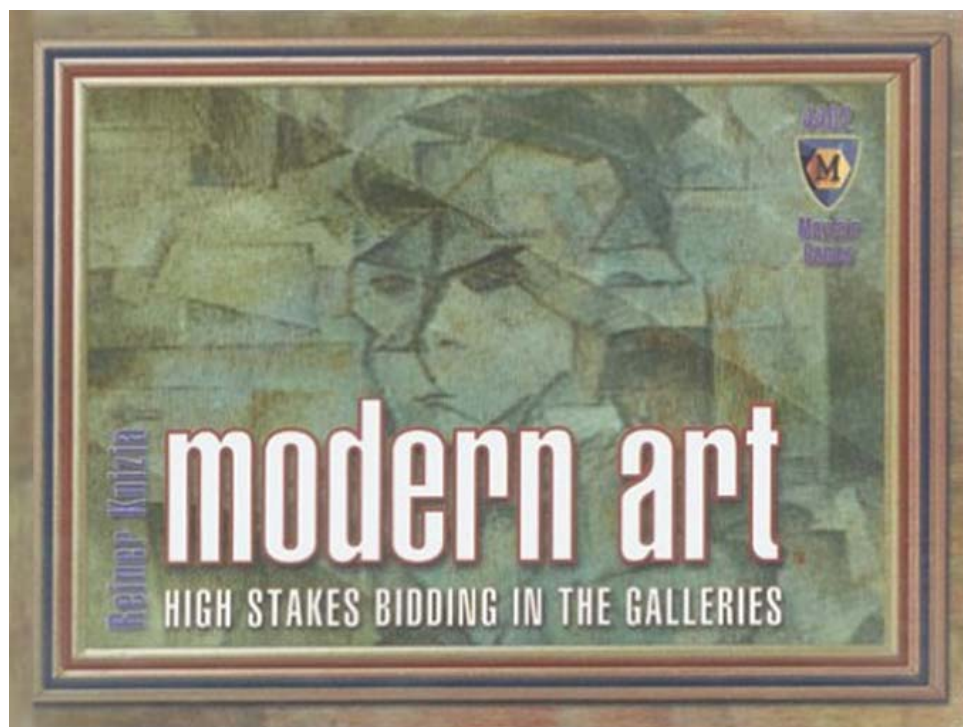
I want to talk here about compactness and elegance in a game design - deliberately avoiding what necessarily makes it 'fun'. In admiring The Well Constructed Game, I don't want to imply that this characteristic is either necessary or sufficient for a game to be good. But we can certainly admire it when we see it.



For much of his early career, Reiner Knizia was especially admired for how much good game he got out of some incredibly simple designs. **Modern Art** is a terrific example of a very simple and Well Constructed Game from this era. The basic structure of the game requires players to maximize their income both when they sell works of art (cards) to other players, and then later when they sell the art back to the bank. What drives the game so wonderfully is the scoring mechanism which creates a spectrum of implications for the players. Basically, the cards auctioned

off come in one of five suits ('artists'), and the artist whose works have been most auctioned in that round pays the most. Players therefore have motivations to promote the auction of artists whose cards they hold in their hands - knowing that this will make them fetch a higher price - and they have motivation to auction off cards by artists they've already bought in the round - thereby bolstering their value at pay off time. Additionally, Knizia incorporates an excellent scoring bomb by having the values of paintings accumulate each turn - but still paying zero if that artist isn't in one of the top three positions. With just an auction and a well designed scoring mechanism, Knizia creates a very tense and engaging game. Every element in the scoring mechanism has a way of working to create strategic decisions for the players.

Actually, one could fairly argue



that there is a superfluous mechanism in the game. There are 4 different ways that a card may be auctioned, and each card specifies how that card is auctioned. It might be through an open outcry, or a closed bid auction for example. These alternatives definitely add color to the game, but are they necessary? I think that they're a little fiddly, and they detract from the game's basic elegance - but I love 'em anyway. I suppose that this shows that being Well Constructed is a nice thing - but it's not everything.

The Well Constructed Game is efficient but it need not be simple. It is not important that there are very few rules - only that every rule contributes significantly to the

game play. Wolfgang Kramer and Richard Ulrich created a miraculous design in **El Grande**. In **El Grande**, players place wooden cubes from their "court" supply onto any of nine regions on the board, in an attempt to get first, second or third place leadership positions during the game's three scoring rounds. Essentially, three mechanisms drive the game, and each one is a doozy. The first is that players must bid for turn order in each turn- which is key because early players have their choice of 'Action Cards' which can give great advantages. Gnashing against this, is the fact that the higher your bid to go first in the round, the fewer 'caballeros' (wood cubes) you'll have in your supply to place on the board. Finally - Kramer and Ulrich

create an extremely effective tool to govern where players may place their cubes at any moment - they must be into a region adjacent to the 'king', but not in the same region as the king itself. Moreover, the king is moved each turn - with the right to control his placement governed by the player who earlier bid for that right. As anyone who has played **El Grande** knows, this simple rule governing the king and his placement creates a spectrum of tactical decisions for the players.

Notice also how these three mechanisms mesh with each other. You want to control the king to place your caballeros in the best position. To do that, you need to bid high for that right. But the higher you bid, the fewer caballeros you make available to yourself. The interaction of its mechanisms, the dramatic effect each mechanism has

on game play, and the agonizing decisions they place on players all combine to make **El Grande** a supremely Well Constructed Game.

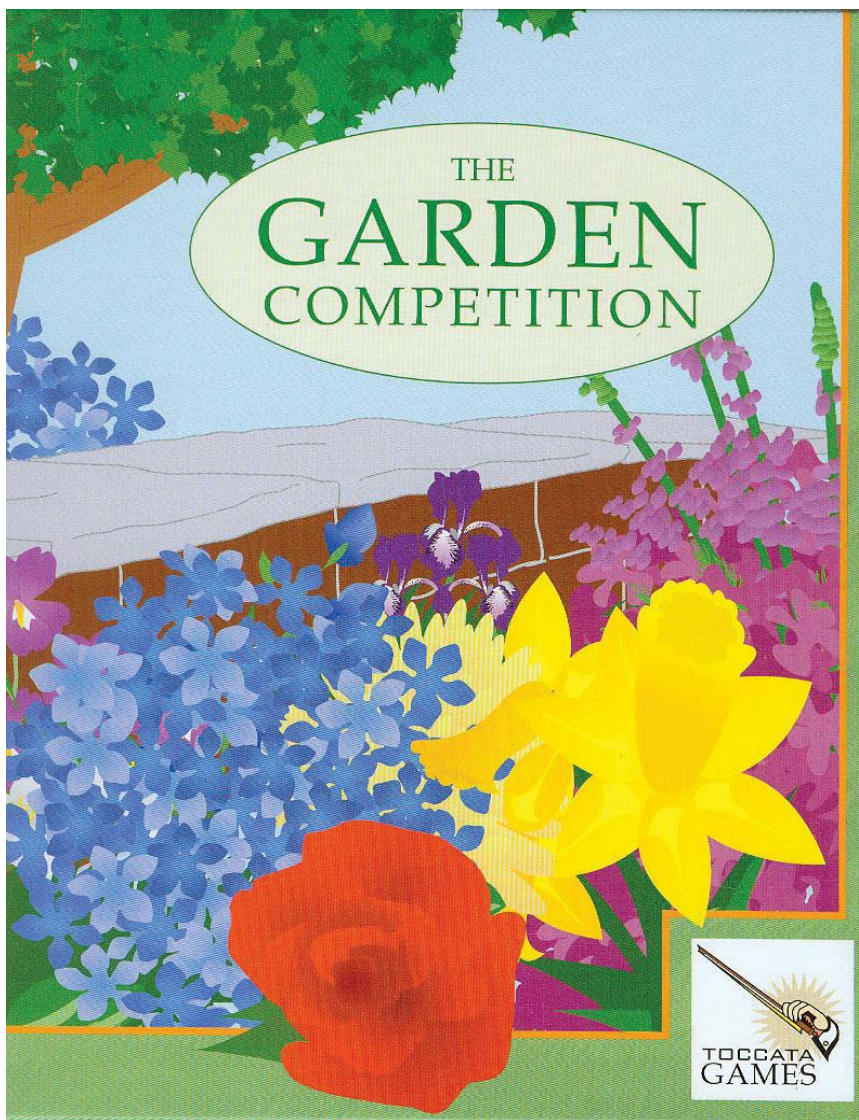
I first noticed the value of a Well Constructed Game when I was playing a game I found to be poorly constructed: the self-published **Garden Competition** by Ken Stevens. **Garden Competition** is by no means a bad game, but what struck me was just how many different rules and mechanisms seemed to not achieve their intended effect. For example, a key aspect of the game is the fact that players must decide which flowers to plant. Of the dozen or so different types, only certain ones are worth

points at the end of the game. There is an elaborate system in which each player has slightly different information on which flowers - or colors of flowers - will score. Players are expected to deduce which flowers are valuable by observing their opponent's behavior. The problem is that deduction is either trivial or unneeded. If an opponent plants a rose, it means either 'red' or 'rose' is worth points. If you can get a rose - plant it. If not... well then there are so many *other* flowers to focus on, you may as well just ignore it.

This looseness and clutter in design shows up in the work of seasoned designers as well. If a Well Constructed Game is one with no excess baggage, then it's easier to appreciate tight design by looking at games by otherwise

excellent and respected designers that seem burdened by superfluous mechanisms and inconsequential game play. **Oasis** is by Alan Moon and Aaron Weisblum and **Keythedral** by Richard Breese are examples of designs with rules and mechanisms that have a disproportionately low consequence on game play and strategy.

