

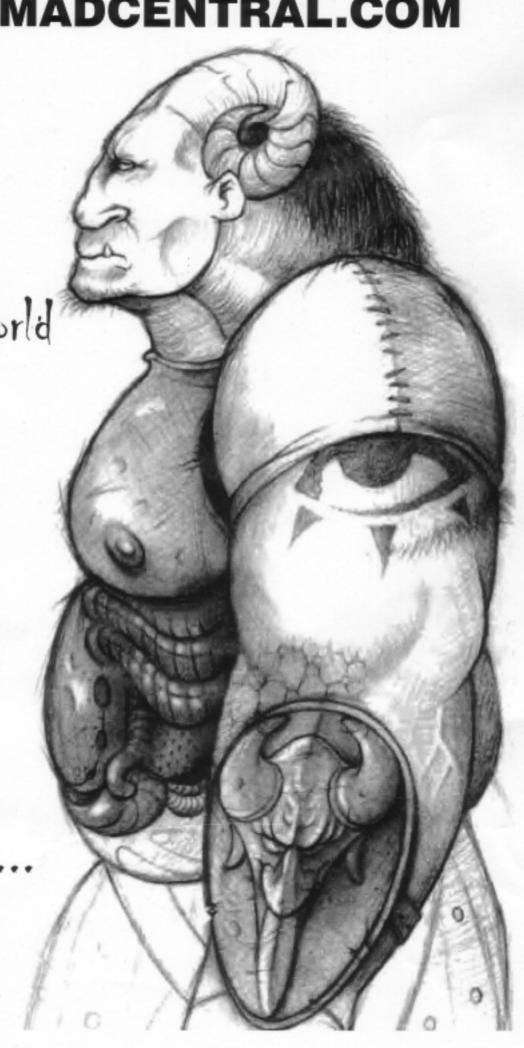
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Free Play in the Broken Lands

Madhouse the darker side.



Report from the Bridge

... AND ONWARDS!

SOME OF YOU have already heard the sad news that my husband Ken died at Christmas. If not, you'll understand why this issue has been delayed. Ken was the inspiration and support for my whole life and I miss him terribly. I do still intend to continue editing Flagship, despite this great loss. I know that the Flagship team can count on your support.

Our major incentive is the liveliness of the PBM hobby: its games, its moderators and - most important, of course - its players.

You'll be pleased to see what a wide range of games we cover this issue. Among them is the exciting new power- and adventure- game Aspects of Might from Justin Parsler of Silver Dreamer: hot stuff. If wargames are your thing, we've an article on the well-regarded Napoleonic wargame Austerlitz. If you love sports games, you'll gladly join with us to welcome our new Sports Editor this issue, and be interested to read the description by the designer of Neutral Zone of his work in getting this up and running. A fantasy wargames addict? Learn what it's like to start Middle Earth PBM as a newcomer, and about the varied challenges offered by the splendidly-named Eldritch, which has been running for several years now without much coverage in our pages. Yes, yes, there's even more: Elvaria, Quest GME, Chevia and the new safari game Great White Hunter (it's good-hearted, honest: no animals really get injured).

John Harrington continues his series about the amateur zines, with an article on Railway Rivals. We welcome Paul Evans, who has agreed to write about non-PBM games on a regular basis, and starts this issue with an account of new games seen at the huge German games fair, Spiel. Steve Tierney's frank, upbeat and eagerly awaited Retroscope returns, while Bob McLain reveals his true colours - which aren't in pastel shades.

Thanks to all who've contributed to this issue despite a difficult time here, and to Colin Forbes and Tom Fyfe who've helped me to put it together. We hope you'll enjoy Flagship 95 as readers, and will work together with us towards issue 96 and then onwards - on towards Flagship 100, and beyond ...



Flagship

Issue No. 95

February/March 2002

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Advertising, subscriptions and all contributions Produced by Westpoint Ltd., FLAGSHIP.

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ROLEPLAYING GAMES



Justin Parsler of Silver Dreamer writes about designing his **Aspects of Might** in this issue, but we've also learnt that a second version of his celebrated powergame Absolute Power has

just been launched as **Absolute Power II: The Regency**. Play will be weekly, at £5 a turn, and the scenario is set in the future of the old Absolute Power universe. Good news, as there was some uncertainty earlier about whether this relaunch would happen. There won't be a great deal of space for new players, so if you're interested contact Silver Dreamer right away.

Adrian Bagley has decided to close his **Legend of the Stars**, a roleplaying game set in outer space. 'The players all seemed to be enjoying it,' he reports, 'but took longer and longer to send in orders, until eventually the game just stopped. The curse of the team game, I suppose... People don't mind sending in computer-moderated letter and number codes to a deadline, but they like to roleplay at their own pace.' The game ran for several years, though, starting in 1998, so it's not done too badly.

Mike Absolom is currently running the **South area of Saturnalia** for free but the game is currently full. Following the birth of his first child, Mike's time is somewhat limited, so a waiting list is in operation. Prospective new players should note that they may have a lengthy wait before they can join the game. Note that other areas of Saturnalia do have room for new players, so it's worth asking around.

WORG are starting a new area of Saturnalia. The Viridian Islands is a group game: overthe-table Saturnalia gaming sessions have been around for years, but this is probably the first postal group PBM in the Saturnalia world. WORG are also working on two games (acquired from Lombot), namely Throne and Battle Dirge. The latter received a good review in Flagship, so it's encouraging to see the game may be continuing later this year.

FANTASY WARGAMES



Harlequin Games have been having a hectic time with their **Middle Earth PBM**. They ran a Face to Face session in Cardiff over Christmas, where players

turned up at the office to play through a game of Middle Earth. They say that 'everyone had a great time, averaging three hours sleep a night' and that 'the atmosphere is awesome'.

Then, just a couple of weeks later, they drove to Copenhagen and ran another game, with the Scandinavian World Championship team playing another team. 'Once again,' they say, it was a 'fantastic ambience, as players hurriedly collate and attempt to write orders in half an hour.'

Because these events have been so successful, Harlequin are off to the USA in June, and running another Face to Face in Cardiff in July. Phew, sounds like hard work but great fun. too.

Their auto-input system for Middle Earth is now in play-test, and the Introductory game is now in its final stages of playtest - you're welcome to join up. (Just when you thought things were calming down, eh?) For those interested in the film *Fellowship of the Ring*, they decided not to go for a big push on this but new players have joined up all the same.

Oh, and their website has had a major overhauled: feedback, as always, is welcome on this: www.middleearthgames.com

Harlequin's most recent game of **Legends**, NIC26, has nearly reached the full 100 players, so they will soon be closing it down to new setups. Until then, any new players will be given some help in catching up: they'll be getting accelerated setups and will be allowed to do the first month only adventures on their first turn.

Harlequin used a new technique to balance the game start, with a web-based sign up scheme that let all the players see which races and factions were popular. They've found that this has led to the best game start since they've run Legends, and they've resolved to use the same method in all their future games.

Harlequin's **Serim Ral 52** comes out in the next two weeks. They apologise to those who have had a wait for this game, but think the wait will be worth it though. This is your last chance to get in at the game start!

Steve White reports that his relaunch of **Kings** of Steel is now making steady progress. It's a hand-moderated game, so quite hard work, but Steve has been developing spread-sheets to reduce the record keeping and is working on an improved appearance for the turnsheets.

The next KoS game is filling rapidly. There may be some places still vacant in it, but you'll need to be prompt if you wish to apply.

NON-FANTASY WARGAMES



Time Patterns' **Crisis!** has been suspended following Ken Mulholland's death, but it will resume after a pause. The existing games

will definitely run to their conclusion, and Time Patterns are hoping to start new games of this old favourite. Apologies to any applicants who haven't been acknowledged yet: cheques won't be cashed until the next game is ready to start.

Richard Miles has asked us to pass on an apology to all players of his **Squad Leader**, who haven't received turns since late summer because he broke two fingers and stretched some tendons (during a kick-boxing lesson, no less!). This left him unable to write, and only able to type with discomfort. He also thanks his players for voting for Squad Leader in our ratings poll. Turns in the game have probably resumed by now.

KJC are offering free startups in their next game of **Warlord** for anyone who hasn't tried the game before and who lives in Britain or Europe. There's no obligation to continue playing if you don't like the look of the game, but note that the number of places available will only be

enough to fill the game, and allocated on a first come first served basis.

Warlord is set in a post-nuclear world, where you seek to become the dominant world power. Starting off with basic forces and technology, you'll obtain more information and power as your empire increases:

http://www.kjcgames.com/warlordf.htm

A waiting list is now open for the next game of **Prometheus**, an empire-building wargame from Hunky Monkey. Start-up is £10, though note that *Flagship* readers can claim a free turn using the discount coupon enclosed with this issue. Stand-by positions are also available in existing games, this being a good way to learn the ropes. Stand by positions are £5 plus two free turns existing players who have the rules can get a standby position for free including a free turn! All turns are £2.50. Play is available via post, PDF email or full colour HTML email.

Subscribe to Flagship online
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www.pbmgames.com/flagship

What is Play By Mail?

THE PROCESS is simple. Players send their orders for each turn in the game to a central moderator (or GM), who works out the results and sends them back. This simple process allows hundreds of players to enter game worlds of great depth, to contact each other between turns for discussion and negotiation and to play at a time that suits them.

In most games everybody's orders are processed together for each turn, simultaneously, but the results that are sent back are the individual ones for your own position. The other players won't know what you're planning unless you choose to tell them, which offers many possibilities for joint and covert action. There are all sorts of games, with all sorts of settings: roleplaying, wargaming, adventuring, empire-building, sports games and plenty more! Some are simple, some are complex, but they will all take skill and planning to play them well

If you've never tried Play By Mail, give it a go. It will be unlike any other kind of gaming that you've played.

SCIENCE FICTION GAMES



Harlequin Games report that a new Star Quest module is under way, set in a galaxy 'devastated by previous wars where the very stars themselves were among the

victims, leaving the remaining clans struggling for space and survival amongst the debris of a dying galaxy.'

The programmer has just finished a new version of the front-end software. This allows players to receive turns, write orders and collate information. Together with the mapping programme and plans for future updates, this is breathing new life into a classic game.

Various factions in KJC's **Beyond the Stellar Empire** are seeking new recruits. These include the Imperial Services, the Confederate Naval Forces, the Hive, the Brotherhood and the Imperial Stellar Patrol; each of these offers its own take on life in BSE and a range of benefits to prospective allies.

Dominic Miller of Rebus Games, who's just started moderating **Galaxy**, has decided to run his first game as a free play-test because he's made quite a few changes to the game.

Galaxy is an sf wargame. You play the leader of a race of people living in a galaxy populated by other, hostile races. So your challenge is to conquer new worlds, defend your own planets, build up a strong economic base, and then, of course, to dominate the whole galaxy ...

dominic@rebusgames.com

Starweb is one of the earliest but best-ever PBM games for those of you who enjoy interacting with your fellow players. You choose one of six different ways to win the game - as a Pirate, a Berserker, an Empire-Builder, a Merchant, an Artefact Collector or an Apostle - each with a different path to victory. The winning number of victory points is chosen by averaging out all the players' votes, so quite when to make your decisive moves is something that you have to judge for yourself.

Starweb isn't available in Europe now, but its US designer, Rick Loomis of Flying Buffalo Inc, is offering free sample games for novices, to be played by email. Each 'trial game' has only six players (one of each character type) and fewer worlds, and lasts exactly 12 turns. One of the six players is an experienced player who will take the peaceful role of Merchant or Artefact-Collector, and who will try to help you out as a mentor. At the end of the 12 turns, the player with the highest score wins a coupon covering the \$5 setup fee for a regular game.

If you want to try this, send Flying Buffalo your name, email address, postal mailing address and your preference in character type and code name (up to 9 letters). You may not get the character type you prefer, of course, as there is only one of each per game.

This won't give you the whole experience of playing Starweb, but you'll learn a lot about the game, and have the benefit of a mentor, and it's all for free.

Incidentally, if you prefer to play a paying game from Flying Buffalo, they can accept payment via PAYPAL, or Visa, Mastercard, Discover, American Express, Diners Club, the JCB card or a postal money order made out in dollars.

www.flyingbuffalo.com

Steve Arnott reports that the waiting list for the next game of **Galactic Invasion III** is now filling up. This sf wargame is based on the same system as Battle of the Planets, run successfully in the past by Harlequin but now discontinued. The game is free and runs to two week deadlines by email only, from:

gi3@notreally.co.uk

POLITICAL GAMES

A new American political game, **E Pluribus Unum - Inside the US Government**, should be approaching its launch around now. More information is obtainable from its GM, Bryan Tribble, at:

http://epu.omega-games.net

CONVENTIONS



OXCON 2002: February 15th-17th at Keble College,

Oxford. There's a

Laser Quest on the Friday evening, which must be booked in advance. Tournaments for Diplomacy, Settlers of Catan and Lost Cities, with plenty of other games available over the weekend. Details from:

http://come.to/oxcon

MASTERCON: 22nd to 24th February 2002, in *The Hind Hotel, Wellingborough, Northants*. Tournaments in Diplomacy, 18XX and Settlers, along with plenty of other games. Details from David Norman:

david@ellought.demon.co.uk

MADHOUSE MINI CON

Mini Convention / Pubmeet on the 23rd and 24th of February, at The Bell Public House, Hemel Hempstead. Madhouse have pulled out all the stops this year to bring you another 2-day minicon. Arrive at midday, grab a drink or two and get in the mood, then at 1PM sharp events will begin. A full Madhouse team will be on hand to make sure there's always plenty to do, and that's without the obligatory scheming, planning and diabolical diplomacy!

TOWERCON

22 - 24 March 2002, Claremont Hotel, Blackpool, Lancashire. TowerCon is an independent games convention held in Blackpool which is now in its 5th year. The event is held at the Claremont Hotel who provide most of the residential accommodation.

TowerCon aims to provide a gaming environment that is relaxed and friendly and caters to a variety of gaming types. Board Games, Freeform, RPG's and war gaming are all supported (CCG's are currently not supported due to space constraints).

There are also a few "unique" items - Glynn Mossop's *Gunfight* which is a great ice breaker at the convention, and the giant *Settlers of Catan* board on which their final of the Settlers competition is played. (Rumours of a Craggy Island variant remain unsubstantiated).

www.towercon.co.uk

DICECON: A boardgames convention, to be held on 25th August 2002 in the *Central Hotel, Glasgow*. Tournaments with prizes for *Settlers* and *Ivanhoe*, plus lots of games that you can play and leave as you wish, including United, Grand Slam and Grand National. There's plenty of free space for boardgaming at the venue. The organisers emphasise that they're going to make sure that 'novices (including family groups) get a gentle introduction and have something to do rather than wander round looking at lots of other people enjoying themselves.'

www.dicecon.com

FIRMS



Andy and Cara Simmonds of Mindless Games have sent us the good news of the birth of Robert Alexander

Simmonds (Robbie) on Sat 29th

December, a brother for their daughter Caitlin. Very best wishes from the Flagship office for this new arrival.

Play By Electron Games are offering trial games of **Eldritch** and **Iron Kings** for new players, which allow you to try either game for 10 turns at no charge.

http://www.pbegames.com

Ian Brumby of **Fenris Games** has suspended his roleplaying games at present, following a change of house which has involved him in a lot of rebuilding. The bathroom and the kitchen had to take precedence over converting the loft into an office, which seems pretty reasonable. Ian is planning to get back to his PBM games in time, but since he can't realistically take on any new players for a while we'll remove him from *Galactic View* until we hear of his return. It's

still possible to write to him to reserve a place for the restart, and Ian also says that he'll refund credit to anyone who isn't prepared to wait. Good luck with the refurbishment, Ian!

KJC Games have announced an increase in their charges for all their games, but only by 10p or so per turn. Not bad: especially since it's their first price rise across the board since 1996!

They can accept payments in euros from all European players outside the UK: check their Overseas Information Sheet on the website: http://www.kjcgames.com/osinfof.htm

Jeremy Wasden of **Fuel PBM** is prepared to

extend his special offer of a complete game of **Continental Rails** or **Heavens Above** for only £35.00, for another issue. Both are well-tried games, so this is a good saving.

The US GM for **Adventures By Mai**l, Keith R LeBlanc, asks us to remind readers that ABM runs email games of **Monster Island**, **Quest II**, **It's A Crime!** and **Smuggler's Run**. US readers may be interested in noting that ABM also runs a mail only version of **Isle Of Crowns**.

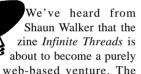
Most of these games are available for UK players from KJC Games, but it's worth noting the ABM link both for our overseas readers and for keen players who can't get enough of a particular game! Keith stresses that there's no commercial rivalry between ABM and KJC: the two firms have worked closely together for many years.

As a special offer, if any of you mention that you heard about ABM in Flagship, Keith will start you up for free and give you some free turns to kick start you in any ABM game you choose. The ABM website is:

http://www.adventuresbymail.com

Stewart Leary of **Received Wisdom** reports that all of his games may now be played by email and, where played by email, the only cost to Flagship readers is £9.99 (or \$15) per year, as there are no per turn costs. He's increased his range of games with **Mighty Heroes**, a superhero game, and his **Chicken Run** is taking off in a big way, with players in the US (and other countries) joining in this and his other games: all 'due to email making the world smaller!'

ZINES



GMs who co-operate in its production will be continuing with their games, but now all results will be displayed on the Infinite Threads website: www.infinite-threads.co.uk

This will require more work on Shaun's part as the webmaster, but he says that he's willing to take this on, and is looking forward to improving your gaming environment and experience. He plans to improve the look and functionality of the website, with 'a discussion board, better graphics, more user-friendly navigation etc'.

Shaun also wants to increase the number of games offered, and is currently on the lookout for GMs (and players alike) for any new games which come along. He'd welcome suggestions for any games which you'd like included, whether as a GM or player. Any games which seem likely to have a reasonable following for repeated games will be considered, and even those which can gather enough players for a one-off.

Interestingly, Shaun is considering starting a number of role-playing games: there aren't many RPG games in zines. Apart from this, there are plans for a few Diplomacy games, both standard and variants, and games of **Stars!** and **Galaxy** if there is sufficient interest. There are various games which are already running, of course: check out the web-site for more on these.

PLAYTESTS

Ready for playtest is **Blood Royal** from James Doyle, which he describes as a game of 'dynastic inheritance, diplomatic intrigue and medieval warfare'. For more information, email him at:

james.doyle@virgin.net

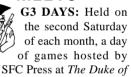
Kevin Johns is looking for 16 playtesters to help with the beta test of his new football game, **Soccer Sensation**. He'll be running this by post, so is asking for £5 to cover the cost of postage: this will bring you a 15-game season. If you're interested in helping, contact Kevin at: 12 Tregullan, Illogan, Redruth, Cornwall TR16 4DG.

STOP PRESS

TBA Games (Austerlitz & Championship League) are now Supersonic Games. More news next issue!

Madhouse are looking for lots and lots of playtesters for a fast, silly web-based game. Check out: www.madcentral.com/hauntedmanor. Its completely free, very simple, it runs daily, it'll take you just a few minutes each day to write some orders. All players are welcome, the more the merrier. It's completely automatic, and runs in your webbrowser and by automatically sending you a short email of turn results each day. Madhouse say they need LOADS of people to sign up for it, to make the first game busy and fun. But please <code>only</code> sign up if you are actually going to bother to play. No timewasters required.

MEETS



York, 35 New Cavendish St, London W1 from 12.30 onwards. Admission is free. Contact SFC Press Old Dover Road, London SE3 8SJ; email events@sfcp.co.uk

HARLEQUIN GAMES: Plans are definitely afoot for a role-playing weekend this summer, with the date to be announced. It will combine a pubmeet, a face to face role-playing session, board games 'and, well, more meeting in the pub'. It's primarily intended for players in Harlequin's hand-moderated games, Exile and Crack of Doom, but if anyone else is interested in coming along, just get in touch with Harlequin at the address in *Galactic View*.

COLIN ANDREWS: A date hasn't been fixed yet, but contact Colin at the address in *GV* if you fancy joining the Over-The-Table RPG which he's planning to run in a month or so. Colin is a well-experienced GM and promises an exciting RPG session.

WORLD GAMES

Zen Games' old favourite, **Tribes of Crane**, is usually full, but its GM Melvyn Huntley was recently able to reduce the waiting list: now's the time to apply if you want to try this famous, long-running game.

Ken Mulholland

1940 - 2001

Ken Mulholland (always Ken, never Kenneth) was born in Liverpool in 1940. The eldest of six children, he went to Quarry Bank Grammar School, then Manchester University where he read Physics. He specialised in Acoustics as a post-graduate, taking his BSc at Southampton and his PhD at Liverpool. He lectured at Liverpool, then at Aston University in Birmingham, teaching Acoustics and then Transport Management until taking early retirement in '95. Previously, his research work abroad included a year at MIT in Boston and periods in Ottawa, Vancouver and Grenoble.

PBMers know Ken for his work on games, of course. He was always a games enthusiast: bridge, boardgames, computer games, roleplaying games and live roleplaying games. Roleplaying was discovered from a D&D set picked up in the USA; Ken ran free-form sessions until it became too difficult to keep a group together. He discovered PBM from an advert for Starweb in one of the sf magazines, and soon found that PBM offered chances to play through an otherwise busy life. Players and GMs alike found Ken helpful and considerate. Throughout his life he was always ready to assist people with both advice and practical help.

Ken's own game, StarGlobe, was designed in his spare time during study leave in Grenoble and programmed on a home computer when he returned to Britain. His scientific background gave him a particular interest in sf, and StarGlobe started as a simulation of starship flight in 3D before getting adapted into a playable game. Ken didn't regard science as a dry subject, but as something to inspire wonder. Computers were useful tools, but above all fun. Ken was an active man, who enjoyed hang-gliding, skiing, swimming and walking the coastal foot-path. He had a passionate love of music, from Buddy Holly to Mahler, and was a keen concert-goer. Ken had a dry, sharp, disrespectful sense of humour, almost always on the side of the underdog. Oh, and the most appalling handwriting!

Tributes & Memories

Rod Hudson was Ken's PhD student at Liverpool University:

In the sixties he got me to appreciate Bach on a Moog synthesiser and Simon & Garfunkel. He introduced me to Pachebal's Canon, and whenever I hear it I think of Ken and his telling of his abortive search for Rachebad's Canon until he realised the composer's actual name.

Keith Attenborough was a colleague at Liverpool University, now Professor at Hull University:

Everything Ken did was done to the full. There is an international list of acousticians who owe something of their careers to Ken. My vivid memories of visiting Ken in Boston in the 1970s (he was on sabbatical at MIT) include several hairy rides in his Ford Mustang, being thrown out of the Bridge Club at MIT and throwing up after fried clams. Ken had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the south coast area and the cliff walks. I remember too the model railway which had to be dismembered to accommodate guests and the continuing collection through the Peco shop at Beer. Our conversations about Science and Science Fiction were always lively, knowledgeable (at least on Ken's part) and controversial. Ken had great love of music, notably the playing of the slow movement of the Moonlight sonata - with which he became increasingly confident over the years! And, of course, the many Majong sessions when Ken was the only person who knew the rules!'

Alasdair Traill, a colleague at Aston University:

I had a great deal of regard and respect for Ken, both as a friend and as one of my most valuable colleagues.'

Paul Truelove, a colleague at Aston University:

'...the kind of colleague who was very much his own person, pursuing his own enthusiasms and unbowed by the university system, and always ready to cope with the absurdities of our department with the best possible response: humour.'



Ken & Carol at Dawlish, Devon

Rob Harper, State of Mind Games:

'While I didn't know Ken as well as some, I considered him a friend, and respected him greatly. His dedication to the postal gaming hobby over such a long time was a real inspiration, and I will always remember the times at conventions when Ken had me giggling hysterically with his dry witparticularly when I ended up sitting next to him at a GM panel some years back. Ken will be greatly missed by many of us in the postal games hobby.'

Stephen White, GM of 'Kings of Steel'

'Although I never had the opportunity to meet Ken personally, I still feel that he was someone I have known, even though the contact was limited to letters and phone calls. Ken helped me greatly over the years with his interest and support in the hobby.'

Mo Holkar, game designer (Undying King Games) and friend:

T've just been reading back through some of our old correspondence, and I don't know how many times, over the last ten years and more, he unselfishly gave me support, advice and opinion - and, of course, the wonderful gift of his wicked humour, which made even the briefest of notes a pleasure.

But I know for sure that without what Carol and Ken built and provided together, I would never have achieved half the things I set out to. And it goes without saying that everyone in the postal games hobby owes his memory a tremendous debt - for opening up new possibilities of gaming, for the solidest example of quality and professionalism, and above all for years of dedication to making the hobby bigger, friendlier, betterconnected, and generally a happier place for all of us.'

Bob McLain, columnist, opponent and friend:

'Ken was a man of principle, calm and forthright, with the best intentions. Carol can be proud of him'

Nick Palmer, former Flagship editor, friend, now MP for Broxstowe In all the years I knew Ken, I never saw him shaken or ill-tempered: he was one of the most completely reliable people I have ever met. In a hobby with its share of flaky characters, this was completely invaluable, and accounted for a good deal of Flagship's success. And quite apart from that, he was such a nice man: amiable, helpful and decent. We've all been lucky to have had him around.'

Aspects of Might

Co-operate to Rebuild a World

Two viewpoints about this deep new adventure game ...

First, MARK HOWE's experiences ...

Aspects of Might is set on the Lakham Peninsula of the world of Arcanos. The Peninsula is 500 by 500 squares on the map, a vast area.

Arcanos is a world filled with godlike powers called Aspects, which are taken from the Tarot: the Emperor, the Star, Justice, Temperance and many more exist, 25 in total, each with its own outlook on things. Once Arcanos prospered and many 'Aspected' people (those who have a strong connection to one Aspect over the others) existed there. The Aspects, however, chose to withdraw from the world and during this period, the Penance, only a few people, the Chosen, retained any link to the Aspects and had to wait for them to return.

The game is set as the Penance is just ending. Towns are slowly being awoken by the Chosen and people are once more regaining contact with the Aspects. Players take the role of these 'Aspected' individuals, and must endeavour to rebuild the world and find a place for themselves in it.

What's involved?

You begin in one of the awakened towns, each of which has some story to it and its own things to do. But players are just as free to choose their own course of action and goals. Some build and develop in the towns they start in; some head off to found communities of their own; some explore; some fight the beasts and monsters; some seek to develop lost lore; some seek positions in a guild or a council; some research new magics (called Suits); indeed, some do a bit of everything. The realm of what's possible is immense, and you are not limited to just one course, you can try as much or as little as suits your taste.

The turns are sent via email only, in a handy Adobe PDF format; the readers for these files are free and easily available. Communication in the game takes place over the 'Astral Web', as if every Aspected being has a form of mental contact with each other. It's a Yahoo group list, which you join by sending a blank email to:

AstralWeb-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

One of the key things about this game which I personally found enjoyable was the In Character (IC) conversations that go on via this list: sometimes the traffic is heavy, but more often than not it is all roleplaying, with few Out of Character (OOC) messages.

Creating characters

A few choices are needed for character creation. First, you must choose a bloodline. As initially it's only possible to play humans, it's the bloodlines that offer variety. Each of them has certain stats that it's higher or lower in than others, as well as one Aspect with which it's commonly associated. (Incidentally, more bloodlines have become available to choose from as other towns have opened up, but you can only find out about these once in play.) Anyway, I chose to play a Volkenan (strong and healthy), and a

Aspects of Might at a glance

An open-ended, email-only game requiring co-operation rather than competitiveness. Using Madhouse's Nexus engine, it's run by Silver Dreamer. The weekly turns are £2.50 each, for 2 characters. The website is:

www.silverdreamer.com

Gossenbecht (amber-eyed, magical and wise). I had envisioned a Warrior and a Mage, and seemed well on the way to achieving that aim.

Next, you choose which one of the 25 Aspects each character will take. The beliefs, statistics and magical suits of each Aspect are fully explained in the rules. The Aspect affects a character's starting statistics, and I decided to stick with my concept of a mage and her warrior companion, so chose the Magician Aspect (high in lore and essence, which is good for spells and knowledge) for the Gossenbecht and the Moon (representing change, strong in vitality) for the Volkenan.

The final major step in character creation is to choose a Talent, which can further affect your character's starting statistics. Talents are qualities like Magical, Wise, Very Strong, as well as a few minor Aspects, which are useful for creating lost lore like Cups, Staves and the like. I chose Very Wise for my Gossenbecht magician, thereby ensuring she could make and learn new knowledge easily but physically would be quite weak, and Very Tough for my Volkenan warrior, thereby ensuring he would have lots of Vitality (like hit points) and adding some extra damage to his blows.

All that was left to do was name my characters: I went for Karalynne Allisair (my mage) and Cael Gaidin (my warrior).

First results

Opening the first turn I anxiously scanned the results, taking it all in. The design of the characters was quite familiar to me, because Aspects uses the Nexus system so its layout resembles that of DungeonWorld.

Each character has six statistics (Charisma, Determination, Agility, Physique, Essence and Lore), each of which has various importance and effects for a character. Lore for example is crucial to someone who is planning to make and research lost Lore, Essence is invaluable to those who want to throw fireballs, summon beasts and the like, and Charisma is important to diplomats and politicians. Then there are six defences, which determine how easy you are to hit by various attack methods: the higher you can get these the better. Then there are the meat'n'veg stats, which include Accuracy, Speed and Experience among others. Last Meditated and Last Connection are special, because Aspected beings need to meditate on their Aspect and make connection with it every so often or they begin to suffer penalties. This can be done easily on an order, and isn't always successful, but the results of a successful connection can be more than worth the effort. Characters also have sections for what they carry: all start off with a club and rag smock.

The map of what my characters could see showed them to be in the centre of the town of Perivale, with numerous other newly awakened Aspected individuals standing around, and from the map key I could see many homes, crop fields and buildings of interest. So I equipped my clubs (just in case) and set off to explore Perivale.

The town of Perivale

Later turns revealed that the places of interest in town offered various goods, services and benefits. There was also a number of guilds like the LoreKeepers and Perivale Militia I could join, some societies like the Friends of Perivale (dedicated citizens sworn to see the town prosper) and parties like the Great Council and the Perivale Town Council. Visiting the Town Hall we were gifted some ducats (the game currency), and an item left for us by one of the Chosen: the items we got were an amber necklace and a pair of dual bracers. On investigation, these could be

enchanted, with a lot of work.

The town's mayor Elder Saris (the GM, Justin) also posted via the Astral Web a number of tasks that we could take part in. In Perivale's case these were hunting down a family of Aspected people who had raided and stolen the town's supply of metal weapons upon awaking (metal is very rare, and its method of construction is something people are still trying to relearn); the slaying of some Goat Tribe members who had forsaken the Aspects and were heading for one of the town's prominent NPCs, who was offering a bounty for them; finally, the Elders needed someone to take a Lore Tome to the town of Applegate, far to the south-

west. This tome would allow us to awaken more Aspected folk in the town. Needless to say, these tasks attracted a lot of interest, and over time more things become available to do.

Research

Another interesting aspect of the game is the ability to do research, in the form of a Feasibility Study. A Feasibility Study is an idea you that have, be it for a new skill, a type of building, a new guild, whatever. The idea is emailed to the GM at silverdrea@aol.com, and you are charged £2 for each study you send, or 50p if it fails. The cost is because these studies are almost entirely hand-moderated by the GM and require him to implement whatever you are trying. Note that not everything you try is possible: you couldn't, say, research steel if you haven't got the ability to mine and smelt iron already. Things beyond the current world's existing technological capability will almost certainly fail. But it is through Feasibility Studies that the characters can relearn and rebuild the services, goods, spells and technologies that were lost by the Penance.