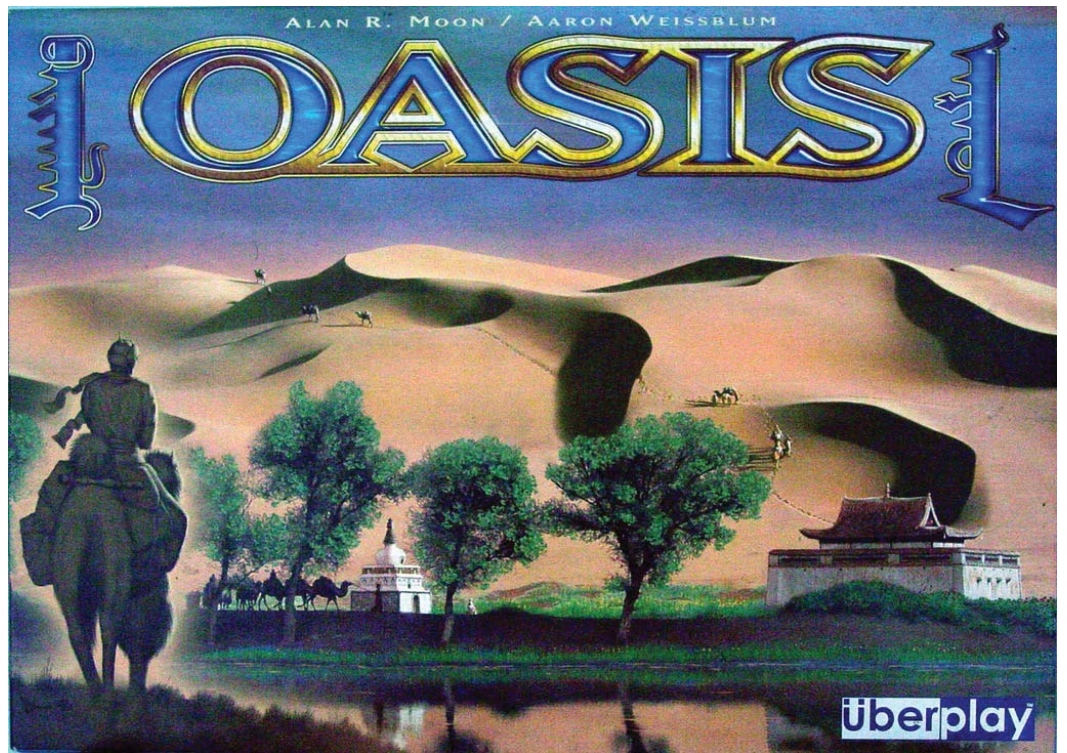
Oasis is an unfortunate example of a boardgame where nothing that happens on the board is all that interesting. Players collect tiles in 3 different land types, trying to gain large clusters of adjacent tiles. But unlike a similar mechanism in **Merchants of Amsterdam** by Reiner Knizia, it is rare to find oneself threatened with being cut off or enclosed. **Oasis** tends to have fairly large areas to play one's tiles, and there are no tactical objectives besides getting a lot of them all together. In contrast, **Merchants of Amsterdam**



requires players to lay adjacent clusters of tiles in the sections of the city, but the grid is narrow (2xn), and littered with strategic points (bridges) which encourage players to play tiles where they otherwise wouldn't want to. The effect in Oasis is a feeling of pointlessness and disappointment. Here is this evocative board with placement rules and the promise of interesting strategy. Eventually players find that their choices aren't all that important, that it is unlikely that they will be cramped in, and that the feeling of tension was false.

In no way does this break the game. It remains entirely playable. But by having its board not finely tuned, the game ends up feeling a little limp and disappointing. Players have a sense of putting tiles on the board for little purpose.

Keythedral suffers from the problem of having needless distinctions for its commodities. Keythedral

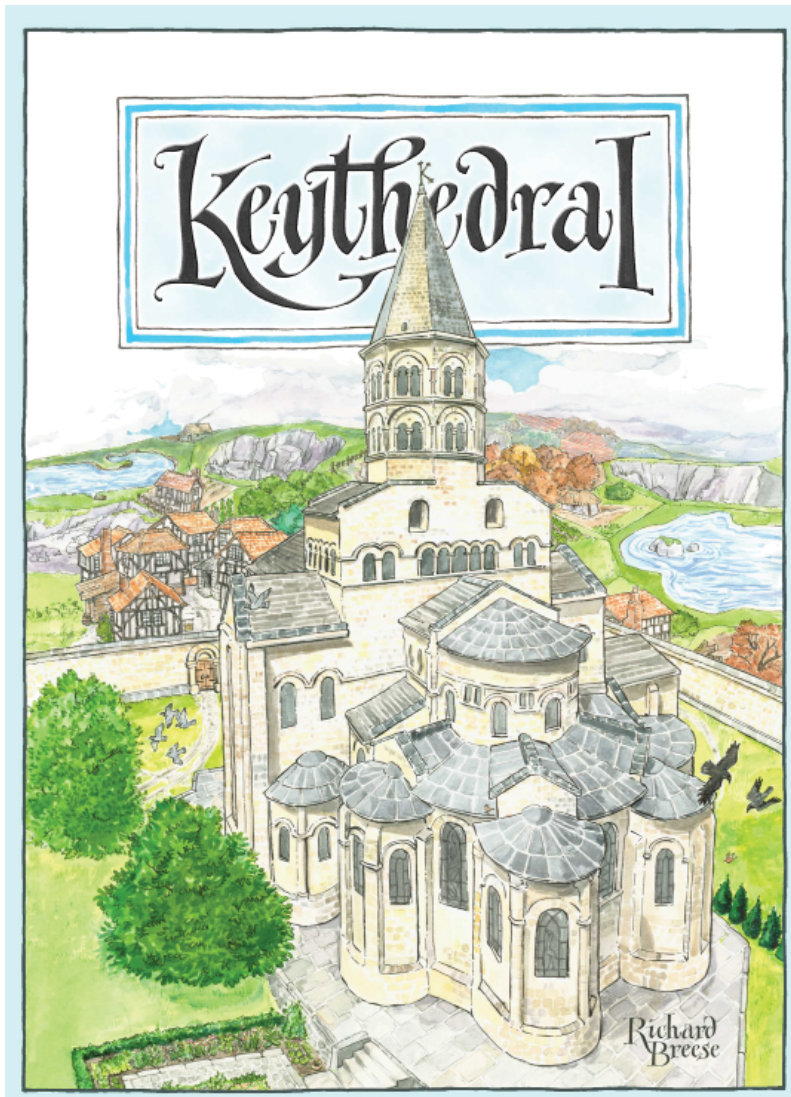


is a little like **Settlers of Catan** in the way that players collect five different types of resources by having cottages and workers on tiles which produce goods each turn. Collecting certain combinations are important at the beginning of the game in order your upgrade cottage or to

build fences which help you defensively. However, soon into the game the primary use of resources is to spend them in particular combinations in order to buy tiles which are worth victory points. As the game progresses, larger quantities of resources are needed to buy bigger tiles worth even more VP's.

Pretty cool until you start to realize that this entire mechanism barely matters. There are so many tiles that will come available in so many different combinations that any player has no urgency to take any particular resource type. Nor is there much need to rush to take that perfect tile when it comes up. If you just hold on, you'll find the tile you need for whatever resource cubes you have. (A limit on the number of cubes you can hold would have been effective.) Furthermore, the amount of VP's you get per cube doesn't really change throughout the game. Early on you get few VP's for few cubes, and later you get lots of VP's for lots of cubes - but the value is pretty much proportional. There is neither much incentive to spend your cubes early nor to save them for later. What seems to be a series of tactical choices for the players aren't really choices at all because they hardly make any difference. Only in the last game turn or two, when future VP tiles become limited, does the urgency to manage your purchases become tense - and suddenly the game picks up a little.

Compare this to the William Attia game **Caylus**, which also uses different types of commodity cubes, but far more effectively. In Caylus, players have many different uses for their commodities - to buy tiles, to help construct the castle, or for special features such as the 'joust'. In fact, commodity cubes used in the castle have great flexibility as well: the only restriction is that of three cubes, one is 'food' and that all three cubes are different colors.



With such flexibility, you would expect that players would be unconcerned about which particular color of cube they pick up. In fact, the distinction among colors works extremely well. For one thing, although castles tend to need food, jousts need cloth, and tiles are hungry for wood and stone, each choice has different strategic implications. So while a player may almost always be able to find a use for his cubes, he needs to manage his production in order to achieve the particular strategic goals he has set for himself. Furthermore, any of these uses - tiles, castle, or joust - can't be chosen at will. The ability to joust or to build tiles is in short supply for each turn, and there are tactical reasons that a player may want to contribute to the castle ALOT on this turn, but not at all on the next turn. Finally, while a player who gets shut out of his choices can always accumulate cubes for another day, timing is much more important in Caylus than it is in Keythedral. A tile built this turn has greater opportunity to earn VP's. The need to delay a castle contribution can mean missing out on getting a bonus or stealing the majority favor from another player. In practice, players find that they need to plan carefully to take and spend the right combinations of cubes - and they need to desperately create alternative plans when their original plan doesn't go as expected.

The one thing that holds me back from calling Caylus a Well Constructed Game is that annoying matter of the unbalanced favor table. In Caylus, a player will occasionally earn 'favors' and he has a choice of four different types to take. Of these, one type (commodity cubes) seems so weak that players hardly ever pick it, and one (money) is sufficiently underpowered that players typically use it only as a fall back or occasional choice. How much tighter and more satisfying the game would have been had each favor created its own strategic path!

Fortunately, this doesn't hurt the game that much. You can always ignore those paths and they are not a major part of the game. This is very different from the case with Oasis where players must use the board constantly only to feel that they are spinning their wheels whenever they do so.

I am not a board game designer, but my belief is that playtesting is the most important contribution to a Well Constructed Game. Designers need to brainstorm. They need to come up with lots of creative ideas, and in many

cases, there is little way to distinguish between what is working and what is superfluous without seeing the mechanism in action. Is the board too big to force players into Agonizing Decisions? How often are people using all the options presented to them (and how often do they win with the less popular ones?) When I wrote my series of Game Theory 101 articles for The Games Journal, all of the ideas I had were addictive in nature. What do designers put in a game that causes its complexion to change and create a Story Arc? Where are the bombs that place players in do-or-die situations? What conditions can be imposed to force players to constantly re-evaluate their positions? The Well Constructed Game is the

product of a reductive process. What stuff was added to the game that isn't making a difference? What decisions aren't agonizing - and can they simply be eliminated?

I've spoken here about the value of a game having no superfluous elements. Of course, a game succeeds on the basis of what it does have rather than what it does not. So appreciating a Well Constructed Game is mostly a matter of aesthetics. It is an opportunity for us game-lovers to simply admire the perfection in a board game design above and beyond the hours we spend immersed playing it: to enjoy a greater pleasure in the love of The Game.



Superhero Roleplaying

A History: part two

SHANNON APPELCLINE continues his look at this interesting genre ...

AFTER A DECADE of innovation and fighting for control of the superhero niche, it's somewhat surprising that the second decade of superhero RPGs, from 1987 to 1996, was mainly a tale of downturn and 'coasting'.

This is even more surprising because the comic industry itself was undergoing notable expansion and upheaval during these years. Starting with the publication of *The Dark Knight* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1987) the industry moved into a darker, grittier and (sometimes) more realistic stage of publication. This was assisted by *Sandman* (1989), which marked the rise of new, more mature comics.

Slim Pickings

Then, starting in 1991-1992, there was considerable growth in the entire comics industry thanks mainly to a collector driven mania not unlike that which had driven the black & white comic boom (and bust) just a few years earlier. Among other things, this led to the creation of *Image Comics*.

Remarkably, no major RPG publisher took advantage of any of this. Though a few supplements looked at the darker, grittier take on superheroes, including some *Dark Champions* books from Hero Games (1993-1994), they were infrequent; most superhero RPGs continued with their very bright 4-color look at superheroes ... which might be part of what led to their eventual declines.