So far, things like Summon Familiar spells and Meditations are tied to a single Aspect; the ability to sanctify ponds or standing stones to a specific Aspect; fighting styles, knowledge

primers, ways to develop Marshlands and a plethora of other things have been learnt and are slowly being turned into Lore Tomes. Basically, how this works is that once a character's Lore statistic is high enough and once he/she gains pen, ink and parchment to write Fragments of Lore, the Lore that's written is tied to the character's Aspect. So a Magician Aspected character can scribe magician fragments, and so on. These fragments are then used to construct the relevant Lore Tome which can then be used to develop the new type of building, learn the new suit, or learn the new proficiency tied to it.

Thoughts about Aspects

The game for me was like a breath of fresh air, something new and different, with many appealing features and novel approaches to certain things. Not to mention the fact that it seems to have avoided many of the problems some games fall prey to, like masses of player killers or powergamers and minimal roleplay. This is not to say this game doesn't offer a place for these kinds of play, in truth Aspects offers a little something for everyone, and then some. But the game seems to encourage a quality of play that provides a wonderful and enjoyable atmosphere.

The ability to attain whatever goals you set yourself also adds so much to the enjoyment of the game. For example, quite early on I earned a post for one of my characters as Alderman of Perivale. This meant that I was responsible for tracking land claims and where people were developing, and keeping the map of the town. This provides my character with an income, paid to her from the town as she is now a public official. I was mapping anyway, but it means so much more to do so now that it's legitimately in character as it's part of her job and she receives some tangible in-game benefit for doing it.

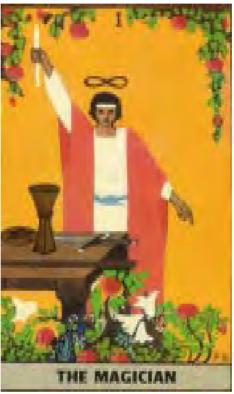
The only real qualms I have had so far are some map graphic issues, in that some of the monsters appear on the map with the same icons, and all the crop fields have the same graphic, regardless of whether they are beans, wheat or the like. And characters appear as a symbol, as opposed to say the little people graphics Dungeonworld uses. But these are nothing major, just my weakness for eye candy, and some of it is being steadily resolved by Justin as time goes by.

The only other gripe I had whether the game seems to be expensive at times, compared to some of the competition out there. Even things like Feasibility Studies that fail cost some money, which seems a bit rough.

The game has seemingly minimum overhead costs as it's email, so there's no printing costs and even the rulebook is an emailed document: the price seems a little unwarranted at times. But again, even that seems to be easily forgotten and forgiven once you're playing the game, and you soon find yourself just sitting there hoping the next turn will hurry up and arrive.

To anyone thinking of trying the game, I recommend you do so. Plan your characters carefully, have a concept and get involved in as much as you feel you can handle. If you need help you can always ask via the Astral Web for it, and the players who are all a friendly bunch are always more than happy to answer your questions, share their maps and give you whatever help they can. You'll soon be engrossed in the world, happy with the atmosphere, and content with the results.

If Aspects isn't the best game available, it's certainly the best I've played, and like all good games it's always growing, expanding and being developed as an ongoing process. Silver Dreamer are not one of these companies that make the game, ignore the opinions of their players and are slow to make enhancements, in fact I've found the GM to be very friendly, ever helpful and always open to useful input and feedback.



Secondly, ALEX MATHIESON takes up his own two characters...

Awakening was such a strange affair. Their past lives seemed but shadows. As if a veil were lifted from their eyes, they awakened to find they were gifted or cursed with the knowledge of their bloodlines and of the Aspects they held within them.

She was Kalliope Silverbrow, and her blood was that of the Faelraker - in that she was touched by the fey, given to their madness and unpredictability, but too she knew the songs of the land and felt in tune with the wild places. As her Aspect she carried the symbol of the Moon - one of the Major Arcana associated with madness and change.

He was Fael Ravenwing, one of the Gossenbecht, in whose blood the power of the mystics ran strong. His amber eyes burned with a strange fire, for he carried with him the power of the magi, the knowledge of how to manipulate the energies of the world to his own ends. For his Aspect he carried the symbol of the Wheel of Fortune - that brings luck, both good and bad, but is also a symbol of life's cycle.

Stepping from out of the barbarism of the past, they had awoken to find themselves clothed only in ragged tunics, with nothing but simple cudgels to their name. They were in a hamlet or village, by the name of Jacob's Ford - a ragtag collection of cottages and ruins, simple folk working the fields and tilling the soil around them.

Their Aspects had spoken to them at their time of awakening - telling each to visit the nearby Loremasters and Town Council of Jacob's Ford, where they might receive further knowledge and instruction. The mage knew that his destiny lay with the Loremasters, for with their knowledge of tomes and fragment writing, he might forge a path for himself in this

strange land. The Faelraker yearned instead to seek the wilds, however, the constraints of civilisation but shackles around her feet.

Voices teased at the edges of their perception - and they knew that they listened to other Awakened, for somehow all were linked by some power of telepathy to one another. The voices spoke of witches and barrows, of skeletons and accursed, of council matters, conversations and requests for aid, until it seemed they could scarce make head nor tail of what path they should take.

Strange journeys lay ahead it seemed, but for the time they made their way solemnly to the Loremasters, where gifts and knowledge awaited them

The varied world

Silver Dreamers' Aspects of Might is conceptually very rich, and it is evident that a lot of thought has gone into the realisation of the world. Designed with Madhouse's Nexus Engine, if you are familiar with such games as Dungeonworld you will find yourself at home with Aspects of Might, the easy-to-pick-up system and character setup allowing for quick and easy entrance into the game world. The turnaround however is fast, faster than most PBM games I have played before, seven days only, which is perhaps a factor in making the game playable only by email.

My early turns in the game were largely exploratory in nature - with a loremaster, a council chambers and a marketplace in the village we started in, it seemed the best course to visit each in turn before venturing into the wilds.

The loremasters presented each of my characters with a gift associated with their bloodline - a silver ring for the Faelraker, and an amber necklace for the Gossenbecht. These were not supernatural in nature, but time and effort could perhaps develop the potential of such gifts, they hinted. My mage had just enough Lore to join the guild of loremasters, which he did the following turn, whereupon they granted him pen and ink, plus parchment in order for him to rediscover some lost lore. Further studies could yield how to fashion tomes of lore and what lore fragments would be required for a particular tome, but that seemed a far-off prospect for such a fledgling magician.

The town council had other gifts - fifty ducats for each of us, to help rebuild the village in some fashion from what was lost in the Penance. Neither of my characters had the necessary charisma to join either the local town council or great council, however, so our business with the councilmen was done, it seemed.

It struck me that whilst a nice way of getting a feel for the lands of Jacob's Ford, it was a very linear path we trod that first turn - visiting the loremasters and council chambers on the instructions of our Aspects.

My mage had to return to the loremasters the following turn, but my Faelraker headed north towards some ruins and thence to visit the marketplace. The ruins it seemed, could be upgraded to a cottage, at the expense of some ducats, which seemed a sensible course of action. But of course, I had not given much attention to the words of the Astral Web, that collective body of thought from Awakened across the lands, which was to be my folly.

I was two weeks into the game, and I have to say the sheer body of emailed messages I had received in so short a time from other players on the group list seemed a very daunting prospect to keep track of. Four hundred messages filled my folder, and regrettably there was little chance of me keeping abreast of them all - so I dabbled here and there with the more interesting subject lines, and left to one side the rather important 'claim' stakes from other Awakened in Jacob's Ford. The game being very dynamic, the councils had decreed that development of any village should be subject to claims for land, to prevent any disputes over territories - something not in the rulebook, but rather an invention of the players. So it was that I was to be the first party to poach on someone else's claim, and build a cottage on a portion of their lands. The matter was easily resolved, thankfully, but I found myself down half my ducats. Hiding my embarrassment I headed for the marketplace once more.

As I ventured north, there were fewer of the other Awakened of the village. Talk there was of something or someone called 'the Accursed' to the north of the village, while skeletons seemed to hold sway to the

south. A curse lay upon them, whatever they were, so the tales went. Perhaps there was some way of lifting it?

The marketplace offered a few items worthy of purchase. Firstly, moccasins, for with proper footwear the wearer can travel further in a given turn. A wicker shield seemed another good buy, along with some animal skins to keep out the cold. I toyed with the idea of a knife or spear, but I thought the club would do me for the time. Having reached the marketplace, I meditated on my Aspect for a time, hoping to receive some small gift in this fashion. By meditating over time I came to be gifted by drops of pure Essence, although I could not make sense of what these

My mage meanwhile ambled through the village, tinkering with his new-found ability to scribe aspects of lore. For his efforts he was gifted with two Wheel fragments, which some on the Astral Web seemed keen to trade for. Perhaps a Feasibility Study would be in order, a long order involving extra turn credit, but which would allow him to fathom out which lore fragments he required to fashion a Tome of some kind? Tomes seemed the key to developing powers and it was evident that trade would be in order, as he seemed only to have the ability to scribe fragments of his major and minor Aspects. A fellow player kindly enlightened me further: 'Wheel of Fortune Aspect is a handy one to have as it allows you to make blessings and cures and things which involve chance and luck.... and as blessings in the game only wear off if another blessing is put on the character or if cursed, they can provide some very good benefits.'

But how to use such a power? I'd need to have a closer look at these fragments I'd fashioned.

My Faelraker was newly clothed and equipped with her purchases, so she ventured north once more. The village continued a fair ways it seemed, although she did chance to see a couple of Accursed before they were put swiftly to the sword by another Awakened. Rather without warning, the following turn another of these foul beings chanced to take its luck against Kalliope. It had appeared from nowhere it seemed, and though neither attacker nor defender were able to inflict much damage upon the other, the mettle of the Faelraker showed through in the end.

Thoughts about Aspects

The handful of turns I played for this review were scarce enough to do justice to the game, I felt, although I had missed a turn or two along the way, due to the rather hectic seven day turnaround. The game is largely one of discovery, in that branches of knowledge are dealt to you as you progress further in whatever direction you choose to take, commands gifted you as you embrace new ideas - be it learning how to fashion copper, or throw clay pottery, to understand the lore of Tomes, or to join some guild or society.

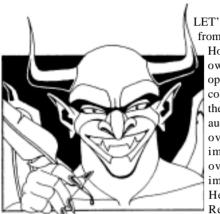
On the plus side, the background to the game, in particular its use of the Tarot deck to great effect, and the sense of mystery that pervades everything in the game were the high points. I was left with so many unresolved questions - what were the essences, how could I seek to learn the secrets of the silver ring and amber necklace, where were these shacks of Accursed I heard tell of to my north?

By contrast, I found the Astral Web, or group mailing list to be by far the most detrimental aspect of the game and something I feel could benefit from a little restructuring. In the space of ten weeks I had a little over 1200 emails in one folder, something I could not hope to keep track of. It was too unfocussed, comments from the GM sitting side by side with requests for aid from some far distant locale, and I felt a better organisation of subject lines would benefit dissemination of such information. Anything pertaining to the game in general having one subject line, anything pertaining to a specific locale having the locale in the subject line for example. Enough to allow for email filters to sort out the information neatly into what is needed and what is not.

I'd recommend the game to you if you enjoy exploratory games, those of discovery and particularly if you enjoy co-operation with the other players. If you find yourself with rather a more competitive streak, then I'd advise you to look elsewhere, for the whole ethos of the game is one of joint co-operation with the other players, seeking to improve the lot of the world of Arcanos.

The Book of Beelzebob

It's BOB MCLAIN! Plus cloven hoof ...



LET'S FACE it. The only news from America is Bob McLain.

How better to showcase my own accomplishments and opinions than to rename my column Book of Beelzebob. If there are any Christians in the audience, I am sure you will overlook the Satanic implications, just as you overlooked the colonialist implications in my earlier Helium Jungle column. Remember, the operative

word in 'Beelzebob' is not beelze, but BOB. Got it, Bub? Do you need still more proof that I am the central figure in PBM?

Look at those letters: PBM. The last two stand for Bob McLain. How can you deny me? (The P, of course, stands for Pretty.)

Admiral Bob Sails Again

I own Flagship. Again. Carol, dear, we're partners, now get me some coffee, will you? Yes, Carol, two sugars, but wait, please: it's not quite true, me owning Flagship. I own US Flagship. Again. You've still got UK Flagship. No milk, thank you, but do bring us a cookie. You would like to hear the story, yes?

I bought the U.S. edition of Flagship from Nicky Palmer in the 1990s. I changed its name to American Flagship, published two issues, and then sold it to John Hansen, a casino worker from Las Vegas who wanted to break into the hobby. I estimated the odds at 50/50 that John would actually publish an issue. He was eager to include a clause in the contract to prohibit me from starting a new PBM magazine for the next five years. I agreed to the clause on the condition that we insert another clause that would return ownership of US Flagship to me (just the assets, not the liabilities) in the event that John didn't publish a single issue in the next five years.

Guess what? It's been five years. John hasn't published a single issue of US Flagship. By law, my contract with John now lurches up from its grave to pluck the magazine from his hands and gently place it in mine. All that wonderful content from the first 58 US issues of Flagship belongs to me again. Whatever shall I do with it? Shall US Flagship, or perhaps American Flagship, return? It's not just the name of my column that's gone to Hell, is it?

That Thief, Spielberg

A few people on the Internet newsgroup rec.games.pbm have discussed whether it's ethical for a moderator to join a game run by another moderator for the purpose of gathering competitive information such as ideas, play mechanics, and even the names of players. Before all of you moderators who have been secretly playing Timelapse for so many years feel a twinge of guilt, let me say that the issue here is an ethical one, not a legal one. Which means that it's not really an issue at all.

Did Steven Spielberg watch other people's movies before (and after) he made his own? Do you suppose he watches those movies with a director's eye? The best way to come up with great new ideas is to explore great old ideas. If I were going to design a new PBM game, I'd join other games similar to mine, take the good concepts, alter them a bit, and proudly call them my own. Anyone who doesn't is not much of a game

designer.

As for player names, well, let me say that I have a database of over 3000 PBM player names and e-mail addresses, most of them culled from player lists and discussion forums. I'll do with those names as I like. In the old days, the more active players, along with some of the moderators, including Rick Loomis of Flying Buffalo, our resident bastion of propriety, would routinely sell or give away the names and postal addresses of PBM players, and no one complained. I enjoyed getting unsolicited PBM material in my mailbox. Now, with everyone's time so very, very valuable, people complain about 'spam', even when the 'spam' is information about a new PBM game or service. Channel your aggression elsewhere. I'll have more spam, spam, spam, eggs, and spam, please.

Move Over, Rubik, Here's Gose

Stephen Gose of PBMCube, a service that offers franchises for the many modules of its Adventurers of Renown PBM game, touts on his Web site that PBMCube offers the 'industry's standard accepted method to process games by Postal Mail, Electronic Mail, FAX or Modem'. When I requested details, Gose asked me if I had heard of TCP/IP. Why, yes! It's the foundation of all Internet communication. Was that Gose's work? I had to learn more, especially how Gose uses TCP/IP for postal and fax turns. But he wouldn't answer my questions.

It gets better. Gose claims that a recent survey 'qualified' his method of running PBM games as the most popular one on the Web. I asked him twice for details on this 'survey', but he wouldn't answer my questions.

And how about this one: according to Gose, PBMCube is 'the only PBM & PBEM game manufacturer to date on the Internet'. First TCP/IP, and now this? The cure for cancer cannot be far behind.

Gose did say that he eagerly looks forward to reading my 'article' about PBMCube 'after it is published'. The power to read articles before they are published is frightening indeed. Gose is God.

Beelzebolts

There must be some reason why I read each issue of Flagship cover-tocover. Of course! It's to find dumb things that people write and then make monkeys of them here.

John Harrington! So it took a 'group of us' to successfully run a 'demo game of Railway Rivals at the '99 Flagship convention'? I won't joke about how many of you it might take to screw in a light bulb. (Perhaps the same number that attended the '99 Flagship convention?)

Colin Forbes! You suggest that in Crisis! players should 'get a couple of allies and plan your own stab better than your opponents'. Somebody, please stop Colin Forbes before he gives away all the trade secrets.

Andy London! You wrote in your DungeonWorld article that 'things can always get worse'. I was going to make fun of you for being a pessimist, but then I turned the page to Mark Stretch's review of Acquire, and realized you were right.

Bob McLain! So you haven't stabbed anyone in years! What about Drew Carson? You stabbed him a couple of months ago. And Andrew Menard? He doesn't even know you stabbed him. You even stabbed your own two team-mates in a recent game of World War IV so you could commandeer the resources of the entire team. Can't you just get along? It's not always about you, you, you.

I'll be back next issue with more stuff about me, me, me.

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Austerlitz

Fight the Good Fight

But, warns DAVID BLAIR, remember the economy ...

MANY OF YOU out there will be familiar with Austerlitz.

This PBM game kicks off in January 1808 and works its way through the Napoleonic era, allowing the gamer to operate one of sixteen countries in Europe, in some cases with holdings in the Caribbean and/or India, and attempt to be one of the last three standing, with or without allies assisting your cause. Since I'm currently participating in two games, about to start up in another two (once enough players fill the few remaining spots), and operating as a temporary turnkeeper in one game where a player has dropped out and before a permanent replacement is found, I thought some of *Flagship*'s readers might be interested in case studies of the existing games - 150 and 157.

Austerlitz #150

In game 150 I operate as Great Britain, usually the first position to be snapped up but strangely enough one of the first to experience a withdrawal. A lot of would-be Duke of Wellingtons don't appreciate that in this off shore island, the most important early factor is the economy. Without a thriving set of industries you will be unable to afford to build up enough troops and ships to create the Great in Britain. Being off shore makes it highly unlikely anybody will invade, certainly for the first 10-12 turns at least, which allows you time to build population at home and expand your colonial holdings, whose importance you will hear about later. Totally different from controlling Spain, Portugal, Naples, Italy, or the Confederation of the Rhine, where your geographical position alone means you are likely to be in a set-to within six turns minimum. It's a slower approach, and Britain has been vacated early on more than one occasion because of the lack of immediate battles.

However I am a slower type of player, who enjoys the economical side equally as well as the military, and I took it with eyes open. Things were going very well, sending troops out to the colonies and acquiring various resources without blood being spilt. These colonial resources largely amounted to ore, gold, zinc and economic points (the last being the game's life blood for building anything).

Early diplomatic overtures to Holland and Spain seemed to secure my immediate threat, till I noticed France was a new lad - he had failed to build certain production sites necessary for his advancement. So I decided to charge in or, more in tune with my philosophy, land on an out-of-the-way beach and march inland. With little opposition Paris fell and I gained the whole of the west coast from Brest down to northern Spain.

About this time Holland seemed to get a little jealous of my success, and before I knew it, treachery abounded in the shape of both he and Italy piling into France from the east and south. But instead of partitioning the country they decided to take it all. Perhaps a little frightened of the troops I had in France, they enlisted the aid of the Ottoman Empire to land as well. Morocco agreed to help me and we descended into various battles and counter attacks. Then the opposition drew a trump card they persuaded Sweden (who by now had gained Norway from Denmark) to invade Britain in Scotland. In the meantime Holland and the Ottomans landed troops in two places in Ireland and three in southern Britain as

Austerlitz at a glance

Long-running historical wargame from Supersonic Games, at £10 for startup and £3 for subsequent turns.

decoys for Sweden. All were eventually despatched, but Sweden took a grip around Peterhead. This meant I was forced to withdraw from France, destroying what I could to leave little for the invaders and face up to the Swedes

Another twist came in the last winter, when it was obvious that Sweden had gone out on a limb in this invasion - he was starving at home. Population fell dramatically, resulting in fewer and fewer citizens becoming available to add to the invasion. We have faced each other on six occasions. In some of them we have done little or no fighting as one or both of us lacked the ideal terrain or equipment to force a breakthrough, knowing a heavy loss for either could spell the end. These standoffs allowed both Sweden and Britain to build up and train troops for what would be a eventual showdown.

While all this is going on, Morocco has enlisted Spanish help and forces are now marshalling in Northern Spain, currently allowing the invaders to finish taking the rest of France. A new Russian player (no, he is not Russian - he has just taken over Russia - try to keep up, please) has taken on the Ottoman Empire.

The set-up as I write is that my British army has now engaged the Swedes outside Peterhead, and by now will have won the fight and will be destroying the remainder of his army over the next turn or two. It has taken a while to achieve the force needed to fight in the Highlands of Scotland, the main thing is Sweden cannot retreat further north, where he had sent ships to take off his troops. Sweden is receiving food and economic points from his allies but they cannot give him population, so the plan is to squeeze their weak spot Sweden from the west, and from Russia in the East. Once they have been broken, the plan is for another Normandy (and, as in 1944, exactly where on the coastline from the Hook of Holland to the Southwest of France will need to be guessed at by the treacherous ones), along with a major push into the south of the Ottoman Empire and south of Italy to create a wide front. With Britain having being forced back home it can now boast of around 900,000 men at its disposal (a million by the time the invasion starts).

Did I mention that during all this time the financing of the army was being done by attacking mines of the opposition in the colonies, gaining the minerals then destroying the sites as they were about to be regained? It is not just one way, as my mines are constantly being picked off in reply. The importance of economy in this game - the ability to have the materials you need to replace ships and men already in your warehouse, and the extra stocks required for trading or selling to your own trade cities to provide the money for these activities - is paramount. Selling in the colonies allows money to be transferred home; without this I would have been out a long time ago.

The whole game is on a knife edge and could go either way, with Britain, Morocco, Spain and Russia countering Sweden (their weakest by far), Holland (the strongest and ringleader - sorry, Commander in Chief), Italy and the Ottoman Empire. This has a long way to go, and there is a lot of fighting still to be done.

Austerlitz #157

Here, as Saladin running the Ottoman Empire, life has been exactly the opposite. TBA gave me the country as a turnkeeper but I liked it so much I took it on full time. For months I have been wandering over the Gaza strip down past Egypt and along to Cairo, picking up neutral areas, all adding to the country's tax income. I have an alliance with Russia which became necessary when the player came in as a replacement. We agreed

that attacking each other would open both of us up for outside interference.

You would be extremely lucky to get a winning spot in Austerlitz without doing some fighting, so I have used my leisure time building up lots of good quality troops: Sipahis, Palace Guards, and of course the expensive but necessary artillery batteries. I also sent a small force with a commander into India and have captured Trincamolee, giving me a trade city in that part of the world. This could come in handy later - it certainly has in 150 above. But the honeymoon will be over soon, I fear. Countries

are at war all around me, including Russia being attacked by Prussia and Austria but being aided by Sweden. Sweden has invaded Britain (a deja vue here, except in this scenario Britain hadn't the materials to keep going and has folded) and is finishing it off. This should make them extremely wealthy and one to keep in with. France has defeated Spain and followed on to Portugal, which promptly folded. Morocco is still enjoying honeymoon, but his spy has informed me a French force has landed off the coast of North Africa and could be at the gates of Cairo within two turns. Of course it could be a peaceful army, and they may actually be looking to go west towards Morocco and not east towards me. But I don't believe in fairies either. Added to which I have noticed a build up of Austrian troops in one of its barracks nowhere near the Russian

front, but darn close to Turkish territory.

A two-pronged attack coming soon? Well done, just what I am surmising - honeymoon is over, lads, time to kit up and move to the front, whilst retaining a reserve in the rear to cover the actual push. With two spies watching for movement in Austrian front lines, and my third one arriving in Cairo as I write, to try to gauge the opposition strength, I fear blood will be running soon, with the French providing the diversion.

Austerlitz itself

Gamers who have played Austerlitz may groan about the lack of realism in the size of the armies and the lack of supply lines which would require slower invasions as you seek to maintain a continuity of supplies to your front line, but I have always found that once immersed in the standard game play, the country takes you over and assuming you like diplomacy

you will always have fellow rulers to be able to discuss trade, alliances, and potential opponents with.

There was an Elite game, using supply lines etc with only ten countries, but it is currently in limbo.

I have played in around ten games, not counting any turnkeeping ones, in the near four years since I started, and although it can be played at a cheaper rate by email, I still prefer the pages of stats coming through the front door with a thud. The time spent analyzing the various trading,



movements. marching, fighting, checking your spy reports and of course checking the maps to see how other countries are progressing. The latter activity highlights the gamers who are aggressive or passive, which ones are forgetting to build their mines. factories. troop levels and estates (the source for food to feed the masses, without which your population will decrease dramatically). The last type are usually fair game for their neighbours unless they are adept at gaining alliances or help from the more experienced players. who would rather help out a poor neighbour than discover he has been overrun and he is now replaced by a megalomaniac.

Overall the game offers variety in the country chosen due to the troop types and terrain, but a touch of familiarity too, in that you need

to make sure production sites are built, population is expanded, trading is done to secure the goods you need but your country can't get enough of (eg Sweden and Naples need to buy or trade for food, or conquer their neighbour of course which will supply most of the items they crave).

You could do a lot worse than looking at this game if you fancy a bit of everything (except monsters and magic).

[David adds: 'Having spoken to Sam @ TBA recently, I have been informed that a takeover of the game by the in-house team looks imminent. Once owned they should be more receptive to suggestions from customers as to the direction(s) they should be taking. This buyout also affects Championship League, for which major re-construction plans are currently in the melting pot.']

STOP PRESS: TBA are now Supersonic Games, see G.V. for contact details.

Steve Tierney's Retroscope

"The Mighty Fall": Phoenix From The Ashes

SORRY about my long absence. The real world, work and other considerations have severely limited the time I had to write this follow-up article. Apologies to the people who enjoyed the last one and emailed me to ask when the next installation would be ready.

Hulk Smash!

Rampage Games were the PBM company about whom we were speaking and we left the article with their success leading to the launch of what was to become not only their leading game, but also probably the most infamous PBM game ever made. That game was The Keys Of Medokh.

In hindsight it's easy to see what went wrong. What Rampage did, as heinous as it may seem to those who were affected by it, really wasn't that different to what many other firms have done. Did they really mean to mistreat hundreds of players, while systematically obtaining money for an incomplete and flawed game? No, I don't believe they did. Were they really the root of all evil, as has been suggested since then? I rather doubt it. What they were was a very talented small team, with big dreams, who got themselves into a horrible mess. It's hard to feel sorry for them, given the final outcome, but perhaps we can at least try to understand them.

The Dream Begins...

Here are the simple facts... PBM is a very hard business to make any money at. That's why 90% (probably more) of the companies who start up, disappear a year or two later, sometimes much sooner. It all starts with a dream, but that dream can become very flawed, very quickly. Rampage had a dream and Medokh was it. A massive game, which to this day is spoken of in hushed tones by those who played, it really was a very advanced idea for its day.

I should stress that this is simply one take on what might have happened, drawn from my own knowledge of game design and a close examination of many Flagship issues, trying to read between the lines. Big game ideas take time to build, while a PBM firm must have regular income if it is to survive. Games don't make money until they are finished and Medokh was far from finished. So Rampage decided to release it anyway, with an innovative promotional idea. They would release the rules in stages, starting with a basic rulebook, more advanced versions of the rules would become available as the players progressed through the game.

Using all their not-inconsiderable promotional talent Rampage pushed this 'staged rules' system as a deliberate feature, hyping it as one of the games assets. They talked a lot about "helping beginners into PBM by not swamping them with rules", and "teaching advanced features only when they are necessary", also "keeping the mystery of advanced game strategies to build up levels of excitement", all of which are admirable traits, if only any of it were true. In fact, the real situation seems to be that they hadn't coded the majority of these functions. They released a game which they thought worked on a 'bare bones' level, and confidently assumed their programmer would finish the code, and their designer would finish the advanced rulebooks, long before any players reached the levels where those things needed to be sent out. Essentially, they bought themselves some time, where they could earn money, while developing their dream. In my opinion, they really thought they could pull it off. It wasn't a deliberate scam at all.

...and Becomes a Nightmare

PBM players are, on the whole, a forgiving bunch. When things start to go wrong, they tend to try and give a company some leeway. Things started

going wrong quietly with Medokh, and the game was so good that people were very willing to give Rampage the benefit of the doubt for a long time. But the scale of problems began to grow and the complaints become more regular. Flagship was inundated with rumours and letters complaining about "features that didn't work", "unanswered letters to Rampage" and "turn problems." In most cases, die-hard Medokh fans refuted these comments in a well-meant attempt to defend the game they loved. The trouble is, by being so loyal they weren't actually doing anybody any favours, because what was created was a controversial atmosphere of uncertainty and disagreement.

Flagship didn't help. Nicky Palmer, then the editor and owner of the mag, was one of the Medokh fans. His comments tended to carry a lot of weight back then, so you'd think he would have tried to stay neutral, but for a long time he was very gentle where a more stern approach might have saved the day. He gave Rampage a lot of chances, talked a lot about "things getting better", and gave a huge amount of space to Rampage's owners to defend their position... space which was simply used as a huge advert rather than an honest appraisal of their situation.

Cynical readers might point out that Rampage were doing a lot of heavy expensive advertising in Flagship, and that Nicky was bound to at least try and protect that revenue Again, I don't think the obvious was the case. I really think that Nicky, liberal fellow and basic nice guy that he is, just wanted to cut them a break. They were, after all, trying to make a mega game. Equally, I don't think Rampage were quite as unethical as they may seem. Rather, they were panicking at their situation, but still honestly believed they were on the verge of getting it right. "Just a bit more time," seems to have been their thoughts, "if we can put off the rabble for a bit then the problems wont even exist anymore and we can pretend they never did!"

Again, with hypothetical analysis, here's what I think happened. I believe that the programming of the additional features took more time than Rampage had anticipated, and since they were working with live data, each time something went wrong they had to do a bunch more stuff to fix it. On top of this, their amazing advertising campaign (which is still copied to this day by several firms) had generated such a lot of new players that their workloads were going through the roof. They began to struggle to enter all the orders, run all the games, fix all the bugs, write all the new code, produce all the new rulebooks What had seemed like a possible task when they started began to spiral out of control. If they didn't fix the bugs the games didn't work. If they didn't run the turns they didn't make any money to pay their wages. If they didn't make the new rulebooks people would reach the 'update' stage and not receive the updates. Rampage tried very hard, but they had stretched themselves way too thin and the strain was tearing them apart.

Crash And Burn

Rampage tried everything. They announced 'sequels' to Medokh, playing up the early success while neatly sidestepping the problems in press releases, made grand statements where they could, and threatened legal action against anybody who said something that didn't like. Their attitude changed from excited and energetic young company, to dark and brooding presence. But the bugs continued to be reported and never seemed to be resolved. Advanced Rulebooks completely failed to appear for many turns after they were required. Announcements and honest promises from Rampage began to be treated by differently by players, first with heavy skepticism and then with outright hostility. The writing was, by this stage, on the wall.

It actually took several years, believe it or not, for this situation to meet the obvious conclusion. Eventually, even Nicky Palmer began recommending people not sign up for Medokh, players were dropping out in droves, new players weren't so quick to sign up no matter how much colourful advertising they were exposed to. Players who dropped out complained of difficulties getting refunds. At this stage, it might be assumed Rampage were in dire straits. They were using their own money and money from other business ventures to cover debts the PBM side was building up due to falling player numbers and signups. Their programmer seemed unable to fix the more serious bugs. Combat didn't work properly. Magic didn't work properly. Half the advanced options described in later rulebooks (which did finally appear, many turns late) didn't even exist in the game. Even their biggest fans had begun to fall silent as the weight of the problems loomed like a black shadow over them.