The only notable exception to this was a new small-press superhero RPG called **Heroes & Heroines** (1993) which licensed a number of indie comic properties including *Image's The Maxx*, some of *Dark Horse's* grittier comics, and even the now venerable *Ex-Mutants*. Unfortunately the designer was new to the field; both the production values of the game and its design were derided, and what could have been a trendy growth instead quickly disappeared.

Meanwhile, the major licensed properties were having problems of their own. Though blessed with lucrative licenses, DC Heroes and Marvel Super Heroes were both cursed with the flip-side of the same which typically involved high royalties and (for DC Heroes in particular) the occasional problems that arise when approval is required on products. Combined with other factors, these would doubtless be factors in these two games' downturns.

By 1992 TSR was pushing more of their outlying games toward their second edition **AD&D** system and turning away from their simple chart-based mechanics--which had infiltrated many of their lines for a while. Marvel Super Heroes thus ended production in 1992, though as we'll see TSR would revisit the license a few years later.

Meanwhile Mayfair was starting to have financial problems that would ultimately result in the company's downfall. They ceased the publication of new supplements for DC Heroes in 1994, and DC pulled their license entirely in 1996.

At the same time Palladium faced another problem that comes about from licensing properties: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was a fad, and when the fad faded, the game did too. TMNT ended publication in 1990, though their older Heroes Unlimited game enjoys the occasional small-scale revival.

That left Champions as the last line standing of the four major systems that had entered the second decade of superhero RPGs. However, it had faced both highs and lows during that second decade, and was now somewhat the worse for wear.

To start off with, the deal between ICE and Hero Games had never worked as the participants had hoped. The founders of Hero Games had all left for full-time jobs soon after the ICE deal, and the maintenance of the game line thus had been left to freelancers and interns. One of them, Rob Bell stepped up and became ICE's first in-house developer for Hero. He published a fourth edition (1989) of the rules which took the first step in turning Champions into a full-fledged multi-genre *Hero System*, following in the footsteps of *GURPS* (1987).

(There had actually been considerable cross-fertilization between the two game systems for their entire lifetime. Champions had inherited ideas about point-based character creation from Steve Jackson's first RPG, **The Fantasy Trip**. Then in the mid-1980s it had expanded into a multi-genre house system, which Steve Jackson used ideas from for his own **GURPS** (1987). Now with the fourth edition of the game, the wheel had turned again.)

After this 1989 revival Champions enjoyed a series of regular in-house editors who helped to keep the game alive, but it depended upon freelance contributions and never developed an entirely coherent gameworld as a result. Then in 1995 ICE started putting all of their resources into the CCG market, which resulted in the Hero Games principals finally terminating their agreement with ICE. They quickly signed a new deal with *R. Talsorian Games*, but as we'll see their fourth edition Hero System got tabled in the process.

Meanwhile there was just one new contender in the superhero genre, the aforementioned GURPS. One of their early genre books, *GURPS Supers* (1989), was supported by almost a dozen supplements (1989-1991), most notably including *GURPS Wild Cards* (1989), another license. But then Steve Jackson largely got out of the adventure business, and instead started putting out standalone sourcebooks. GURPS Supers thus faded away almost as quickly as it had appeared.

In 1996 every major super-hero line was essentially dead. Even Hero Games, now under the R. Talsorian umbrella, was closing down Hero Fourth Edition support, in planning for a new game system called **Fuzion**.

Perhaps it would help revitalize a genre which had grown moribund ...

Return of the Classics: 1997-2003

Unfortunately the new *Champions* was not to be the hoped for Holy Grail for the superheroes genre. It was released as *Champions: New Millennium* (1997). The underlying Fuzion system was a clever combination of the Hero System and R. Talsorian's Interlok system and was yet another attempt to produce a simpler superhero RPG that might attract new comic book readers to games. Unfortunately it left old Hero System gamers feeling utterly abandoned,

since old *Champions* support continued only through (some of the first) PDFs and licensed products.

Then Mike Pondsmith of R. Talsorian Games announced that he was exiting the industry in 1998, also leaving Hero Games high and dry. They would flounder for the next four years through another unsuccessful attempt at going it on their own, then a disastrous alliance with an online company called *Cybergames*. *Champions* would all but die until 2002.

Meanwhile the DC Heroes game made an unexpected return as **Blood of Heroes** (1998), published by *Pulsar Games* who had acquired the license to the 'Mayfair Exponential Game System' just as the company was going down for the last time. The DC superheroes were swapped out for generic new heroes created by Pulsar, but other than some polishing, the new game was just about identical to the previous editions by Mayfair. Pulsar would publish a few supplements over the next years until the d20 crash took them down with it in 2003. Though the company now has new owners, they've done nothing with the game, and indeed haven't updated their web site for years.

It wasn't just old game systems that were returning in the late 1990s, but old licenses too, suggesting a general rebirth of the whole superhero roleplaying genre which had sputtered out over the last few years.

TSR first made use of their Marvel license with the publication of **Marvel Super Dice** (1997), a new game based on their **Dragon Dice**. However the company's downfall and purchase by *Wizards of the Coast* led to that line's quick cancellation.

However, the new Wizards-owned TSR soon followed with a new RPG too, **Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game** (1998), which was based on their innovative SAGA game design, which replaced dice rolling with resource management and centered the games on stories rather than just conflicts. Unfortunately **Marvel SAGA** would prove another d20 casualty when Wizards of the Coast started closing up their non-D&D lines in 1999 in advance of the release of their new d20 system.

Finally the DC heroes saw new life with the publication of **DC Universe** (1999) by *West End Games*, using the 'Legend' variant of their classic d6 system. The

game was not terribly well received, and West End Games

was unfortunately in a vulnerable state at the time, owned as they then were by a French company called *Humanoids Publishing* which had bailed them out of bankruptcy. By 2001 Humanoids had decided that the roleplaying business wasn't really for them, and production of the line quietly ended.

It's somewhat odd that all of these classic lines and licenses both rose and fell in such a quick period, with *Champions: New Millennium* running 1997-2000, *Blood of Heroes* running 1998-2003, *Marvel SAGA* running



1998-1999, and DC Universe running 1999-2001.

Fortunately, totally new games were rising as well.

Innovative Settings: 1999-2000

The wide disconnect between the comic book industry and the superhero RPG industry is somewhat startling. Clearly the licensed RPGs provided some connections, and there were even some RPG-based comics from *Eclipse Comics* for Villains and Vigilantes (1986) and Champions (1986-1987), but beyond that the RPG industry stayed remarkably clear of the comic industry's trends. It took until 1999 for the publication of RPGs that mirrored the more evocative and grittier comics that began in the mid-to-late 1980s.

The first of these was *White Wolf's Aberrant* (1999), part of their pulp-inspired 'Trinity' series of games. It was another futuristic game, like *Superhero: 2044*, which had gotten everything started. However *Aberrant* enjoyed twenty years of game design advances, and thus was a better system (based on White Wolf's *Storyteller* games) and likewise featured a much richer background setting. It also featured gritty ideas such as social unrest and power usage eventually leading to 'taint' for the user.

The other darker game of the time period was *Godlike* (2000) by Dennis Detwiler and Greg Stolze, eventually published by *Arc Dream Publishing*. *Godlike* used a unique dice pool system where matching numbers were combined into sets, but its main appeal was--as with *Aberrant*--in its gritty setting, here an alternate version of World War II. *Godlike* has since inspired a follow-up game *Wild Talents* (2006).

The Rise of d20: 2000-Present

Meanwhile we hit the event that caused the quick death of all those classic game lines that launched in the late 1990s. Even the innovative new settings didn't do that well. *White Wolf's Aberrant* came to a close in 2002, while *Godlike* only survived because it was being put out by a small press who was publishing only occasionally.



The reason for the big upheaval in superhero games was d20. Wizard of the Coast's release of their new open-source gaming system caused changes throughout the roleplaying distribution system. Suddenly it became a lot harder to get non-d20 games into stores. Every superhero system suffered, resulting in the cancellations that we've already seen.

On the other hand a new series of d20-based superhero games appeared, showing how far Wizard's new system could be stretched. There were two almost simultaneous releases.

Silver Age Sentinels (2002) was put out by *Guardians of Order* using first their own Tri-Stat System, then a few months later using the d20 system. It was a very traditional four-color superhero gaming system that was well-liked and survived for a few years, but has since disappeared entirely--along with *Guardians of Order* due to various financial problems.

Mutants & Masterminds (2002), written by Steve

Kenson and published by *Green Ronin* has done much better due to some combination of better design, better marketing, and better support. Most notably *Green Ronin* decided to give *Mutants & Masterminds* its own open-source license which they call 'M&M Superlink'. This has resulted in supplements published by at least a dozen different companies--most of them small PDF publishers--between 2003 and the present, generally adding to the interest in the game (which continues to be supported to this day).

A bit later another notable d20 release appeared, a new d20 version of *Aberrant* (2004).

Remarkably, despite the influx of d20 and despite the general downturn of superhero RPGs since their height in the 1980s, two non-d20 systems have also managed to get a foothold in recent years.

The first was the long-awaited fifth edition of the *Hero System* (2002), published by a new *Hero Games* which had bought out the *Hero System* from *Cybergames* in 2001. The new *Hero System* was truly generic--which it hadn't been to date--but a new version of *Champions* (2002) was offered as its first genre book. The new *Hero Games* has since largely maintained a once a month publication schedule, with at least half of those books compatible with *Champions*, making it the best supported version of the game since at least when *ICE* was publishing, and perhaps ever.

The second new game was another licensed *Marvel* game, this one called *The Marvel Universe Roleplaying Game* (2003). It was another resource-management game, like *SAGA* had been, and was generally considered an interesting and innovative game system. It also included ideas about how to make use of flashbacks and other comic book tropes. Unfortunately *Marvel* expected it to not only reach the success level of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but also to do so very quickly. When it failed to do so after just a half-dozen publications, they canceled the line.

A few smaller scale games that have appeared in the last few years include: *The Authority* (2004), another Tri-Stat game by *Guardians of Order* that went down with the company; and *Living Legends* (2005), a new game by Jeff Dee, the designer of that first modern superhero RPG, *Villains & Vigilantes*. Other small publications such as *Truth & Justice* (2005), *With Great Power ...* (2005), and the aforementioned *Wild Talents* (2006) suggest that we may be in a superhero roleplaying Renaissance.

Generally the superhero industry seems to have undergone three booms. The first began with the publications of *Champions* in 1981, ran through the early indie games and the licensed publications of the 1980s, and died out in the early 1990s. The second boom began in 1997 as multiple new superhero games went to market, and lasted until the d20 boom killed it.