The Winter Of Discontent

Rampage folded relatively quietly, given their outspoken history. Some players seem satisfied with how that fold happened, others are definitely not. Whatever the case, the affair has become a landmark which is often discussed or referred to. The game itself, Keys Of Medokh, has become a misty recollection, half-remembered like a mirage. Perhaps this is really isn't such a sorry epitaph. Ethereal like the dream it was.

It's amusing to see that even at the end, the bosses at Rampage didn't give in. They still insisted their game 'mostly' worked. They still talked loudly about their achievements. To be fair, they probably could. Whatever

else you say about Medokh, it is undoubtedly one of the most memorable and significant milestones in PBM history. People still talk about it as a legend, even though it didn't work! To this day it stands alongside other such not-quite-games, like Battlecrab and Suzerainty, a monument to what might have been.

PBM is littered with the unmarked graves of long-forgotten games, but the Keys Of Medokh must have a marble slab and a brass plaque to its name. What's written on the plate? "Here lies the very big game that never was." Or maybe, "Coming soon, another massive new game from Rampage... Sign up now, first two turns are free!" Now where's my cheque book?

The Small Facts

- (1) Medokh briefly made a reappearance under Phildee Enterprises, who also failed to fix the bugs and eventually gave up trying in the absence of any help from the designers. A valid attempt, nonetheless.
- (2) Medokh then passed to another legendary PBM mogul, Peter Read, and his "Dynamic Games." He also failed to fix the bugs and although he tried to run Medokh for a long time even he eventually gave up the ghost and has stopped running that, or any other, PBM game.
- (3) Rampage have shown their face several times since then, in several forms. None of their attempts to reinvent themselves seem to have achieved anything. Perhaps the future will see yet another big dream, but this time with lessons learnt and problems solved? Who knows?

Be Afraid ... Be Very Afraid...

For upon the weekend of the 23rd and 24th of February, Soon; the creeping things that lurk within the shadows shall gather ~ Be still. You can hear them, for they are legion.

The Madhouse Minicon is back again!

- ❖ A WHOLE WEEKEND OF GAMING!
- All day board games
- ❖ Andy London's Tabletop Roleplaying Experience
- * The Infamous DungeonWorld Discussion Forum
- ❖ New SPECIAL Limited Characters
- Bulk Payment Discounts on Turnfees

- **❖** NETWORK COMPUTER GAMES
- * MADHOUSE Special Events
- ❖ All-day bar...
- ❖ DESTINY TABLETOP RPG SCENARIO
- **❖** TABLE MINIATURE WARGAMES!
- $\ \, \diamondsuit \ \,$ Chaos & disorder tabletop frag
fest
- ❖ PRIZE DUNGEONWORLD QUIZ

Where:- The Bell Public House, High Street, Hemel Hempstead. When:-Saturday 23rd February, and Sunday 24th February

We've pulled out all the stops this year to bring you another 2-day minicon. Arrive at midday, grab a drink or two and get in the mood, then at 1pm sharp events will begin. A full Madhouse team will be on hand to make sure there's always plenty to do, and that's without the obligatory scheming, planning and diabolical diplomacy!

There will be several standalone roleplaying events and no experience is needed to take part. Furthermore, Andy London will be running his renowned roleplaying session, spreading the adventure in several sessions throughout the weekend.

Board Games will be in abundance, including some organised tournaments. Again, no experience necessary, just show up and we'll make sure you know how to play and have a great time!

Madhouse aren't organising bed and breakfast on the Saturday this year, since players have shown they prefer to organise this themselves. However, please see below for a selection of inexpensive places you could stay if you wish to book your own nights accommodation. If you need any other info about accommodation please give us a call on the Madhouse helpline and we'll do our best to help!

Getting to the Minicon

By Train:- Hemel can be reached by connection from Euston, Watford or Milton Keynes. The number "2" or "3" bus that stops right outside Hemel Hempstead station will take you right to the pubmeet. Ask the bus driver to let you know when you are at "the Old Town" since that's the local name for the road in which the Old Bell resides.

By Car:- Hemel Hempstead is junction 8 on the M1. Leave the motorway and follow the dual carriageway 3 miles all the way to the end. The dual carriageway ends at the 'Magic Roundabout', a bizarre roundabout which you can go either way around. (You'll know it when you see it, believe me!) Go anticlockwise around the roundabout and take the first available junction that isn't a bus lane! Follow the road straight past the lights and over the first roundabout. Take a right at the 2nd roundabout. Follow the road over a small chalk roundabout and take the next left. You are now in the High Street, known locally as the "Old Town". The pub is along this road on the right.

Local Hotels: Travel Inn $\,$ tel. 01442 879149, The Hawthorns B&B $\,$ tel. 01442 213250

See You There! Steve Tierney - Madhouse Chief Surgeon

Eldritch

An Aviar's Diary

JOSHUA CAULFIELD takes to the skies in this complex PBeM game ...

Eldritch is a fantasy wargame that pits you against up to 40 other players in a bid to rule the world. Each world is generated by the game moderator, Mark Thomas, and is set either as open-ended or scenario based. The open-ended games are simply worlds created for the players, with a small number of NPC factions, and the players are effectively allowed to do what they will. This game encourages more production and development in factions but still encompasses a large degree of warfare. Scenario based games have set victory conditions and tend to have a stronger storyline associated with them. When a specified number of Victory Points is obtained and held by a faction or alliance for five turns, the game ends and that faction or alliance is deemed the winner. These scenario games generally tend towards more advanced starting positions, and more combat-oriented play.

G201: The Cauldera of Kings

This game is scenario based and requires 80 victory points to win. The background of the scenario is effectively that of a fallen empire, with a group of factions that have risen to claim what power is left. More detailed scenario information is available at:

http://www.pbegames.com/eldritch/g201/CaulderaOfKings.html

There are a few remaining holdouts of imperial garrisons, but most of the empire has broken apart and each of the local powers (ie the player factions) is rising up in a bid for personal power and glory. The map is laid out as if the world were inside a giant cauldera, the inner rim of a volcano. Because of this, the map itself rolls over at the edges. Thus if you were to continue north off the edge of the map, you would simply reappear on the southern edge of the map and return to your starting point eventually. Mark, the game moderator, actually has the metaphysical discussion handy for how and why this occurs, but personally I'll just accept it and get on with the game.

Pre-Game planning

Strategy in G201 begins before the game does. Many of the participants are experienced from having just finished G200, and have set opinions of one another. This previous scenario was won by an alliance of over ten factions playing an 'Evil Alliance' game. Apparently a great deal of misinformation and treachery went on in the game, and from the discussion on the mailing list, there was more than a little negative fallout both in and outside of the game between players.

There are also a number of new players in G201, in various stages of development. I am one of these. I have been playing Eldritch for about six months now, and just between you and me, I'm beginning to get the hang of it. It has helped me tremendously to play around a little in the openended game before getting serious in the scenario game. During the last six months I have made several player contacts. I happen to know that several of these are also going to be playing in G201. I plan on connecting with a few of them and forming an alliance immediately. This is a pretty normal occurrence, and people who know each other from previous games

Eldritch at a glance

Complex fantasy wargame from Play By Electron Games: www.pbegames.com/eldritch/ Startup + 2 turns is free, with further turns at \$2 each.

A 10-turn trial game is available for free.

will form alliances together either before or shortly after the start of a new game.

We'll come back to the inter-player diplomacy later, but also before the game I have to make a decision. I have to choose a race to play. This is without a doubt, the single most important decision that a player makes in any Eldritch game, as it determines the type of game you are going to play. Each race has significant merits and flaws to skills and actions. Additionally, there are racial preferences that come into play when hiring and occupying an area. Certainly a player will be able to hire other races to fill in gaps, but those other races are unlikely to be immediately available and, more importantly, the player is far less likely to obtain champions in those other races.

There are a tremendous number of factors involved in choosing a starting race. There are the documented hard numbers, such as action points, carrying capacity, life points and spell points. There are the features hinted at in the racial description, such as magic use, skill specializations and combat abilities. Finally, I have found a number of undocumented attributes that can bear greatly on the outcome of the game, such as morale and civilization levels. So after looking through all the factors available to me, and thinking of the type of game I want to play, I choose the Aviar race. Aviar are the birdmen in Eldritch. Although I tend to like the imagery of winged humans, and that will play into my faction name and role-playing aspect of the game, Aviar are weak HP-wise, and won't be much good mining. They are also one of the weakest Morale races in the game. This means that they won't be able to work for more than a turn or so in a territory without a champion.

However, they are skilled in Air and Life magic, they have a high number of Action Points and, best of all, they can fly. This means that ground troops cannot attack them without missile weapons, and that they can travel more rapidly than almost any other race. This comes in handy, because it allows me to move a unit, and complete a full-turn order. This allows me a great jump on development. I'll need to remain cognizant of morale issues, and need to build up large units for big combats, but in all it will be a fun race to play, and frankly that's the entire reason I'm playing.

Turn 1 - Overview

The first turn comes through and we get a full set-up. Each faction controls a city, and two hexes nearby. I have been given two titles in the city, which allows me to tax for almost 3000 coins inside, and I have titles for the two hexes next to the city that I control. I also have about 400 troops that are trained and equipped. This is a huge time saver. Effectively I have been given to start total resources that would have taken me a minimum of ten turns to develop on my own.

Additionally, I have 17 champions, and many of them have strong magic skills. While the majority are Aviar, as one would expect, I also have a contingent of human Lancers, and a human Fire Mage. There is a Smoke Demon champion as well, and a Pixie champion with ten pixies following her. In all I have a very good set-up for the opening of the game. The thing to remember is that everyone else is similarly set up.

Outside the turn, I have set up an alliance with Rob and Art, as planned. It is convenient, as Rob has the city on my western side, and Art is just beyond him. Rob is busy making diplomatic gestures and treaties, and will eventually bring in the other Aviar Faction into our Alliance. A player named Alex, who lives overseas, runs this faction. We exchange

turn reports, and share information accordingly. I also find out who my other neighbor is and set up friendly relations with both of them.

The Goals

The complexity of Eldritch can be overwhelming when you first begin to play. I have found it exceedingly important to set up short, medium and long-range goals. In the short run, I have three goals: establish the security of my domain from other factions, establish a tax base and generate revenue, and claim the two territories I do not occupy next to my city.

Each territory is a hex in this game, and is therefore bordered by six adjacent territories. My starting city happens to be on a coastal hex. This offers both an advantage in the sense of security, as only units that can travel by sea can attack me, and a disadvantage, as there will not be any titles for me to claim there.

My medium-term goals are to explore as much of the map as possible and find an NPC faction to attack, preferably the minions of chaos. My long-term goals fit into that line as well. I will need a strong defensive army to protect my city from potential invasion, and a strong attacking army to be able to launch excursions and take out the NPC factions. (I am avoiding direct conflict with other player factions, because they are more organized, and frankly I'm not a player killer type of gamer.) I will also need a Bank built into my city, and so I need to hire and train construction workers for that task.

Actions

I will move two champions, one into each of the neighboring hexes, with large groups of troops to support them, in case there are enemies there. Each hex might contain NPC faction troops, generated creatures, or simply local militia protecting the territory, not to mention a neighbor might get a little aggressive early on. I will also divide many of my forces to allow for maximum taxation and working. I am trying to gather as much coin as I can each turn.

Each unit requires upkeep: this can be achieved by foraging, which costs action points, and gives only a chance of success, or costs coin. The more skilled a unit is the more it costs to keep up. It is a worthwhile use of action points to forage, so I do, but because many of my units will fail I need to have money available to pay them or they will leave or starve. The issue is, most of my troops at the moment are in the city, and cannot forage inside. So I will move many of them out into the surrounding territories.

Inside the city I claim one of the two titles left over. The title is Parish Priest, and requires a religious skill at level two, which I fortunately have. The title costs me about twice what it is worth. (This

is common with titles.) This cost, as well as the cost of hiring and training other troops will take up almost half of my faction fund. I have learned from a previous bad experience that low faction funds can be very detrimental to the faction, so I pay close attention as I move forward.

I split up most of my units to begin training in either combat or development skills, and I set all my champions to train in magic. One of the advantages of champions is that they can teach the skills they know. So I set one champion up to teach and all the rest to study that same magic so as to accelerate the learning curve. Finally I send a large number of scouts out in every direction. As Aviar, I have a natural advantage in scouting, and so I plan to use it.

That pretty much covers the actions for this turn. In summary: I've deployed all my troops in a strong perimeter, set two champions to the new hexes, and the rest to study magic. I have a good start and relative safety from my neighbors. I am claiming a new title now and should have a good economic start as well.

Analysis and Thoughts

One of the more interesting things about Eldritch is that the game ranks the entire player factions and shows you where you are relative to the others. These are my rankings at turn 1:

Rankings: (Out of 32 Factions)

You rank 2nd (10 - 32) in total entity figures (525).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in significant military victories (0).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in explored territories and discoveries (0).

You rank 8th (18 - 19) in total resources (53312).

You rank 10th (27 - 28) in total power (26378).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in number of titles held (5).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in monthly trade (0).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in monthly tax revenue (0).

You rank 3rd (10 - 11) in magical knowledge (32).

You rank 9th (28 - 30) in military prowess (2099).

You rank 2nd (3 - 5) in craft skills (108).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in victory points (3).

You rank 1st (1 - 32) in total champions (17).

As you can see, I get the relative ranking, the actual rank, and the value the rank is based upon. Naturally at this point I am pretty close to equal to all the other factions. I am a little above average in magic, well below average in military

strength and power, and well above average in craft skills. There are not many revealing things in the rankings yet, but that will change shortly I expect. Regarding my own alliance, I don't entirely trust Rob. Frankly, the way he acts, I expect him to turn on us

in the endgame. That's fine, I'll trust him until he does, but he'll only have the one chance with me. I don't know Alex, and his emails strike me as competent, but not particularly friendly. That could be a language issue, or simply caution, as he doesn't know me, and probably doesn't know Rob that well either. I know Art from the real world, and have total confidence in him.

The Chronicle

The Chronicle is a separate turn report that is generated by the server and by players. The system sends out rumors of which factions are the highest in the rankings. The players submit short articles about the game. Players are rewarded with a high chance of receiving 50 coins to their faction fund for their contribution. I write mine

because it's fun. *The Chronicle* gives the discerning player some insight on what is happening in the realm around them. However, it is important to remember that people use *The Chronicle* to send out lies and misinformation as well.

This is my submission to *The Chronicle*: *Seraphim [F20] writes*:

The heavens parted and the light shown down. The winged ones appeared, although from behind the clouds or somewhere beyond none could say for sure. A tall silvery-feathered male approached. "We have arrived, and we will support the light in its reclamation of this land."

Sports News

DAVID BLAIR takes up the mantle of Sports Editor ...

Since taking on the role previously occupied by Chris Dickson, having fought off hordes of interested parties (that was what you said, wasn't it, Carol?) I have wondered how to get this first article started, bearing in mind this is my 1st time in such a capacity.

This is traditionally the quiet time of any year for a new outlet starting up, and there appeared to be nothing in the "In" tray that could have been passed on to myself from Chris. So I thought I would regale the membership with my personal involvement in PBMs and put some ideas/suggestions in place to involve the readership for the future.

Assuming a lot of you rehe way I do when I have read previous Sports News in that if the review seems interesting enough to pursue then it is on with the Web site if there is one, or on to the phone/fax to seek further information. Using these methods I have joined games in PACL, Chris Robey's Soccer Manager, Neutral Zone American Football all from these pages. In addition there are a couple of war/economic simulations and chess - but I digress.

I am aware that quite a few readers are not enamoured with the amount of sport placed in Flagship, but the plain truth is that thousands of people are interested enough to play in the vast sports arenas from the basics of football, rugby, hockey, baseball to the less likely domain of the wrestler or tennis player. I would be very pleased to hear from players who play in any sports game who feel a review of that game may be of interest to others. I am happy to take suggestions and approach GMs to buy (yes, pay for them) about 4 turns in a standby position to be able to objectively review games for a future issue. Of course if some GMs would like me to review their offerings for free, I would be even more happy (and would return any rule book supplied if I did not continue in the game).

My personal likes involve football, American football, cricket (and me a Scot, too!), baseball, ice hockey, and tennis. I have also dabbled in basketball and Aussie Rules football. Other sports I need some convincing, but I am willing to be convinced.

As Chris mentioned in the last issue online games are becoming more and more popular and like many players now, I have explored online to get some games, one of the first I got into was **SESL** (pronounced Cecil), which carries 3 leagues of 16 teams covering all senior clubs in Scotland along with a few non leaguers to make up the total. The program used for this game and quite a few others is the Olmec system devised by Al Sellars. The system can be downloaded by anybody who wished to operate a league for themselves. Although a computer inevitably works out the play by play once all teams

gameplans are entered, there is a real feeling of involvement which starts with the web page (www.sesl.net) on which the last 6 years history of the clubs is gloriously (or otherwise) displayed. There you can add some Press release where you can blow your teams achievements, slate other clubs tactics, or do summaries of your divisional matches or cup ties - for that you can earn from 20k to 50k depending upon the merit of the content.

GM Mark Creasey is never far away with answers to even the most obtuse questions in order to fine tune the system, taking on board ideas for

future seasons. The basis of the game is of course to win, but maintaining a top team can be difficult as a method of aging is used mid season and again at the end of the season, which effectively reduces the Skill levels of players by a process that largely hits the highest rated players. This ensures players do not go on for years, and along with a Bosman system which ensures each team gets a free player in a position of their choice at the beginning of the season depending upon their league finish - weaker teams get a better rated player - it in theory at least attempts to equalise the clubs over the seasons. Set against that is the system of using Training points and Coaching points to build up your team to its best, the

start of the season (same amount to all clubs), the latter you have to buy at the beginning, so careful budgeting is required. Throw in an endurance level per player which ensures the

former is given free at the

Beckhams and Larssons of this world can not play throughout the season without being rested, and you have a game where decisions on your game plan have to be worked on every week. Play the same system and players for

4 consecutive matches may well win points but injuries partly brought on by fatigue will soon decimate even the best teams. Player's names can be real or ficticious, as there is a continual stream of players retiring or being signed up as apprentices (with a view to training up to be 1st team players or for transferring for a profit). Referees are allocated to each game and clubs are equipped with their respective traits which can force some rethinking as their decisions can easily and quickly change the course of a match. A harsh referee will almost certainly be showing far more yellow than the one who is more obsessed with offside (the latter translates into providing an added percentage onto defences - handy when you are away to the top team and you are struggling to put any kind of team on the park). This way each game has a flavour to it. Tactics include passive, normal and aggressive behaviour per player, although there is a commensurate endurance level loss depending upon the one selected. All formations are served here, and there are various options to man mark, change tactics due to time passed and/or the state of

the score. So it is very easy for example to substitute say a winger for a defensive midfield player when and if your team goes 2 goals up after the 60th minute. Tactics also include Stall (everybody back and the long punt upfield), counter attack, Press (to try to snatch a goal having gone behind - watch though as the extra push up front is as likely to cost you space at the back and you can get punished). Many more options, and easy to see why the League is well placed going into it's 7th season in early January. On line auctions and the SESL Cup draw give a flavour of participation. With 3 up and 3 down and an occasional option to scrap your team and start again in the 3rd division (if you see no way forward for your aging, useless bunch) means an interesting game with plenty of scope.

There are around 6 or 7 different games using this Olmec system, all with their own idiosyncracies, (some use morale instead of stadium size to estimate the crowd, some use referees whilst others don't, some pay a Coaching point instead of cash for a Press release, and therefore variety is there for all). Another good piece of information - all leagues using the system do not charge for you for playing!

Although Championship League has been going for years and now is operating over 1000 leagues, each with 4 divisions of 16 clubs, it still retains a draw for many players keen to manage their favourite team with all their top players. The main plus for the would be coach is that the name of a team is no guarantee of success - Man Utd has as much chance of winning their division as Carlisle Utd, Auxerre, or Dagenham and Redbridge. It is how you run the team that will determine your success or otherwise. Championship League has to my knowledge never been beaten on team names and have researched some far flung parts of the globe to satisfy keen coaches. I remember Auchinleck Talbot, Boca Juniors, Ross County and Scotland XI, not to mention a fair smattering of French, Greek, Italian etc clubs all playing in the same League. The trick to doing well with whichever team you want to run, is that because generally speaking everybody has the same set of their own real name players with their correct ages, height and weight etc it is down to the training and tactics to get the results. Building your stadium up initially is more important than gaining early results, as the income from a 60,000 stadium @ £25 per head is more likely to produce the cash needed to improve the squad in the long run, than the standard starting stadium of 14,000 @ £10 per head. Training is important as the correct combination early on will produce a winning team - but for obvious reasons I will not divulge them. Turns are weekly and it is possible to have 2 teams in the same League set up, although not in the same Division. It costs £2-25 per week per team although purchasing a season ticket or a Platinum card will reduce this considerably. There are 3 Cup Competitions along with 30 league fixtures giving a 32 week season. Stacks of pages to read with stats galore including a table of the worst player of the week and the totals of red and yellow cards being handed out by each official, best player in each position, best well off clubs etc. A good transfer market prevails and opportunity is given to contact the League and other Clubs for players or general chat You also run a youth squad for free which plays the same team as your main team and this is a very useful avenue for gaining players cheaply - you just see their ratings improve and then promote them. Matches per week will be between 1 main game (or 2 if a Cup tie is involved) along with a friendly match (free) and your youth game. Players age naturally as the season progresses - you are even informed of their birthday and there is a possibility of retirement when they reach 34 or above. Only drawback I found was that a player age 39 could have marvellous attributes and be worth only 1k, but he will do as well as a 6m player with the same skills. There seems no accounting for the fact an old player may lose some skills as time goes by. Unless the computer retires him he could conceivably go for ever. However a great starter for anybody wishing a football PBM as again the GMs are very responsive. They can be found on email C-League@dial.pipex.com or 01563 829197.

Now if only to preserve this new occupation of mine, how about a feedback from sports lovers along with your wishes in the column? Do you want ratings for games although they can be subjective, but again that is what we have polls for in Flagship - to gauge popularity and highlight flaws perhaps? I am open for suggestions and criticism.

Dave Blair (davidblair@btinternet.com)



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Middle Earth PBM

Meeting a Challenge

DARREN HAYWARD starts as a newbie in an old favourite...

THE LONG lazy days of summer and I'm looking for my next PBM challenge. I had several sets of rules to look through but I settled on **Middle Earth PBM**. Something of a change for me this one, previously I've always been in for the early turns of a game and I've been a playmaker. I'd show these old timers a thing or two and find some new twists. Oh foolish boy.

The time it took for the rules to come back was best measured in hours rather than days. The set up was slower but not by much. Games fill up fast in MEPBM and new games are always starting. I went for a two-week turnaround game but you get a leisurely month to get your first orders in. My natural inclination was for one of the ten Free Peoples positions (good guys). Dark Servants (bad guys) didn't appeal to me and the five neutral nations (who can choose either side) need experienced players. Even I wasn't that stupid. I opted for the 1650 scenario. This takes place before the events in the LOTR but a lot of familiar characters and places are recognizable. I drew Cardolan, a less well-known nation in the northwest. Above me was Arthedain, whose territory includes Bree and to the NW were the Noldo Elves, who include Elrond and Cirdan as player characters. These are both FP positions and therefore my teammates. NE of me was the Witch King (DS) and Rhudaur (Neutral). To the east the Dwarven (FP) capital of Moria was in the mountains. Last but not least, to the south was Dunland, another neutral. Only one natural enemy and a quiet backwater, I briefly thought this might be boring, but I was wrong.

I contacted my teammates and introduced myself. Experience levels varied dramatically but everyone seemed keen and there were a few very experienced players in the mix. I was immediately sent a help file giving details of all the twenty-five start up positions and other useful bits of information. There is some randomness in the set ups but not much. Although this information is hard to digest it makes a very useful reference source and helps even up the information gap between old and new players.

This is where I got my first surprise. The various game positions are drastically imbalanced. Don't misunderstand me, this imbalance is an essential part of the game and is little short of brilliant. I reviewed Cardolan's set up and soon sorted out its strengths and weaknesses. Weak characters, modest economy, no artifacts but reasonable armies and a small navy. With its ability to hire armies for free, Cardolan can be summed up as a military production line. This was my cup of tea. Managing economies and armies like this was something I'd always been good at and I could ignore the issue of artifacts and magic because I had none. Ignoring the very things my opponents had in large supply was one of my early mistakes. As an MEPBM newbie you can't cover everything but I really should have paid more attention to these aspects of the game.

Turn one - and it's war

There are a number of short strategy guides available written by experienced players, and I leaned heavily on those for Cardolan in my

Middle Earth PBM at a glance

Fantasy wargame with Lord of the Rings setting, from Harlequin Games. £10 for startup + 2 turns, with further turns at £3.90 each. www.middleearthgames.com decision-making. I liken this phase to chess: the opening moves are pretty well known but after that the possibilities are endless.

I had eight characters and my limit on turn one was twelve. Naming four characters was obviously a priority. I started with only one character in my capital, which is where all characters are named and all the most powerful financial orders take place. I soon gained an understanding of how all this worked. Each character has a skill or skills. You get two orders but can use a skill only once per turn. Therefore an agent could put in any two of, one Agent order, one movement order, and two miscellaneous orders. Multiskilled characters get more options but not more orders. The character at the capital was a Commander / Agent. I decided to put in a sell order and name an agent. I had a choice here as to how to achieve this. I could name a character and distribute 30 skill points on up to three different skill areas, or as in this case I would name a character with thirty agent points. The down side was that this costs a whopping 10,000 gold. The cheaper, 5000 gold option was to name an agent. Cardolan could name agents up to 30 skill points but my capital character's current agent skill was only twenty and this was a limiting factor. I decided I wanted more characters now and I could train my new agent up later. That left my army moves. I had four armies of which three were in the rear. The fourth was just within movement range of the nearest Witch King town. This seemed an incredibly predictable opening move and I considered holding back. In the end I ordered a forced march NE to that Witch King town. Troops are expensive to maintain and I had started with a tax deficit. Marching at the enemy on turn one, this obviously wasn't a game for the fainthearted. Movement is virtually the last thing on each turn so I would move on turn one and any battle would be fought on turn two. This being a team game diplomacy is important, none more so than with the five neutral nations. These can join either side and can have a massive effect on the course of the game. I received a friendly note from Rhudaur. I replied with a long discourse on game strategy and why Rhudaur should go free. This all looked fairly promising.

I received my turn through the post, although I instantly switched to the email service. I prefer paper turns, but getting my turn back three days after my teammates had started discussing their turns on email was simply too much to bear. It also helps if you can send copies of your turns to your allies. An MEPBM turn is a series of reports: list of pop centres, list of armies, results of each character's orders and a home area map. I'd managed to put in a set of orders that all worked and I felt I had a grasp of the basic mechanics of the game. There was however good and bad news. My newly named twenty-point agent had a bonus to his agent rank and was actually a twenty nine-point agent. What a stroke of luck. It also meant he could name another twenty-nine pointer. OK, it wasn't quite the maximum thirty points but one piddling point means little. On the down side my predictable forced march order NE was simply too predictable. I was sitting next to three Witch King armies.

Gulp, had I thrown away my strongest army? It looked that way.

Turn two - problems, problems

After my luck naming an agent with an agent bonus, I had moved another character into my capital so I was able to name a new commander and a second new agent this turn. This aspect of the game looked good and I was growing increasingly confident things were under control. My home map was clear of enemy armies and I was passing friendly notes with neutral Rhudaur. In the NE my strongest army had walked into three DS

armies. Troops are cannon fodder in this game and a bloodbath would certainly reduce my tax deficit, which was growing. I was sure I would lose the battle but I was also sure my military position would recover faster than the Witch King's. Looking at my expenses there was only one thing for it; I had to raise my tax rate. This causes an immediate morale hit and causes a further small morale loss per turn. Cardolan starts with the larger Towns and major towns that have decent starting morale so I could take the hit.

There was a chance the Witch King would fail to issue attack orders against me, so I decided to have my army commander refuse personal challenge and I tried to move the character out of the hex. rather than move the army out of the hex. If my army was not attacked the move character order would fail because the character in question was an army commander. If the army was destroyed I save a turn moving out a character. Either way my army would defend, using the default battle orders. Around this time I heard some mildly disquieting news, a Scandinavian player who was thought to favor the DS was running neutral Dunland to my south. Luckily there was a major river as a border and the crossing point was a major town protected by a castle. No threat there, so I thought.

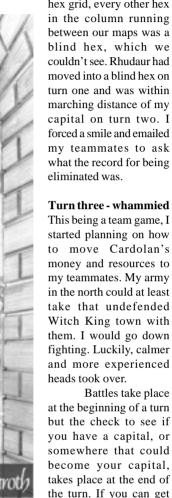
Just about everything in the above paragraph was wrong. I

tried to raise taxes quite a lot but the character that gave the order wasn't good enough. Instead of raising taxes from 40% to 59% I ended up on 45%, a vaguely useless tax rate. You gain little extra tax income for the continued morale hit. It took a while to work out just what had happened in the battle against the Witch King but as far as I could calculate I only fought one of his armies, and won. His other armies had done some mutual transfers so that one became an all cavalry force and they had both moved away. His now undefended town was at my mercy. Now for the bad news: one way that a nation can be eliminated is if it has no capital. Cardolan has two pop centers that are big enough to be capitals; one had a huge Rhudaur army sitting over it whilst the other had multiple Dunland armies in residence. It looked like I would lose both next turn and be eliminated.

Just what the hell had happened and why didn't I see it coming? The why and how of it involves the game mechanics and two neutral players about as neutral as a vat of acid. Firstly, that friendly Rhudaur player was actually one of the DS players fishing for information, and I fell for it. I gave away no hard information but they identified me as a sucker target. I've never heard from the real Rhudaur to this day. Secondly, I didn't

appreciate Rhudaur's set up. The other four neutrals are well advised to wait and see how the war develops but not Rhudaur. Rhudaur has a pretty impressive army but a very poor economy. His armies must attack and either be reduced in size or gain taxable pop centers as a priority. It seems the decision to go DS was made before the game began. Dunland just couldn't resist jumping on the bandwagon. Thirdly, I didn't realize the significance of the way the home maps work. My map and the Dwarves' map appeared to match up but this being a left-right running

> hex grid, every other hex in the column running between our maps was a blind hex, which we couldn't see. Rhudaur had moved into a blind hex on turn one and was within marching distance of my capital on turn two. I forced a smile and emailed my teammates to ask what the record for being eliminated was.



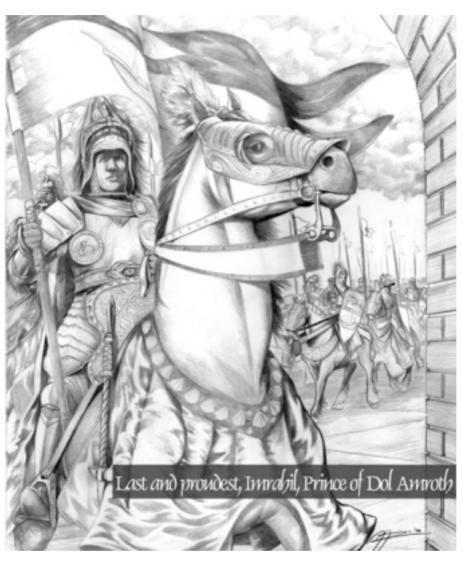
them. I would go down fighting. Luckily, calmer and more experienced heads took over. Battles take place at the beginning of a turn but the check to see if you have a capital, or somewhere that could become your capital, takes place at the end of the turn. If you can get yourself a new major

town during the turn you

are OK. Because this

game is still going I'll not explain exactly how it was achieved but I got a new major town. I can't claim a lot of credit for this because one of my teammates dropped everything to help me out. I extend my thanks to him. I had a few decisions to make. My army in the north was ordered to level that Witch King town. My other armies had moved up from the rear and could either turn back or press on to Rhudaur's lightly fortified pop centers. I opted for the latter. Rhudaur's army couldn't attack me and defend his home area; it was time to dish it out.