Now, however, we seem to be in a new golden age. Old hero *Champions* is back in fighting form, complemented by the d20 superhero game *Mutants & Masterminds* and multiple small press releases, the most notable of which is the *Godlike* line. Current rumor also says that the DC license is now held by *Games Workshop* (who failed to get that *Marvel* license 25 years ago) and that they're planning a new superhero game through their *Black Industries* imprint. If this sees print soon, it might be like the 1980s all over again.

LEO MARSHALL, designer of LeCardo ...

1 – What first attracted you to gaming?

I used to play a lot of board games with my family when I was a child. More recently, dismayed by the repetitive and passive nature of most computer games, I have been drawn back to board and card games.

2 – How long have you been (a) playing games and (b) designing them?

Surprisingly, (b) longer than (a). I started going to games conventions to promote **LeCardo**, played some great games and am now hooked!

3 – What advantages do you have from a familiarity with other types of game?

I can design games based on the kind of things gamers currently enjoy playing, in other words tailored to my audience's interests.

4 – Is there a particular reason for choosing 'LeCardo' as your game's title?

It was a happy accident. My brother suggested calling it Leocardo (obviously with reference to both my name and the Italian Renaissance artist). When I submitted it to the Patent Office, however, they said it was too close to an existing toy company called Leonardo, but that if I took out the first 'o' it would be ok. So I did, and the name stuck

5 – Do you think that players have similar tastes world-wide?

Not sure. I've been told that some nationalities prefer very strict rules, whereas others like more free-form gameplay. In terms of types of game though, I don't think so.

6 – I guess that you're aiming for an international market with 'LeCardo'?

Of course. I'm based in London, but I travel quite widely to promote **LeCardo** (including Essen in October this year). Interestingly, unlike most other products, I see the German market, apparently the biggest in the world, as a more natural place to expand than, say, the US. This is because of both the Germans' love of gaming and the similarity of the languages. The latter point is very important. Given the nature of **LeCardo**, I need to expand into markets where other language versions of the game are viable: this category would include Japanese, Chinese and Korean.

7 – Has this had any effect on the design or presentation of your game?

Not really. If you come from a non-English speaking background, your English still has to be pretty good to be able to play **LeCardo**, even if you are studying it as a foreign language. I suppose the rules will need to be that much clearer, but it doesn't seem to have been a problem so far.

The game was designed before any harbouring of ambitions for world domination. I hope to get feedback at Essen on how the design appeals or doesn't appeal to an international audience.

8 – It occurs to me that educational games risk being rather boring to play. Do you have elements in LeCardo to maintain interest?

What players generally do is to build complexities into the game, such as limiting the number of cards any player can put down in one go, etc. Also, when you've played it a lot, the fun often consists in trying to get favourite combinations out and employing strategies to use the area of play to your advantage and trying to block other players.

9 – How do you plan to gather new players?

Largely through word of mouth, viral dissemination through forums on websites such as *boardgamegeek*, and of course on my own blog/website. Also, through the holding of tournaments (I'm hoping to arrange some after I get back from Essen).

10 – Do you work mainly on your own or as part of a team?

At the moment I work on my own (as chief executive, book-keeper, marketing director, tea and coffee maker etc.), but in the future I'd like to recruit a few elves, when and if I can afford to pay them in a currency more commercially acceptable than gratitude.

11 – Who does your art-work?

My father, Hugh Marshall, who sadly died before **LeCardo** began to take off, was a graphic artist who did a lot of work in the 60s and 70s for publishers, magazines, advertising companies etc.

12 – Do you have plans for future games?

Yes, several. Keeping mum about the details for now ;).

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

I'm coming round to that idea, yes. I was an EFL teacher for twenty years and before that I had ambitions to become a writer, but recently I've become enthused with idea of designing more games.

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

I did it the wrong way round: I invented the game and then tried to market it and get financial backing etc. It's better to look at the market, spot a gap in it, design a game to fill that gap, and work out how much it's roughly going to cost (and whether it's possible to get backing) before launching into it. However, the problem with that approach is that inventors usually think of an idea first, as I did. In which case, be realistic about your game's prospects and don't expect to be on sale in Hamleys immediately. Listen to other people's advice and be prepared to accept when their suggestions make sense (ie are better than yours!). Do extensive market research, investigate legal ramifications concerning copyright etc. Work hard but also know when to stop and have a break: don't overdo it.

Finally, have fun!

Pevan's Perspective

From Sherwood Forest to Sushi

PEVANS describes his reactions to a dozen boardgames ...

TIME TO CATCH up with some of the games I've been playing in recent months.

Bombay is a new game from *Ystari* and Cyril Demaegd and is most notable for the model elephants players use. Especially the pink one. Each elephant has a howdah that will hold two wooden cubes—the 'bales of silk' that are sparsely available around the board. Players move their elephant around the board, buying and selling silk, building palaces and collecting clients. At the end of the game, they get bonuses for having sold silk at all the cities on the board and for the total of palaces and clients they have. The player with the most money wins. The game offers some tactical options, but was much slighter than I expected.

From Bombay to Frankfurt—Frankfurt am Main, that is—for **Bürger, Baumeister & Co**, a game that celebrates the 150th anniversary of that city's Saalbau (meeting hall). Published by *Abacus* and designed by Michael Schacht, the game is a bit of an oddity. The small board shows a plan of Frankfurt, divided into different coloured districts, each sub-divided. Players have a hand of building tiles in the same colours and showing a particular type of building. Each turn players play one of these onto an empty space of the correct colour and buy a fresh one. When placing a tile, players score its value, plus the value of any other tiles of the same type already in that district. Instant town planning! Some spaces also give players bonus points or coins.

In addition to the standard buildings, players have the option of completing a 'great project' each turn—there's one in each district. These are either worth four points or double a player's score for that turn. The game ends when the building tiles run out, players get bonus points for some of the tiles they have left and the player with the most points wins. I have to say I was underwhelmed by this game. It's quite slight and lacks the intensity that I expect from a Michael Schacht game.

I have caught up with last year's **Castle for all Seasons** from *Eggertspiele* and Inka and Markus Brand. The game is about constructing the bits of the castle that is laid out on the board. One side of the board shows the castle in summer, the other in winter, which makes things a bit trickier for the players. As beginners, we stuck with the summer side. Players have a set of workers and choose one each turn, revealing them together. Each worker allows players to do different things: get cash, collect raw materials and construct buildings. Players only get their cards back by playing a specific worker and may score points when they do this—they also get points from constructing buildings.

The larger buildings provide bonuses for the players

who construct them, which can be very significant at the end of the game. However, the key to the game seems to be making the correct choice of worker to benefit from what the other players are doing as well as what that specific worker does. My first experience is that this is much easier to do when you're an experienced player with a bunch of newcomers. While the game clearly has a lot in common with some others from the last couple of years, it offers some different challenges and stands on its own as a middleweight offering.

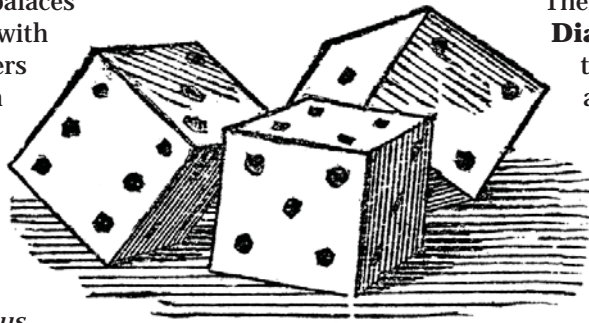
There has been quite a buzz about **Diamonds Club**, so I was keen to try it out. It was rather overlooked at Spiel '08 as it's published by *Ravensburger*, who are best known for their children's games. However, designer Rüdiger Dorn has come up with a game that appeals to—and challenges—gamers. Players are landscaping the garden of their stately home—a separate board for each player.

They do this with buildings (gazebos, orangeries et al), collections of animals or just by growing trees. These have to be bought with sets of precious stones, which in turn are acquired by taking actions.

The turn starts with players using their stack of coins to take actions available from the board (which changes each turn). Actions allow them to improve their bonuses (including the value of any trees in their garden), collect animals (which are only worth serious points for complete sets of different animals) and gain contracts, ships and mines. Once this phase is over, players get gems for each set of contract, ship and mine they have. Then they use their gems to buy buildings and plant trees. The game ends once at least one player has filled their board and the player with the most points wins. This is a challenging game with lots of tactical options and I'm not surprised it's got people talking.

Finca was designed by Ralf zur Linde and Wolfgang Sentker (both new names to me) and published by *Hans im Glück*. This is an odd little game of fruit growing on the island of Mallorca (Majorca). The game has a kind of roundel: players move their farmer pieces around the windmill sails in one corner of the board. The sail they land on lets them pick up a specific fruit, the number depending on the number of pieces on the space. Crossing the median line of the sails gets the player a donkey cart as well.

Using a cart allows a player to deliver some fruit (you can't get that many in a donkey cart) to the districts of the island. Each district is looking for a certain combination of fruit, as shown by the top tile in the district. Delivering the right fruit gets the player the tile and a bonus tile if it's the last in the district. Players also have a set of special actions, allowing them to bend the rules in specific ways, but these



are worth victory points if not used. This is a nice enough little game with some neat touches, but rather lighter than I'd expect from HiG.

Maori is also published by Hans im Glück and was designed by Günter Burkhardt. This is a tile-laying game set in the Pacific islands. Each player has a board showing empty sea, overlaid with a square grid. Onto this, they place tiles showing parts of islands. The trick, of course, is to actually complete your islands rather than leaving odd bits of land lying about. Players score more for islands with palm trees and other features give bonus points—if you complete them.

What makes the game tricky is how you select and place your tiles. The tiles are laid out in a square grid with a wooden canoe alongside one of them. To take a tile, players must move the canoe and then select a tile from the row or column it ends up next to. How far you can move the canoe depends on how many canoe symbols you have on your board. To take a tile that's not the one adjacent to the canoe, you have to pay some shells—which you get by choosing tiles with shell symbols on them. Tiles must be placed in the right orientation and, with the advanced rules, must go next to the canoe piece on your board (which you can then move). **Maori** is by no means a heavyweight game, but I found it more interesting and challenging than *Finca*.

Masters Gallery is one of the second batch of games from *Gryphon Games*, the new imprint of *FRED Distribution*. This is essentially Reiner Knizia's card game version of his classic **Modern Art**. As the original game was pretty much a card game anyway, the changes are not huge. Like **Modern Art**, players have a hand of cards representing works by a number of artists. They play one a turn, carrying out the action on the card. At the end of each round, the artists are valued according to how many of their pictures have been played and players get money for the pictures they have. After a set number of rounds, the player with the most money wins.

Unlike **Modern Art**, the artists represented in **Masters Gallery** are masters rather than fictional version of modern artists and the pictures are recognisable works rather than pastiches of modern art. (A separate version of the game, **Modern Art: the Card Game**, uses the original game's artwork.) However, the main difference is that cards are played rather than auctioned to the other players. The game remains pretty much the same, though—as I demonstrate by doing as badly as ever.

Mac Gerdt's **The Princes of Machu Picchu** was launched at Spiel '08 (though I missed it there). The game has all the hallmarks of an Eggertspiele production (English and German sides to the board, nice wooden pieces etc), but is from a new name to me, *PD Games* (and *Rio Grande*). The game does not have Gerdt's trademark 'roundel' of actions. Instead, players move their 'prince' piece around the districts of Machu Picchu, each of which allows them to carry out a particular action. The actions allow players to gain the various goods used in the game, place workers to generate extra goods, buy and sell goods, recruit priests and make sacrifices at the temples.

Key to the game are the victory point cards that give players points for holding various things at the end of the game. Players can add to their cards by getting one of their playing pieces to the top of the mountain. Climbing the mountain is done by using your priests to make sacrifices in the temples. At the top, you add cards to your hand and

then discard to gain one card overall. This is a neat mechanism that gives you the chance of building up the victory points you score on specific items so that you can concentrate your efforts. The game runs a set number of turns, unless players recruit all the priests first. The way the game ends alters the way points are scored, which gives players some strategic options. I have really enjoyed the game from the first time I played.

One of the new games from Eggertspiele is **Sherwood Forest** by Nils Finkemeyer (another new name). The board shows the eponymous forest with a number of routes through it. Along these pass rich merchants, to be preyed on by the lurking bandits (that's the players). Just watch out for the Sheriff's men! Each turn, travellers pass through the forest, their routes shown by a selection of cards. These are richer—and tougher—as the game goes on. First, though, players get a number of actions: recruiting men to their gang, buying weapons, peaking at the cards and positioning their men.

Players can work together, which can be very necessary, sharing the spoils. A successful ambush brings victory points ('glory') and money. Players can also convert money to victory points by donating to the church—something they're forced to do if they have lots of money. This is a fairly light game, but has some tactical subtleties—particularly using the 'advanced' rules—and was great fun to play. Another one I look forward to seeing more of.

I am rather taken with **Small World**, too. This is a re-vamp by Philippe Keyaerts of his earlier **Vinci** and is published by *Days of Wonder*. The game is essentially the same, but has been simplified a bit, which makes it flow more smoothly and play faster. It has a fantasy theme, which means the board is no longer a stylised version of Europe. This also gives character to the 'empires' that players take. Instead of being two random attributes, each empire is a fantasy race (Elves, Dwarves, Wizards and so on) with a particular characteristic (Flying, Fortifying, Berserk etc). This may be a purely cosmetic change, but it makes a big difference to the feel of the game. It is definitely more atmospheric.

If you haven't come across **Vinci**, both games involve players choosing an 'empire'. They use their playing pieces to conquer territory on the board, taking advantage of the empire's special abilities. Then they score points for the areas they occupy, potentially gaining extra points according to the empire's abilities. The key to both games is knowing when to put an empire into 'decline' and start a new one. This means a one-turn slump in points scored, but usually a longer-term boost to your points. Timing is everything. Plus spotting the good empires. **Small World** is an excellent development of a clever game.

Wasabi is a game I played late one evening—suitably light fare to follow several beers, we thought. This is an odd little game from *Z-Man*, designed by Adam Gertzbein and Josh Cappel. Players are making sushi, deploying ingredient tiles on to the square grid of the board. Each player has a selection of recipes and gets points for these when they have the right ingredients together on the board—more points if they're in the right sequence. Completing a recipe gets you an action card, which you can use to switch or stack ingredients or otherwise change the board. I found the game pretty lightweight and rather abstract. I wonder whether it might appeal more to people who like sushi?

Carol's Logbook

All the latest Turn-Based Gaming News

CAROL MULHOLLAND surveys the latest news from *Dungeonworld*, *Twilight Earth*, *Struggle for Empire*, *Lizards: Evolution*, *Legends*, *Destiny II* & *Rimworlds* ...

MOST TURN-BASED games are now available by email and online rather than by post, which is a great change from the play-by-mail system with which Flagship started. The newer system has the great advantage of not only making the games easily available internationally but it also seems wise just at present, when British postal workers are considering strike action. (Let's just hope that our printed copies of this issue aren't delayed.) The heartening news is that there's plenty happening in the way of game development.

Adventure Games

Good news from *Madhouse* is that they are launching two new modules of their **Dungeonworld**: *Time of Thunder* and *The Golden Coast*. The latter is a new area within the main *Dungeonworld* module and it's set along a stretch of dangerous coast. It features new classes like Ninja, Pirates and Squid Monsters (ulp!) and includes *Dungeonworld*'s new seafaring rules, which are based on ideas first tried out in the Underworld area. Steve Tierney reports that interest in this new area has been keen with almost a hundred signups by existing and new players.

The second module, *Time of Thunder*, will start shortly and differs in that it is stand-alone and weekly. It's set at the dawn of Berenian history, a time which has been mentioned in the game so far, but it can now be actually experienced by players. It's a dangerous period, though, with demons ruling the land and striving to wipe out all the good races. Players will have to fight them for Bereny's survival. Free play is available in both of these modules.

Madhouse are 'fairly sure that *Dungeonworld* remains the largest turn-based adventure game in the world. 22,000 active characters move around an immense play area that dwarfs anything else we've ever seen. ...'

Madhouse also report that work is continuing on their turn-based version of the classic roleplaying game **Tunnels & Trolls**. They still hope to be releasing it later this year. Their open-ended post-apocalyptic game **Twilight Earth** is still growing, and they recommend it 'for anyone who enjoys long-term survival planning amid a deadly environment.' Free play is available, while commercial play costs only 10p per character per turn, which sounds like a pretty good deal.

www.madcentral.com

War Games

Agema Publications' new historic wargame, **Struggle for Empire**, is well under way now. It's set in the 19th century period of colonial expansion and you can learn what the game is like to play from John Tindall's account of his initial turns in this issue.

www.agema.org.uk

Jens Niemann moderates **World War II**, which as its title indicates is a wargame set as recently as seventy

years ago. I've just received the game newsletter, or *The Dublin Chronicle*, for July 21st 1946. It's laid out most convincingly and the events reported do resemble what really happened, but not entirely: clearly, anyone playing the game would be principally concerned about his own position!

wwii@cynaps.org

Turn-based MMOGs

We'll include *Psychic Software*'s **Dark Wind: War on Wheels** in this issue's Logbook because, although it's a multi-player game, this, too, is turn-based. Regular readers will remember that Dave Panchyk praised it several issues ago, as a lively game of strategic combat using various kinds of automobile. If you sign up before October 19th, you obtain a free start and there are now two new towns: Texan, which produces vital fuel, and Shantyville, which lurks as a troublesome parasite beside the main trade route. There are new wilderness maps to go with these towns, PvP town attacks are possible and there's a new website. For the PvP combat, it's possible to agree the frequency of turns with your opponent, and the publicity assures everyone that the game is designed for fun, not for 'griefing'. It's interesting to see a MMOG exploiting a turn-based system like this:

www.dark-wind.com

Fantasy Wargames

Madhouse report that they are working on a 'power-gamers empire-building wargame set back in a fictional PreHistory akin to classic Sci-Fi B-Movies.' Sounds a bit different, eh?

Meanwhile, **Lizards: Evolution** is running as their online version of the original *Lizards*. Note that there's a *Special Offer* for Flagship readers: you can join in to play a full game for only £5 if you quote Flagship when you sign up. They are working with *Flying Buffalo* in the USA to offer *Lizards* worldwide. They'll run a worldwide ranking table.

Harlequin Games have been busily revamping the *Throne of Chaos* module of **Legends**. This is a sub-module set within the *Crown of Chaos* module, in which 'instead of playing all the factions and those factions battling for supremacy, the Empire faction is split into its various component Duchies and these war for control of the Empire. The Dukes, Barons and Citizens have a limited time to Claim the Throne for their Duchy, and must do so before the Emperor returns. If the war for the various cities delays that long, then victory will not be decided on who has claimed the throne in their own right, but rather the Emperor will choose as his own heir apparent the Duke whose Duchy has done best in the various tournaments.'

Most players control the various Dukes, Barons and Citizens of the various Duchies – so far, so good, and this outline sounds simple enough. However, things aren't

as simple as they sound: 'there is (as ever) a bug, a cat, a mutant, a fish, a halfling, some chaos and even an enigma in the ointment. These nuisances to the Ducal thrones are each played by a single player whose sole job is being a thorn in the side of the Empire. Though vastly outnumbered, they have the potential to grow too powerful for even the Dukes to handle alone, forcing the warring Dukes to cooperate or, if they are left to fester for long enough, they may even be able to seize the victory themselves.'

We can also report on the new game which combines the setting of Middle-Earth with the established Legends system. The first test game of this new module, **Legends: The One Ring**, has now ended, 'with victory going to the Free People in the Call of Gondor faction, though an honourable mention should also go to those players in the Mirkwood faction who fell just days short of declaring a Dark Servant victory! The hosts of Gondor stood proud and in battle took the very gates of Mordor, Isengard fell to their might, yet still as the battle hung in the balance the Witch King himself who had taken the One Ring from Frodo now wore it openly upon his hand and the result was ever in doubt, until the Champion of the Valar strode into the very heart of the Withered Heath and none could oppose his coming there. The Dark Lord was thrown down and peace came again to Middle-earth.'

www.harlequingames.com

Science Fiction Games

Madhouse report that they have now concluded playtesting **Destiny II** and that the game is very healthy and growing well. 'We have just released a new heap of starship upgrades and a bunch of new character types.' £20 buys twenty turns (one starship, four characters).

www.madcentral.com

Jon Ogden confirms that his efforts to launch an online version of his classic **Rimworlds** have been making steady progress. He says, 'it was as a result of posting in your forum that I ended up in touch with a couple of old players who convinced me that I wasn't crazy to think that Rimworlds could come back.' He says that he'll be looking for playtesters soon after Christmas. So stand by for more news in due course. Indeed, we hope to interview Jon in our next issue.

Personal News

It's not long ago since we congratulated *Antony Dunks* for winning a seat in the council elections on Sark as an Independent. Now, congratulations are due to *Madhouse's* Chief Surgeon, Steve Tierney, for gaining a county council seat for Cambridgeshire as a Conservative with an impressive 53% of the votes. Prestigious, eh? Steve reports that he has 'enjoyed juggling his two loves—politics and games—and is finding himself as excited as ever by both.'

So, that's two game moderators elected to councils now. I suppose moderators have to be good candidates for political posts, because they're accustomed to working for their individual players while keeping a steady eye on the overall picture...