When turn three came back I was gob smacked. Dunland had not attacked my second major town. Like, huh? Had they miscalculated, made a mistake or had a change of heart? I doubt it was the latter. I suspect they were playing a more subtle game. Another way you can be eliminated is if you go bankrupt and even if this wasn't the original plan it was now a serious possibility. Major towns give you a lot of taxable income so as I lost pop centers I lost tax revenue. You get a double whammy if you lose your capital at the beginning of a turn, because the new capital isn't actually the capital until the end of the turn so you can issue no capital only orders such as selling or transferring goods. I then realized it was a triple whammy: a forced relocation of your capital is a



Middle Earth PBM

Middle Earth is a titanic struggle between Good and Evil set in the world of J.R.R. Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' and 'The Hobbit'.

Should Aragorn have led the armies of the Free People in a suicide attack on Minas Morgul or should he have guarded the Forests of Lorien? Were the Nazgul wasting their time chasing Hobbits when they could have been planning to assassinate Gandalf? What if Saruman had acquired the One Ring?



fairly serious morale hit, morale was dropping like a stone. Are you ready for this? - it was a quadruple whammy. I ran out of money so there was also a forced tax rise and yet another morale hit.

Then it hit me. My capital was now my original second major town - that's right the one Dunland was sitting on - and it was all going to happen again next turn. On the military front, I destroyed the Witch King town and moved to the nearest Rhudaur pop center, only to find it had one of the original Witch King armies guarding it. Oops. Meanwhile I had amalgamated my remaining armies that started in the rear into one large army but Rhudaur had sent out a smaller blocking army and pinned me in position away from his pop centers. This wasn't going well.

Turn four - surviving, just

As far as the economics of my position were concerned my hands were tied. I had some cash and I sold some food direct out of one of my pop centers as a desperation move. All I could do was sit there and take it. What was left of my starting army facing the Witch King was totally outgunned. I tried the same orders as before, refuse challenge and move character, not army. My other army was ordered to attack the Rhudaur blocking force and move towards his next pop center.

I took another quad whammy and I ended up with taxes on 87% and zero in the bank. My new capital had a morale rating of 2, down from 75. On the military front my army facing the Witch King was destroyed but the commander got out alive. My other army destroyed the Rhudaur blocking army but was blocked by another small army. Both Rhudaur and Dunlands armies had moved on to attack more pop centers of mine.

Despite all this I had survived and the direct threat of elimination was over. It was bad. OK, it was damn bad, but I had lived to fight another day.

Turn five onwards

Over the next few turns the assault on me continued. I threw blocking armies out at their armies and my allies came to my aid with cash and assassins. Eventually the Rhudaur army ran out of steam whilst Dunland miscalculated and threw his army away attacking an Arthedain town that he was too weak to take, and the loser in battle gets wiped out. I eventually disbanded my army trying to get into Rhudaur's home area for tax reasons, which led the DS to think I had been eliminated. I think this gained me a precious turn or two of relative calm. The Scandinavian Dunland player dropped out. Seems Dunland was having economic problems. Dunland's strength is more in characters than economy and his taxes were pretty high but another DS team member picked up his position. Cardolan? I'm still playing and fighting back any way I can and enjoying the game immensely.

Overview

In summary I think I've seen the best and worst of MEPBM in this game. There are vastly experienced players out there who know it all but there is usually a good mix of experience on any team. Actually I found the biggest problem was learning the ME-speak some players use: they talk in order codes. 'You should 810 Elrond out of there' (810 is the order number for 'move character'). You soon pick it up though.

Although I was jumped on with suspicious speed I don't think it was just because I was a newbie, it would have happened anyway. You also have the inbuilt problems of team play and dropouts, but the GMs allow other team members to pick up drops and they are very prompt with bringing in replacements.

The two things that impressed me the most about this game were the sheer range of options available and just how exceptionally well programmed the game is. In this diary I've only really discussed a few basic aspects but there's a lot more. The more experienced players have seen a lot of the game but no one has seen everything. So did I teach the old timers a thing or two? In a word, no, but I've certainly had my moments and I found out that everyone makes mistakes.

If you want fantasy war-gaming with just about everything involved this is *the* game to play.



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For centuries, the continent of Arcana has been under the control of the Imperial Legions of the Blackstar Empire. The Empire's policy of ruthless expansion ensured that the only free people remaining in Arcana were now scattered around the fringes of the Imperial conquests, exiled to the fens and foothills that encircle the central plains. Living leaderless and also without hope, the prospect for revenge or retribution seemed remote...until now.

Far to the west, the Empire, grown decadent and decayed, is gripped by civil war. No longer do the powerful war galleys bring additional troops across the Straights. Rumours of treachery and desertion among the Legions is rife. Only at the fortified city of Blackgate are the elite Legions still loyal to the throne, while the fanatical Starcult Priests have sworn to defend the city to the death.

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Consignia? Why?

The story, as I understand it, is that now the Post Office has an interest in expanding their operations into Europe. As such, they can't use the name 'The Post Office' because every country has their own. Instead, they decided to brand themselves as 'Consignia'. Which is a silly name, but the reason stands.

Mike Lav

Overseas players

Could you create a list of games that are available to players from the United States in the Galactic View section? The games would at least need a two week turnaround, as mail seems to be a bit on the slow side these days (understandably so).

The reason I ask is, you guys have an assortment of games that I'm sure many over here would be willing to play. I have written to quite a few companies asking for information, with only one response. Thank you, Danny McConnell: I am now thoroughly enjoying getting my ass kicked in baseball and hockey. But hopefully I'll be able to turn things around. Point being, other companies lost out on a potential customer.

I'm sure some companies do not like sending mail out as it's expensive to mail material overseas. But if it's stated in Galactic View that the company will send the material if the money for the startup is sent and it can be played from the US, then maybe we can reach a common goal and all be happy. I want to play. The companies want my \$. What's wrong with that?

I also think the PBM world is missing out on a golden opportunity to expand by not marketing PBM in the prison systems. You have a captive audience - literally. (Not necessarily a good this for me, but!)

I have found PBM to be a great way to spend some time. In this prison where I'm at there's only 500 inmates. At least 12 of them are involved in at least one PBM game. Most are involved in several, like myself.

One of the circulars here that makes the rounds in most prisons here is a company called Jack L Markus Inc. Maybe a small ad in there informing the men of the PBM games offered in Europe that can be played by people in the USA might bring in an influx of new gamers? Just a thought. We're not all that bad.

James M LeBlanc

[GMs who can accept US players are invited to contact us: we'll list you next issue. And we're happy to pass on the address of Jack L Markus Inc to any GM who's interested, in the UK or the USA.]

Are Game Prices Too Low?

Those running postal games do generally offer an excellent service. However, they suffer from the competition. Next to my mouse mat is a copy of 'Chanur's Homecoming' by C J Cherryh, bought for \$7 (about £5), a mere 398 pages long. While I'm sure that most players will be willing to pay a premium for their own story, customised with their own decisions, that comparison will always be there.

Mike Lav

Prudent, in Interviews?

I have, for about eight years, included 'Play-by-Mail' as a hobby on my CV. During my job interviews the question of PBM comes up and I explain what it is, the sort of games I play, and so on. The interviewers are usually impressed, as I can (especially when drunk) blag for Britain, telling them that it's the birthplace of their commercialised fantasy soccer and cricket games, etc.

I was shocked when I was halfway through an interview recently and the IT Manager stopped me mid flow and stated that I would abuse the internet during work time playing games. I tried to explain that I generally don't play any e-PBM games, and also have the internet at home and would do it there.

However, she wasn't going to be swayed, so the interview was terminated then and there.

The moral of this story? In this electronic day and age, admitting playing games may be a double-edged sword - especially with opinionated and blinkered IT personnel. I'm still considering whether to remove 'Playby-Mail' from my CV.

Richard Miles

[Ulp. What do other readers think?]

Getting into Movies?

Somewhere there must be a games player who's not yet seen the film of part 1 of The Lord of the Rings? If it's you, do give it a go: it's intelligent, it's splendidly acted and it captures the spirit of the book without the, um, poems. Great stuff.

What a shame that the connections between game-playing and films and novels are generally so weak, and that when there is a real connection then the results are often disappointing. Tomb Raider, at least, was better than expected, with a heroine who was so splendidly sinuous as to be almost plausible: it just seemed a strange oversight that the audience wasn't issued with keyboards. The film *Dungeons and Dragons* was too odd, alas: splendid dragons, but weak acting and a slapdash conclusion.

So often games-players are treated with contempt or revulsion by non-gamers, who don't know whether we're adults, teenagers or children. Hey, we're a bit of every age group, and bright and fair-minded too. And we do enjoy going to the cinema.

Duck, it's Bob!

I have edited this letter severely. So much so in fact that it's barely a letter at all. Why? Well may you ask ... To tell the truth, I fear that anything I write in this august organ will be seized upon by Bob McLain and twisted to serve his own bitter and twisted purposes. So there you have it: Bob McLain, the ultimate form of censorship!

(name and address supplied)



Your Feedback on Issue 94

LAST ISSUE received the high overall rating of 8.7, and its colour cover was greeted with enthusiasm. Yes, we'll run colour as often as we can, but can't promise this regularly because of the expense. **Ben Williams** raises an interesting point: 'I would have given a 10, but for one thing. I realise that PBM covers a vast spectrum of games, but I do find that Flagship tends to go through phases of covering roleplaying games, then wargames etc. Personally I would like to see a more balanced approach... I would be in favour of more regular columnists (along the lines of the excellent work done by Chris Dickson for sports games). Such columnists seem to appear from time to time, then vanish by the next issue. Surely there must be reliable people out there willing to write a short column on a regular basis?' Volunteers welcomed!

Favourite articles were the one on Middle-Earth ('I didn't agree with all of it, but the article was well thought out and generally good for newcomers to the game' - Patrick Gleeson), that on Kings of Karadon ('excellently written and tantalising' - Ben Williams), the zine coverage ('hope this becomes a regular feature' - Mike Jepson), Bob Mclain's column ('I'm scared to even compliment this guy, so I won't. More! More! More!' - Anon), DungeonWorld, Quest ('it's always interesting to watch a game I used to play improve itself' - Mike Lay) the Tailpiece, the article on Acquire and The Displacement Engine. There was disagreement about the overview article: Andy Kendall thought it 'Far more useful than the GV listing. Maybe a page an issue on different types of game, concerning turnaround maybe, likely duration for close-ended, national or character-based? Stuff like that', but Patrick Gleeson thought it 'a little dull I'm afraid, seemed a bit like a filler'.

65% found nothing boring, with the remaining negative votes scattered among sports coverage ('but then I know some people play nothing else' - **Andy Kendall**), the Lords of the Earth design article ('I expected to be enthralled... it's always been a game I've thought about playing. But what a dull article!' - **Patrick Gleeson**), Bob Mclain's column ('News from America seemed entirely lacking in, well, news' - **Mike Lay**) oh, and fantasy games.

Question 4 asked about our occasional coverage of games which can't accept new players. There wasn't a clear majority for either side on this, 50.5% don't mind and 49.5% object, though those of you who dislike such articles do seem to feel very strongly. 'I find such articles irritate me, especially if it's a good game and a well-written article,' says Patrick Gleeson, and 'Why on earth publish articles which are effectively promoting games which your readers cannot play?' agrees Ben Williams. Other readers, however, agree with Bruce Edwards: 'Although the game may not be taking new players, the GM could be planning to run a similar game in the future and prospective players could be tempted to get in touch' and David Blair 'Still worthwhile covering it as either you can place yourself on their waiting list, or stick it in the diary for later when a position becomes available.'

Question 5, however, brought general agreement, with no-one who wouldn't play with a prisoner at all, while 85% have no objection to a prisoner as a fellow player and 15% expect to be told if a prisoner is playing in the game. 'Personally,' says **Ben Williams**, 'I'd rather play with a prisoner than some of your other correspondents. PBM is a social hobby, if people can't live and let live, then maybe they should find another hobby.' 'I don't regard it as a particular problem,' thinks **Mike Lay**, 'If we are aiming at rehabilitation, then introducing anybody to a hobby must be a good thing. Of course, nearly all my games are played by email, which probably makes me feel more secure!' 'It's sensible to be a bit cautious about giving personal information,' adds **J Sharp**, 'but that's true of contacting any other player. Anyway, the whole point of gaming is pretending to be what you ain't.'

Question 6 asked about new games. 32% of you think that the number of new games is too low ('Naturally I have loads of brilliant ideas for new games. But to focus on reality, I do feel that many GMs have lost interest in developing new games' - Patrick Gleeson), 24% haven't yet worked through all the tempting games that already exist, 28% prefer the idea of tried and tested games being revamped, 16% (at least, like Patrick!) have your own ideas for a brilliant new game. 'I think that it is difficult to come up with a totally new game,' argues Bruce Edwards, 'without drawing from older games for theme, style or playing method... Be it a new or old game, the best games are the ones you want to play again and again.' David Blair asks, 'Any way you can go back into Galactic View and list the games as per genre

- makes it all the easier to pick out a likely game to pursue from a list of likeminded games?' **Ben Williams** points out that, 'There are lots of tempting games I haven't tried, though I notice that the vast majority of games listed in Galactic View don't receive much coverage... In fact, 126 of the listed games (over 50%) have *never* been reviewed at all! Sorry to be such a bore, but I really do feel you could be offering a much broader service to readers.'

Sigh, a big programme of updating GV has been delayed by real-world events. But in general we've always waited for GMs to offer us review positions, and for players to send in Rumours. So let's see what readers think about this ...

Feedback questions on #94

[Choose more than one answer if you wish, and feel free to comment.]

- 1 Please rate this issue from 1 (tedious) to 10 (tremendous).
- 2 Which articles/sections did you most enjoy, and why?
- 3 Which bored you, and why?
- 4 Should Flagship's coverage be broader? (a) Yes, there may be little-publicised games that would suit me, (b) If you're listing lots of games, you should actually try them out, (c) No, I'd rather play the games that are frequently reviewed.
- 5 A couple of feedback comments ask for games to be grouped, whether in GV or as an article.
 - (a) I prefer an alphabetical listing in Galactic View,
 - (b) I prefer the GV games to be grouped according to subject,
 - (c) I think games differ too much to be grouped easily.
- 6 Are there any more features in a game that you'd like to know about? (a) I'd like to know about turnaround,
 - (b) I'd like to know roughly how long a finite game will last,
 - (c) I'd like to know the importance of interactivity.

[Replies welcomed by surface mail to the UK office, or by email to Flagship@flagship-uk.demon.co.uk. By April 1st, please.]

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The Chevian Chronicles

A Strange Prisoner Calls for Aid

GREG LAMB'S Alyx returns to the capital, and a new challenge ...

LAST TIME, we saw the combined forces of Chevia narrowly fight off an attack by the Goblin army on Easterngate, one of the duchy's major settlements. While the battle raged outside the city walls, our swordwielding heroine Alyx DeLibra was part of a small group helping to deal with those enemies who managed to slip through our defences, including a band of Goblin saboteurs and a zombie uprising. During the clash with the Goblins who had infiltrated the city we managed to capture two of their soldiers as well as a human who was apparently helping them. With the immediate threat to Easterngate quashed, and as one of the few PCs able to communicate in the Goblin tongue, I decide that Alyx should spend the first two weeks of the next month questioning these captives. Against all realism, I still hold some hope that Chevia's two principal races can co-exist rather than wipe each other out, and that means opening lines of communication. Also, I want to find out the story behind the human defector.