Our founder and previous editor, Nick Palmer, became an MP back in '97. Time to send him our best wishes for keeping his seat in next year's general election. This may be a close call because MPs aren't at all popular at present.

STOP PRESS!

Here's some exciting news! *Microcosm* Games, as regular readers will know, have been working on their new game set in Tolkien's world, which is called **The One Ring**. The latest news is that they expect to launch this on *Facebook* next month. A ten-man team has been working on the game, with such experienced designers as Sam Roads, Clint Oldridge and Michael Borgendahl, along with the renowned Ian Livingstone as a non-executive director. The initial plan was to design the game for mobile phones, but the current exponential growth of social networking sites like *Facebook* has made the team choose this medium instead.

So what's their game about? It's turn-based, and players can take the part of one of Tolkien's characters on a quest to seek out and destroy the One Ring. Good news is that it will be free to play as you get started and learn it, using an introductory 'freemium model'. The game has been going through a thorough playtest for several months, so we look forward to hearing what you make of it, as its players, once it's launched.

Microcosm point out that the computer games industry here in the UK is bigger than the movie industry. Indeed, it's third in the world for size, behind only the USA and Japan. We wish the enterprise well - this could easily be the Next Big Thing!

www.oneringgame.com

<http://apps.facebook.com/theonering/>



Dispatches

Cardgames, RPGs, MMOGs & Meets

CAROL MULHOLLAND presents news about games and gamers ...

THERE'S PLENTY of news about games to cover this issue. Let's start with a fantasy roleplaying topic by mentioning **Warpstone**, the magazine which concentrates on the fantasy roleplaying system **Warhammer**. I'm starting with it because the issue which has just reached me, number 29, is the penultimate one. The editor, John Foody, has announced that issue 30 will be the last.

John has done an excellent job of compiling and presenting Warpstone. If you have any interest in fantasy roleplaying, I do recommend taking a look at this magazine: the standard of production is high and the material includes all kinds of scenarios and background discussion that demonstrates the potential depth of Warhammer and the creativity of its players. Back copies are available from:

www.warpstone.org

Moving onto card games, we've also news about *WarriorElite's* **War for Edadh**, which we reviewed last issue. The firm is working on their first expansion, *The Art of Conflict*, but meanwhile it's possible to download a couple of variants from their website for free. One is called *The Galli Variant* 'which offers a new challenge to players' and the other is *Honour? & Glory* (yes, the question-mark is intentional!). This second game is playable by three to four players and involves competing against a single opponent. For this one, each player will need a set of Mastery cards.

www.warriorelite.com

Magnus Nordluff of *Three Crown Games*, who designed the recently reviewed **With Sword and Shield**, has now released **Pax Baltica**. It's an historical wargame, set in the Great Northern War of 1700-1721, which Magnus describes as being 'somewhat regarded as a side-show to the War of Spanish Succession.' This sounds interesting as an alternative to the usual continental settings. Apparently only a limited number of copies have been printed, though 'of almost industry-standard quality,' so if you're interested in the period, don't delay finding out more from:

www.3cg.se

You'll see that we're interviewing Leo Marshall, the designer of **LeCardo**, this issue. LeCardo isn't a war game, but a word game of 52 cards, where play consists of putting your cards together to form compound words and phrases. We hope to be reviewing it in a future issue, but if the idea appeals to you, take a look at it at:

www.lecardo.com

Our fourth card game this issue is **Kings Cribbage**: we were hoping to review it this issue but events have delayed our coverage. The game was designed in Canada, but is now available world-wide. It's based on the old card game Crib (or Cribbage), which I remember as a favourite game of my father and uncles, though it sticks in my mind

mainly because of the distinctive wooden tablet they used for scoring. This version doesn't have the tablet, but it has attractive pieces and a moveable board, which must surely make it a pleasure to play. The website also mentions an online version, which may be of interest to those of you who don't have playing partners nearby. This has around 8000 players!

www.kingscribbageuk.com

www.kingscribbage.com

Moving from card games to boardgames, we hear that **Le Havre** has won the International Gamer Award for 2009 in the multi-player category. Favourably reviewed by Pevans in *Flagship #127*, the game was designed by Uwe Rosenberg and is published by *Lookout Games* and *Ystari Games*. Pevans described Le Havre as 'a big, clever, absorbing game', which makes it seem well worthy of such a prestigious award.

In the equally prestigious two-player category is a strategic boardgame called **Day & Night**. Two fantasy rulers, Lady Day and Lady Night, compete for total ownership of their palace. The players control their rulers by using cards, which have been praised for the quality of their original artwork. Designed by Valentijn Eekels, Day & Night is published by *Mystics.nl*.

Rick Loomis of *Flying Buffalo Inc* has just reached his 62nd birthday: congratulations, Rick. The reason I'm mentioning this here rather than in *Logbook* is that Rick has decided to sell off the sort of games that avid players tend to accumulate over the years: collectable wargames and boardgames and old out-of-print Flying Buffalo stuff. Look for the seller 'flyingbuffaloinc' on ebay.

And yes, we've some roleplaying news as well, by courtesy of the **RPGNow Newsletter**, which concentrates on independent games. I'll pick out just a few of the titles that caught my fancy...

A sourcebook (or should that be 'a grimoire?') that sounds of interest is *The Book of Arcane Magic* by *4 Winds Fantasy Gaming*. It's compatible with the *Pathfinder* system and includes plenty of information that would be useful in any campaign setting.

A different area of playing is covered by *Karmic Pirates*, suitable for using with the **Karma RPG system**, it's claimed that this 'offers players a glimpse into the dangerous world of classic piracy.' Well, where I live, folk really do say 'Arrr...'

Rpgkarma.com

I rather like the sound of **Those Pesky Humans** by *Minion Games*, where you play a Monster who's determined to clear its dungeon from invading adventurers. It's described as having simple mechanics to speed the game along and having enough tiles to change the dungeon's

layout. There's a variety of monsters and abilities to keep the game replayable. Plenty of other games, sourcebooks and systems are included in the Newsletter: it's an enticing compilation.

www.RPGNow.com

We've news of a online game, **eRepublik**, which is free to play and has been growing steadily since its launch. Apparently it now has the substantial number of 600,000 registered citizens. Its motto is 'Change the world and rewrite history', which sounds appealing and it's described as a 'social strategy' game. We'll look at this more closely and report back.

www.erepublik.com

Moving on to matters of communication, Chris Ryan of *Esdevium Games* has sent us the news that *Wizards of the Coast* are planning to upgrade their forums to a new community platform. Over the coming weeks the new community will feature friend lists, groups, blogs, wiki, an invite system and calendars along with the existing vibrant forums. 'Select groups are now participating in a preview of the new community to become familiar with tools that will soon be available to the gaming community at large.'

www.esdeviumgames.com

Chris Geggus has sent out an email on behalf of the *Weekend Gaming Group*. The WWG exists to organise the two annual gaming conventions which were previously organised by *AHIKS Europe*, a group which has now folded. The conventions are held in Knutsford, Manchester, in early March and in Wallington, Surrey, at the Dukes Head Hotel from 9th-11th October. The October convention isn't far off, so be quick if you're interested in attending. The charges are £10 for the whole event or £5 for a single day,

though of course you'll have to contact the hotel if you want to stay there and the charge for this will be at a *special rate* of £110 per double room for two nights bed & breakfast:
dukeshead@youngs.co.uk

The vast four-day *Spiel* convention will take place at Messe Essen in Germany from October 22nd-25th. It'll present lots of different games, of course, and at present the organisers are emphasising Boardgames and Comic Action. Full details at:

internationalespieltage.de

I'm planning to attend *Dragonmeet*, at Kensington Town Hall in London on November 28th. Look out for the Flagship stand if you can make it there yourselves. *Dragonmeet* is always a lively convention, with plenty of games to admire and explore.

dragonmeet.co.uk

It's some way off, yet, but if you fancy a challenge it's worth preparing for it in good time. At *Manorcon* in Leicester on Saturday the 17th of July 2010, teams of four players will compete to represent the UK at *Spiel 2010*. The top three or four winning teams will be invited to represent the UK in Essen.

The contest lasts from 9.30 to 18.00 and you will play four rounds, playing a different game each round, with each player competing against three different opponents in each round. Phew, sounds like a pretty big test of stamina!

And the games? These are **Steam; Stone Age; Ysphan, diamonds club; Small World, Race for the Galaxy, Masons**. Get practising, chaps!

www.manorcon.org.uk

Games Gazette

Established in October 1980, Games Gazette is now (probably) the oldest UK games review (amateur) magazine. It has evolved from being a 100% role-playing publication into a 100% games publication, with reviews, features and articles on most types of games, gaming and games related products.

Games Gazette is available in several UK games and hobby stores or as a six-issue per year subscription. For an online preview and insight please visit the website <http://www.gamesgazette.co.uk>

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Games Gazette

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Essex SS15 5EG

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Rumours

from the Front

Your uncensored comments on games

Contributions received from:

Michael Bitton, Andrew Collins, Dean Johnson, Carolyn Koh, Lisa Krebs, Bill Moore, Carol Mulholland & Andrew Wallace.

MOGs

Atlantica Online (NDoors Interactive)

Lisa Krebs – ‘Atlantica Online is a strategy, turn-based MMO with a lot of really good points that make the game almost, but not quite worth playing. My one belief in games is that, no matter how hard-core you want your player base to be, no matter how well you treat them in the higher levels, no matter how unique your game... If in the beginning, you don’t hook them, it doesn’t matter. This game has loads of goods but it’s hard to find the fun. There is, however, one area where this game shines, and explains why so many players enjoy it; the combat system.

Unlike other MMOs, combat is turn-based. You travel along with (mostly invisible) mercenaries who appear when it’s time to fight. You control your mercenaries’ movements and attacks as well as your own. Mini-chess, in a way - you can’t just pound a bunch of keys and try to beat your opponent and any lag you happen to be experiencing that night. You can tell which characters are able to move by the green circles underneath them and you can select the specific opponent you want to attack. The format is 3X3 blocks. This combat style is my favorite feature of the game. I truly enjoyed it, as will anyone who likes that level of control in game-play. There’s less of a mash feel when you can spend 15 seconds to control all of your mercenaries.

If you try this and get bored and frustrated early on, please believe me, the game gets more fun the more you play it and the more side-features and tricks you learn. It’s not the questing, the wandering and the end-game that will keep you engaged. It’s the style of combat, the equipping of you and your mercenaries, the tactical combat style, the betting, the crafting, the community and a myriad of other “side” reasons to stay that you won’t discover until oh, level 20 or so. The story is okay, the quests aren’t interesting and the narration can be... annoying. The one redeeming quality is the turn-based combat. I encourage everyone to try this game out, but don’t pass judgment until you’ve ‘found the fun’ because it’s there; it just takes a while to get to.’

EVE Online (CCP Games)

Andrew Wallace – ‘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. My own favourite new feature is Wormhole Space. With this, CCP has created tiny pockets of lawless 0.0 space for players to dip their toes into, and built a system around them that’s open enough for players to interact with in their own way. Everyone can get involved in WH space, from miners to pirates, and it’s not tied to any specific region. The months since the release of Apocrypha have been full of the stories that make EVE great, tales of heroic success and unfortunate tragedy as expeditions run into Sleepers, or each other.’

Faunasphere (Big Fish Games)

Carolyn Koh--‘The essence of Faunasphere is that it is a 100% web-based, non-violent, pro-environmental casual MMO. You raise adorably cute-looking fauna, zap pollution and build your own world for your fauna to reside in. You start by adopting one of three fauna available, a Hooper (Horse), a Sniffer (Dog) or a Scooter (Tortoise) and enter the world, zapping blocks of pollution, digging up plants and with your fauna’s ability, shake trees, dive into pools, lift rocks or root around inside hollow stumps for treasure. Each action yields you Lux – the in-game currency, egg points, food or quest items and world building blocks. Gameplay is straight forward. Point and click, to do most anything, mousing over the UI and items in game to bring up tool-tips. The game is linear and gates to new lands must be unlocked by completing goals found in each area, some which are repeatable and excellent for levelling up new Fauna. If you are looking for fast-paced game, with combat, this isn’t it. Not one bit. If you are looking for a game you can play while chatting with your friends, or for a few minutes during lunch, if you enjoy the surprises of harvesting, Faunasphere may be just your cup of tea. Just don’t let it suck your life away. It is charmingly compelling.’

Warhammer Online (Mythic Entertainment)

Michael Bitton--‘Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning has been out for almost a year now. Alas, the launch of Warhammer Online was marred by myriad issues that you’ve likely heard about by now. In the past few months, I’ve watched the game go from a hotly anticipated launch to a haemorrhaging of the player base that would most closely resemble rats fleeing a sinking ship. However, Warhammer Online 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 over the

past few months 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 this 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.'

Turn-based Games

Chaos Trail (*Chaos Trail*)

Carol Mulholland – 'My last turn was rather delayed—moderator Simon tells me that he's had two jobs, so no wonder. My character, A'amria, is wending her way in a homewards direction, accompanied by her half-human guide Seneth and two young sisters who both seem endangered by their ancestry. They had a frightening night when Seneth ventured outside the hut where they were sheltering and there was the sound of keening from the surrounding forest. However, he returned without explaining where he'd gone and they resume their journey. That is, until a group of zombie-like creatures comes staggering down a hill towards them. One of the sisters has a terrifying seizure, but the zombies and their human followers are beaten off...'

Dungeonworld (*Madhouse*)

Bill Moore – '*Main Game (Bereny)*: Rumbling on, as usual... In the Underworld far beneath the land of Bereny, Sir Gyurdion, my Dwarven Knight of the White Tower, was investigating a Twisted Jungle, home of some very unfriendly pygmies recently when terrible misfortune befell him. He was supposed to be part of the party trying to rescue the Dwarven King and his people from a mysterious invader in their realm of Caldor, but got separated from his companions and more than a little sidetracked. Anyway, to cut a long story short, he made the mistake of resting his hand on an ancient menhir and found himself instantly transported to a small inter-dimensional cell, which at one time held the legendary Spindley Man, a creature who

had once threatened the whole land. This in itself would not have been too bad, but it was also the home to two Ultimate Animates, who apparently had once guarded said creature and were not too happy about the incursion of said dwarf into their abode. A couple of heavy punches from one of the animates, Whole Soul, reduced Gyurdion to within an inch of death (not just metaphorically either—he had 1 out of 50 health remaining!). His only chance was to call on the resources of the enchanters of the guild, far away in Safe Haven, to cast their scrolls of second wind and give him a temporary boost of health to allow him to run past Whole Soul to the teleport column and zap back to the menhir. Even with eighteen second winds cast on him (a new guild record), he only just made it. Hate to think what it all cost!'

Estate position: Well, now that the werewolf menace is dealt with, another problem arises. To the south of my estate lies the great Farlow Forest, home of the notorious Pendleton Keep. Recently my Baroness has been doing a little scouting of her two neighbours and she found the estate to her west has been tumbled into ruin (I blame the lousy state of the economy, myself!). While there she heard bad rumours from the peasantry and setting out towards the northern border of the forest she found the source—two Murder Trees! These demonically possessed beings were threatening the locals and, while slow-moving, would no doubt eventually threaten the peace of her estate or that of her neighbours. Possessing only a humble long bow she was not able to make much impression on the strong bark of the beasts and, since she had only basic leather armour looted from the corpse of a goblin raider, was in no position to go toe-to-toe with such enemies, either. Through an Oaken Man friend in the Nature Guild, Terin'Sha, she was able to make contact with their leader Yul Herman and various allies have been dispatched to help her out: a ranger from Pendleton Keep, some friends of her neighbour Baroness Twang, a few Crusaders who are using the wizardly teleport system to the nearby dungeon of Mirromane and some wandering druids. Who knows if this will be enough to defeat the devilish twosome? Only time will tell...'

Kyr: We Minotaurs scramble onward in our lengthy quest to reach the fables dhabad of Pyros, home of the reported rising of our god, Lazarus. Our toughest opponent at the moment is not the dune raiders, sand folk and dromedani who plague our every step. These denizens of the dunes are mere mortal folk, easily despatched by our axes, barely worthy of our notice. No, our problem is well above us—the Sun! Yes, we're in the desert again, and our life exists only as long as our water holds out. Seven bottles each seemed perfectly adequate in the cool shade of the City of Splendours market place, but now it seems a rather perverse economy. Not once, but twice, I perhaps the strongest of our little tribe, fall behind the rest and have to empty a whole bottle in order to carry on. Only three left now. But look—what is that on the next dune? A mirage? No—that unimpressive-looking hole is the entrance to Pyros, our ultimate destination and perhaps the new home of our god! Onward once more! Rockenfeller, Minotaur.'

Kyrian Settlement Position: Well, my oprions are expanding as my Fakirahni discovers ever more "Opportunities", the documents whereby my Kamir (leader) sets up new operations and acquires new skills. Now my humble peasant workers have been adapted to provide a variety

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of crops. Not only the basic Kyrian crops but specialised items such as Saffron, Rice, Oranges and Poppies (I wonder what these are used for?), which fetch much more at market.

Plus they have gained the irrigation skill, allowing the output per crop to increase. My latest venture is the purchase of a Vizier, whom I have allowed to set up shop (tent) on my Kamir's lands. Not sure how much use he's going to be, though. I asked him to tell one of my guard's fortunes and all he would say is that apparently, there is a tall, dark stranger in his future. Hmm... maybe the chicks will go for it?'

SteamWorkx: Ah yes, Derwent, land of Steam Punk and strangely infected wildlife. My engineer and warlock had decided to investigate one of the clefts which riddle the over-mined Derwent landscape. Heading down, they chanced on a small locked room with some lair loot inside. Luckily they also came upon a Derwentian Scout at the same time, one of the few characters in Kyr who can deal with locked doors. My engineer was thus able to gain entrance and rifle the loot stash. Hmm... let's see.. One small whisky bottle, one iron club, one dice pouch, one parchment and 99 gold. Not enough to start a revolution, is it? Anyway, as they left the cleft they were ambushed by a couple of head hunters armed with spectral axes. My engineer's steam gun finished one off, but the other hacked my warlock down to only 5 health. I had to borrow some healing ointments from a friend of the scout. I reckon that's my profit gone already. Oh well, maybe I'll have more luck at the Temple of Skills I hear is nearby?'

Golden Coast: Steve's latest module. Pirates and Ninjas, aar! I've gone for a balanced party of four in the southern city of Karlistane, but there are a couple of other startup locations available now. Karlistane is a strange and haunted place at the very edge of the known world. My party of a DuZeld, a male Pirate, a female Midnight Elf Rogue and Male Seafolk have started out on their adventure here. The Duzeld is a strange squid-like being with mental powers and the ability to grow very large (not surprisingly, it's small right now). Zeld have three sexes, male, female and Du, all three of whom are needed to procreate (not that I'm planning to do this right now, you understand!). He... She... It can also swim and live underwater. The Pirate is fairly self-explanatory, starting with a nice cutlass and flintlock. Sadly, it seems you can't equip both at the same time. There's also Ninjas but I haven't taken one of them as apparently they and pirates don't get on. No-one's exactly sure quite why, it's one of things you just accept, like lousy service in pubs. The Midnight Elf should come in useful when trying to open doors and chests (starts with lock picks) and apparently likes wild animals. The Seafolk is basically a plain ol' vanilla human but can swim, sail and fish. Which is nice if you live on the coast. Anyway, I haven't decided yet if I want the fearless four to adventure together or split up and explore. I think I'll investigate some of the locations nearby on the beach where they've begun. Buccaneer Skills is probably for pirates and I imagine Hidden Way Skills is probably for (hawk...spit...) those annoying ninjas! Not sure what the Beach Trader is selling. Better not be icecream, suntan oil and deck chairs, though. Can't tackle a T Rex with a deck chair, believe me!

Land of the Dead: Finally decided to start a character in this long-running module as I sadly lost one of my favourites due to an unfortunate encounter with a disciplined unit of Shellians (tortoise-like folk). Sounds fairly grim so far (well, what do you expect? she just died!). Major Cibelle

Lockshear finds herself in the Lands of the Dead with just five days to swear fealty to a new master, one of the five Lords of the Dead, or to fade away into nothingness and become, well, even deader than she is already. These range from the fairly benign-sounding White Lady, right down to The Reaper, the slash-and-burn nutcase who recently has been making a bit part appearance in the "real" world of Bereny. Also, she keeps hearing quotes in her head from a book called "Walking with the Dead" by Jessica Stark that she has no recollection of ever reading...'

Brokenlands: The Slythian fellowship wander through the land of Infernia which, as its name would seem to suggest, is an area of lava pits, hot water, fire creatures and... a strange magic trader called "Sidekicks R Us". She only sells, well... sidekicks. Since Brother Kharan was feeling relatively flush with cash, he forewent the poxy skeletons and orcs and went for a top-of-the-range Amber Dragon called Arcane for a cool 300 gold pieces. Having got the loan of the huge beast, the brother let it loose on the lesser denizens of Infernis, only to find that (a) being a fire dragon, he mostly fought by breathing fire: and (b) the occupants of the lava pits were, not surprisingly, rather immune to fire attacks. Back to square one. Anyway, this was a great excuse to head on to the next level in our team's efforts to get back out of the broken lands and back to Bereny... Keldassi Flow, land of rivers and lakes. If only he can find a cup, Arcane could at least boil him some water for a nice cup of tea...'

Einstein's Lot (*Ulaidh Games*)

Carol Mulholland – 'Moderator Chris Morris can very skilfully convey the menacing presence of mythological creatures from Ancient Egypt and from fairy tales in apparently normal modern times. My character has encountered an invisible serpent, the Elven Queen, cats under the control of the goddess Bast and a friendly female vampire. Now she has to decide which human beings to trust. Not so easy, against a university background...'

Lands of Androhil (*Bob Fry*)

Bill Moore – 'Dwerrin and his two dwarven friends head down into the Great Furnace, far below the City under the Sea. The furnace proves to be full of smelters and lava buildings, presumably to produce something, though who knows what. Unfortunately, while there are a few bridges over the rivers of lava, the dwarfs' way forward is eventually blocked by crusted lava, for which they will need some kind of fire-resistant footwear to get any further over. There is also a crack, however, from which fire imps continually appear and, while the three are able to deal with the imps without too much trouble, it begs further investigation. As they crawl down it, they discover they are in the lair of the Goat Demon and are attacked by the eponymous demon, Zagan. Major dust-up, but out heroes eventually come out on top. Now it's just a question of picking up the loot... Hang on, what's this? A couple of locked chests. Cliara, can I borrow your lock picks? You did remember to bring them, didn't you? Cliara?'

Legends (*Harlequin Games*)

Dean Johnson – 'Still the most complex, good value for money, fantasy/strategy game available.'

Lizards (*Madhouse*)

Bill Moore – 'Game COI: Up to turn 13 now and, for

what is usually a fast action game, the political situation so far has led to a surprising amount of stability. Only one of the fifteen players has bought the farm and, while there's plenty of fighting going on, no-one has developed as an obvious favourite yet. It seems every time it looks like someone is going to get ahead the others gang up on him. I myself am attacking three players on different borders and, while I've made some gains, I've yet to be in a good position to go in for the kill and take any of their home dens. You'd think we were playing a game of Starweb the amount of alliance building and breaking that's going on.'

Serim Ral (*Incubus Designs*)

Bill Moore – '*SR26 (Ancient Realms)*: Now up to turn 154 (!) this one is proving a bit of a stayer. Two well-balanced alliances have been fighting it out for about 100 turns now and every time one seems about to get on top, the other manages to do something to counter them. Most of our problems come when players drop out and each alliance has gone through a whole succession of players, finding new ones to replace them each time. This time it's our enemies have been hit as two of their allies in the south-east drop out. This turns a lot of cities and artefacts neutral and gives the other side a small window of opportunity before they find a replacement. My ally Dantalus and I seem to have made a breakthrough by pushing our opposition out of Italy and are currently fighting our way through Greece and modern-day Yugoslavia. Our opponents then counter-attack in Ireland, Britain and Scandinavia. Lots more (virtual) blood to be shed yet, I think!'

SR35 (Ancient Realms): At turn 36 now and the game seems about to be fundamentally re-ordered. My alliance under the Scythian god Tabiti-Hestia has mostly fallen apart due to a number of drop-outs for various reasons and the alliance of the Scandian god Gebeleizis seems like it may be about to take victory by default. The remaining players have therefore decided to get together and re-organise so that we can have two or three well-balanced alliances and a decent game instead of a walk-over. It's a bit more overt than the usual way of alliance building but it beats paying money for a lousy game. I'll stick around to see how it works out, anyway.'

Starweb (*Flying Buffalo*)

Bill Moore – '*SW-A1366*: Finally reaches its conclusion on turn 20, quite late for a Starweb game due to the high victory point limit of 7546. As suspected, I didn't quite do enough with my Apostle NOVA to get victory, coming in fourth with 5454. I had a lot of fun, though, planet busting a whole swath of worlds towards the end there. My failure was in finding and selecting a profitable enough jihad target. I started out on BORG, a merchant, which wasn't bad, but he dropped out and his worlds were gobbled up fairly quickly by his neighbours and I had a lot of competition for them. In the end I had to pick on someone else and got stuck with a pirate, URSA. These don't make awfully good targets for an apostle as they generally have low population worlds due to their continuous looting, which stunts population growth. The really odd thing about this anonymous game was that, rather than being won by a pirate or berserker, who seem to be popular picks and generally dominate the standings, it was won by a merchant, WYRM (Tony Gribi), and second place went to an Artefact Collector, FLUX (Paul W Brown). Congratulations, guys, must have been some strategy!'

VGA Planets (*www.drewhead.org*)

Dean Johnson – 'Shareware created by Tim Weissman. Hosted free on *www.drewhead.org*. Great depth/complexity. Shareware turn-based pebm space opera.'

Board & Card Games

Caylus (*Rio Grande Games*)

Andrew Collins – 'Caylus is a brilliantly designed game which offers a range of paths to victory. It is this variety of competing strategies and the way that players need to adapt to the strategies of others that make this game so enjoyable and re-playable. Our group have had winners that have not built any buildings, winners that have contributed little to castle and winners that have won by forcing a quick completion to the castle. These are only some of the evolving strategies employed. Each of the potential moves is relatively simple and easy to learn, but the complexity that some people talk about is because of the complex ways in which the moves interact and the variety of potential approaches. This is exactly what makes the game so appealing. Finally, the board is the best I have seen. Once you have read and understood the rules there is no need to refer back to them as the board provides visual reminders of all the rules. The only problem with the game is that involves building a castle for France and as an Englishman this is a tough concept to support. I reassure myself with the knowledge that in nearly all our games the foundations or walls are only ever half completed.'

Carcassonne (*Rio Grande Games*)

Andrew Collins – 'Carcassonne is easily the most popular game on my gaming shelves. Simple rules and an ever-changing game board, hence a game that is never played the same twice, and a strategy that is always evolving. I think the one thing that makes this game the most popular in my group of players is that anyone, I have yet to have one that I have introduced into this game not like it and want to play it again, can pick this up, learn the strategy and game mechanics in the first go through, and easily desire to play again. The perfect game for relaxing and laughing with friends after a long week.'

Conquest of the Empire (*Eagle Games*)

Andrew Collins – 'Conquest of the Empire is the finest of the MB Gamemaster Series games; it's a multiplayer struggle to be the last man standing (but nowhere near as acrimonious as Diplomacy). As a pretender to the title of Caesar, you marshal your infantry, cavalry, and catapults, and collect tribute from provinces under your control. All troops must be led either by a general or your Caesar (but don't lose him). Building cities allows you to collect more tribute, and allows you to hook up your provinces to facilitate quick movement (one of the neater parts of the game--you can move from Asia Minor to Carthage in one turn, thanks to those roads). Galleys allow you to sail across the sea and engage in naval combat. At two points in the game, inflation hits and the prices for units double, then triple, which puts the squeeze on the players who have not expanded their influence or taken others out of the game. A turn consists of movement, combat, purchasing, then placing your units (always in your home capitol). Combat is handled through targeting a unit in your opponent's

force, then rolling a die. The presence of a catapult or fortified city may allow you to hit that target better, a feature called "combat advantage." We have found that gaining combat advantage is just a luck fest using the normal rules, though, so we play by a number of House Rules.'

Killer Bunnies (*Playroom Entertainment*)

Andrew Collins – 'Killer Bunnies is a fun game that holds the attention of my 10-year old daughter. I also find the game quite entertaining. Although the game is fun I do find some problems with it. Firstly, there are situations in the game that come up that are not explained within the rules. Different combinations of cards cause issues where we need to make up a rule for future games. It is not a big deal, just annoying. Secondly, at times the game can be a bit tedious. Sometime when a bunch of cards come into play it makes the rules a bit tiresome, but not too badly. Overall I would recommend the game for families.'

Union and Confederate Military Leaders playing cards (US Games Systems)

Andrew Collins – 'This facsimile reproduction of playing cards was originally published in 1863 by M. Nelson, New York. This double deck set of Union Generals & Confederate Generals (from the American Civil War) features an engraved portrait of a different general or statesman on each card. I bought this card game with great expectations, but was soon alarmed to note that General Lee had been given a three of Hearts status. Then, to my shock and dismay, I find that one of the best generals of the entire war did not even receive a card, and that of course was Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest. Poor General Grant was only a five of diamonds even after having just won the battle of Vicksburg. Many obscure generals were included, obviously men who might have been well known in 1863, but who appropriately descended into the jaws of obscurity soon after the war ended, and are completely unknown now to even the most studied civil war scholar. On the upside, there are photos of several key celebrity Generals, including some politicians such as Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stevens, but no Abe Lincoln. Be warned, the photo quality on some cards is very poor. In short, save your money, instead buy a bag of cracker-jacks, and don't waste your time on this largely useless and disappointing card game.'

El Grande (*Rio Grande*)

Andrew Collins – 'El Grande is the grandfather of area control games, and it still works after all these years. After reading so many great things about this game, I finally decided to get my own edition of it. The Decennial Edition includes four different expansions making the gaming possibilities almost endless. I have not found a reason to venture beyond the basic game yet as it still has all the charm and strategy I need. As you work to extend your influence over Spain, other Caballeros will be battling it out with you in a fight that is incredibly brief when one considers all that is going on. Although the timing of the game can seem short, there are so many different ways you can use your turn and those in power will continually shift every round. Why go for the latest and flashiest when Wolfgang Kramer gave us all we need in El Grande? Find out why this game is a classic.'

The Mighty Pen

Your views and queries about game issues ...

Free Flagships?

I think you made the right choice in going digital. I'm not as convinced as you are that there's not a market for premium content (I believe your side of the puddle is a bit more resistant to paying for access on the web than my side, but I'm basing my thoughts on a statistically tiny sample.) At any rate, you might think about having both free content and for-pay content.

Jon Ogden (Rimworlds)

It must be rather lowering to produce your excellent magazine for free on the website. I'd be prepared to pay for a PDF, myself. There must be a market for a quality magazine like *Flagship* on the internet?

Mark Ellison

[I reckon that it'll be impossible to stop people forwarding Flagship material to their friends for free: a lot of internet folk do sincerely believe that everything can and should be distributed for free. I'm keenly watching to see what'll happen.]

Spelling?

Shouldn't your news column be called Despatches rather than Dispatches? The former spelling seems to be more in line with my dictionary definition...

Mark Gordon

[I've checked with my Oxford English Dictionary, which gives "despatches" as a variant of "dispatches" and advises the "dispatches" spelling as preferable on historical grounds. However, words do change and rightly so: it's how our language advances. So perhaps a division is arising between the meanings of the two spellings? According to OED even Dr Johnson got this wrong, entering the word in his dictionary under 'des-' when all the examples he gives are spelt 'dis-'. Thanks, Mark, I like brooding over this sort of stuff...]

Maybe it's worth adding here that in Flagship generally we always try to keep US spellings for US contributors and British spelling for UK contributors.

Of course, there's always the odd typo, which leaps up to hit me in the eye when I open the latest issue...]



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