The Baron has scheduled a victory banquet for the third week, which should give the opportunity for some needed rest and relaxation. After that, Alyx will meet up with another player character, a city guard by the name of Revek, in order to investigate the sewers in an attempt to find out how the undead invaders managed to enter the city. Finally she'll head for the local Church of the Three where Revek, who doubles as a priest, will be appealing to his chosen deity to help those wounded in the battle. Alyx will lend her mundane healing skills to his efforts. She may not be able to close wounds with a prayer, but she can tie bandages with the best of them.

Nonus 1108 - Loose threads

Alyx arrives at the gaol at the same time as the foppish 'Pinkie' Pimm Purnell, who has come for similar reasons. The two find a commotion going on and two Goblins plus a short man come bursting out of the gaol, pursued rather awkwardly by a guardsman who is covered in blood. The Goblins are armed with clubs, while their human companion has a short sword. Alyx instantly draws her sword and Pinkie calls for the escapees to stop and throw down their weapons. The Goblins shout obscenities in their own language and make a break for freedom.

Yet another plan fails to survive contact with the enemy. Alyx and Pinkie head for the city gaol with the intent of interrogating the captured Goblins, only to find themselves suddenly fighting for their lives. A combination of our combat skills and superior weaponry mean the fight is both short and bloody, and after a few moments of hectic activity the three would-be escapees have been cut down. Alyx would rather they had been taken alive, but had little choice in the matter given the circumstances and the aggressiveness of her impromptu comrade at arms. She tends to the wounded guardsman, but can do nothing for his companion who was killed in the escape. I'm a doctor, Jim, not a miracle worker.

The Chevian Chronicles at a glance

A roleplaying game from State of Mind Games, with turn reports plus a general newsletter each turn. Note that Chevia isn't open for new players now, as it's drawing to its in-built conclusion.. With my first two orders nullified by the Goblins' unwillingness to sit helpfully in a cell and be questioned, it's on to the Baron's feast. There are several announcements of thanks for those who supported Easterngate in its battle, culminating in a knighthood for the famed Ed 'Mac' Bain, as well as plenty of drinking, dancing, eating and general merriment. From there it's a step downwards, both literally and figuratively, as Alyx and Revek venture into the sewers to seek out zombies. We find nothing.

Much later, I discover that the undead were actually created by another PC in a botched attempt to heal the fallen. Wish I'd known that at the time. After several baths, it's on to the church to round off the turn with more healing training. There are plenty of willing subjects on whom to practise.

With nothing else to hold me in Easterngate, next turn I plan to meet up once again with Cassie O'Pia and head back to the capital city of Brightwater. The journey will leave me with one week spare after I arrive in the city, which I intend to put to good use by learning a new skill. A year ago I asked the resident weapons master in Brightwater, a certain Hakan Slei, about learning to fight with a sword in either hand. He told me to come back when I'd got to grips with a single blade. Ten turns and quite a few fights later, I can return triumphantly and begin training in two-sword style. This will cost me, though, so I also decide to ask Slei if his school needs an assistant tutor.

... I can return triumphantly and begin training in two-sword style ...

Decimus 1108 - Two fisted monkey style attack!

Alyx meets up with Cassie O'Pia, and the two women begin a journey to Brightwater. The trip is long and cold, but generally uneventful. Eventually, they reach the capital.

Not a lot I can add to that, really. The turn passes without a hitch. Somehow, I kind of miss things going wrong all the time. Once in the city, I take the first steps on the way to becoming the medieval equivalent of a John Woo character, gaining level zero in the Ambidexterity skill. I believe I'm the only PC in Chevia to employ this particular fighting style, probably because it's so utterly impractical. But hey, at least I'll look cool. Slei also offers to employ me at his school. The pay is barely better than my old barmaid job, but the additional lure of free training clinches the deal.

So, now I have a job again, I guess I'd better turn up for it. Next turn will be another relatively dull one, with two weeks of work, two weeks of training in my shiny new skill, and a week of rest to round the turn off and see to a minor but nagging injury I picked up in the skirmish last month. A hopefully productive turn, then, but not a particularly exciting one, with nothing out of the ordinary planned for the near future. It's not going to happen, is it?

Primus 1109 - Blast from the past

Near the end of the month, Alyx has a dream in which the Guardian of the Feral Woods appears and speaks, apparently in great pain. "You owe me...favour...I ask you...help now...I am held in element...magic school in the biggest...city...I need...rescue."

Those of you who've only joined this diary recently won't remember the Guardian, who last appeared over a year and a half ago in game time. The Feral Woods is a highly magical area into which Alyx ventured while travelling with a magic user named Tayka Chanse, another player character who had to perform a mystic ritual in a certain glade within the Woods. Others had reportedly ran afoul of terrible beasts within the forest, but Alyx and Tayka instead encountered a strange little furry chap who demanded tribute in order to grant them entry. Lacking anything in the way of treasure, we instead offered to repay him a favour in future in return for letting us pass. It appears that now is the time to repay the debt

Of course, it's not going to be that easy. The Elementalists' Guildhouse in Brightwater is home of the most powerful mages on the continent, and I'm willing to bet that even with Alyx's famed people skills, they're not going to let me walk in and free their captive just because I asked nicely. I need a plan. Well, first, I need information. Just what kind of defences does the guild employ? How many guards are there and how frequent are the patrols? Time to make use of some of my shadier talents, which have grown a little rusty with all the good deeds and honest work I've been doing lately. First, I'll pay a visit to the Guildhouse to enquire about finding employment as a guard there. Of course, what I'll actually be doing is finding out about the security systems that I'll need to overcome. The week after, I'll return at night to scope out the place, looking for possible entry routes and weak points. For the rest of the turn, I'll head back to the weapon school for more work and more combat training. Somehow I get the impression it's going to come in handy soon.

Secundus 1109 - Wards and wardens

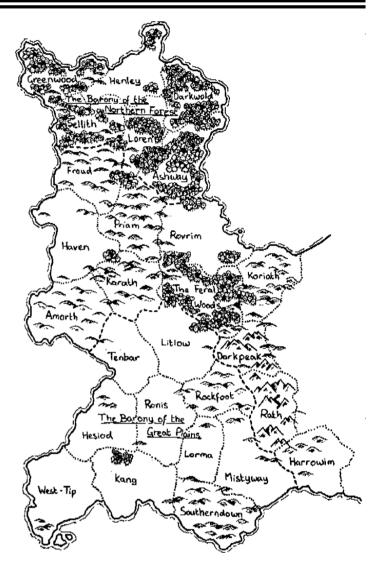
Later, Alyx makes another visit to the Guild of Elementalists, this time under cover of darkness. She sneaks around the area as best she can, and notices that while there are three doors into the building, there is only one which is constantly guarded, with shifts being changed every few hours. The other areas seem to be covered by occasional patrols. Windows are all barred and many are shuttered. A few outhouses and annexes allow a bit of cover for sneaking around.

Hmm. The defences observed by Alyx on her second trip to the Guildhouse are pretty minimal, and I'm fairly confident in her ability to bypass them, even given her limited Stealth skill. The problem is going to be something that came up during my talk with the Elementalists the week before. It seems that the guild relies heavily on magical traps that protect the whole building, which would explain the relative lack of a mundane security force. Oh, and I also earned a few more crowns and went up a level in Ambidexterity, but you don't want to hear about that, do you? On with the criminal activities. Getting around the various mystical constructs would no doubt be easier with magical assistance, but unfortunately Tayka, who had the same dream as Alyx, is otherwise engaged and on the other side of the duchy to boot. It looks like I'm on my own. And that means more investigation is needed.

I decide to drop into the local inn, at which Alyx once worked, and hang around the bar looking for an off-duty Elementalist to engage in conversation. Mages, being largely pale types with an unhealthy fascination with books, don't often get pretty girls buying them drinks, so hopefully my seemingly innocent enquiry about the guild's defences will go unnoticed. Of course, Alyx also has her high Fellowship ability, which helps her to come across as a friendly and genuine person even when she couldn't care less about the person to whom she's talking. Many modern chat show hosts have perfected this same technique. The rest of the month will be taken up with - all together now - working and training at the weapon school. Routine but worthwhile in the long run, as is so often the case.

Tertius 1109 - Breaking the ice

At the Dragon's Claw, Alyx locates an apprentice Elementalist, Fyran Dice, who she talks with. In conversation she asks about magic in general, and receives some very vague answers and a few very technical ones. As part of this conversation she manages to drop in a query asking how the



Map of Chevia (copyright the Ducal Library)

guards at the Guild of Elementalists avoid getting zapped by the magical traps. Fyran says this is because they know which areas to stay away from.

Okay, I'm now ready to put my plan into action. First, though, it's time to revive the identity of the Fallen Eagle once again. Long-term readers may recall that Alyx first used this pseudonym several game years ago in order to pass herself off as a bandit. I hope that by wearing a disguise during my rescue attempt, and later sending a statement to the Chevian Herald claiming responsibility under my false name, I'll be able to divert attention from myself as the real culprit. Getting the disguise will be the easy part. I have a shield that is now of little use to me, unless I abandon the off-hand weapon skill I worked so hard for, so a visit to the marketplace and a trade for a black cloak should be a simple enough matter. Three of those now-traditional work and training actions will fill up the time until the fifth week, when it's time for the breaking and entering to take place.

Remember there were two doors that were only infrequently patrolled, often by only a single guard? This will be the key to Alyx's entry into the Guildhouse. By jumping a lone guard from behind and putting a knife to his throat, she hopes to persuade him to lead her to where the Guardian is held without triggering any of those nasty spells. Don't worry, she's bluffing. No, really. Honestly. Look, if you're not going to trust a wanted criminal, who can you trust these days? Anyway, once the Guardian has been located, it'll just be a matter of freeing him and escaping back the way she came in. Of course, he's likely to be locked up, but the guard should have a key, right? No problem. Piece of cake. Not convinced? Me neither.

The Origins of Aspects of Might

JUSTIN PARSLER describes his inspiration for the game ...

I HAVE LONG been an armchair aficionado of the Tarot. The artwork is often beautiful, the cards tactile and the symbology behind it magnificent. It has been begging for proper inclusion in some sort of game, and the opportunity to do so recently presented itself.

Being in the fortunate position of having access to the Nexus engine (the dedicated PBM programme written by Madhouse) my aim was to design a game which took full advantage of its myriad features. Nexus is a marvellous system with which one can do almost everything, and the additions made in the last year - since, for instance, I wrote Riddle of the Sands - had opened up a whole heap of new possibilities.

I wanted to combine powergaming and roleplaying. I also felt it should be a game where the players really shaped the world. This meant having some sort of setting that was either 'at the beginning' or after some sort of disaster. I thought of the Tarot at this point. A quick email to the excellent folk at US Games, who are the people who publish the famous Rider Waite Tarot amongst others, and I secured permission to use the artwork from the deck.

Armed with an idea and some very good art, as well as an excellent programme, I was ready to go.

... This neatly explained why players were so much more potent, and so much more important, than the people around them ...

Tarot cosmology

I had no intention of using the Tarot as any sort of 'divining' method, I wanted to use the symbology to create a magic/religious system.

Thus the game theory developed: all knowledge flows from the 'Aspects', which correspond with the major arcana of the Tarot. Some individuals, the player characters for the most part, were 'attuned' to one of these Aspects. This neatly explained why players were so much more potent, and so much more important, than the people around them.

I did not want everyone who played the game to need to know the 'ins and outs' of the Tarot: anyone should be able to come to the game, with no previous knowledge, and play. So I condensed the meaning of each card to their 'essentials' and incorporated this into the rulebook.

Using the Tarot in this way gave a ready-made cosmology, one which was unique, yet one which most people had some sort of acquaintance with, if only on a nodding basis.

Characters

A system I have applied to many games in the past is the 'rule of three'. I find that if you get to pick three things, the set-up is fairly simple but still allows for a lot of different possibilities. I applied this to characters in AoM: they get to pick their Aspect, their Bloodline (a bit like race, though all are variants on human) and a secondary Talent, like being strong or agile.

Onwards and Upwards

I wanted AoM to be a game where the players shaped the world: where what they did made a difference. Setting the game after a great disaster - the Penance - and putting the player characters in a position to rebuild

civilisation was my intent. I did it this way, rather than setting it at 'the beginning of things' because I wanted there to be 'old stuff' around: interesting things to find, people to offer some guidance and so forth.

It was easy to adapt the Feasibility Study system to AoM. This system, which has been a main feature of our Absolute series of games, allows players to ask for what they want to be able to do, and be told how to go about achieving it.

There is one major drawback with games which allow player research: if it is too quick, the game progresses too fast and becomes both dull and unmanageable; too slow and people do not manage to achieve anything. Play has revealed that I seem to have managed to get it just about right with AoM, but the process of achieving the right balance is more art than science. In the past, I have often got it wrong.

The evil internet

I am a bit of a Luddite on the sly: for a man who uses a computer every day, I have very little love of them for their own sake. What I like about computers is that they let me run better games, by taking the drudgery out of running PBM and letting me concentrate on designing cool new stuff.

Thus I came rather hard to the decision to run AoM only via the internet. Why? Well, almost everyone now has email. Turns can be sent in PDF format, which is incredibly easy to read and requires no technical know-how to use.

Turns get to people quicker. They get lost about as often, but when they do get lost we know straight away and can send another copy. Fewer trees die to serve people's gaming habits. It is much, much cheaper to send out turns (though it can be a real pain in the butt when email is running slow and I have to sit around for hours pressing buttons), which means a combination of lower fees and more profit, which makes everyone happy.

There has been a lot of controversy about email and PBM. It seems, to me at least, to boil down to this: email is a better way of sending letters. It also allows for much faster and more interesting role play and diplomacy. There is a mailing list within the game which represents an in-game phenomena, the Astral Web. Messages are in character and the quality of roleplay rather good.

The in-character list has been so successful that players have set up a number - about eight at present - of lists dedicated to other topics. I am just in the process of splitting the 'official' lists into three, one for GM announcements, one for 'important' discussion and one for chatter. That way players who felt they were getting just too much email action can cut down the lists they are on and consequently the quantity of email received.

Most people, though, cannot get enough.

... achieving the right balance is more art than science ...

...and finally

I hope this article has been of some marginal interest. A full dissection of what went into creating AoM would take a book, not a short article. Hopefully, I have covered subjects people will find interesting.

And, if you want to know more, or just abuse me for a fool, then you know my email address.

Great White Hunter

The Big Game Game

SCHUYLER CORSON enters the jungle ...

THE LINE of people threaded through the dense overgrowth, their eyes darting back and forth, muscles straining under their loads. The majority of them were locals, guides and porters hired from nearby villages to carry supplies and point out the local highlights to the foreigners. The remainder were an assortment of representatives of various off-continent countries. Before them, a chorus of animal cries greeted them, shrieks and growls reverberating in the thick air of the jungle, rolling though the thick mist of the valley below them. From behind, a final reminder of civilization sounded, the high pitched cry of the aging double-nosed steam engine unique to the mountainous regions of the dark continent. With a chuffing growl, the locomotive strained against its load of fuel tender and passenger cars, drawing them back towards the comforts of civilization, and leaving the trail of humanity to their own designs.

The man in the lead, a massively built example of the local tribesmen, calmed his machete action, having found the faint trail that he had been looking for. He had led a different group to this region only a few months before, but the land had already reclaimed most of the evidence of that trip. With a satisfied grin, he set out at a near

breakneck pace, driving the group to an area that he knew would be suitable for their base camp. As they proceeded, the canopy of trees closed, shutting out the day until only occasional glimpses of the sky were noted. For several hours, they moved deeper into the lush green of the near alien beauty.

When the guide signaled that they had reached the space best suited for the base camp, the porters quickly began setting up the rudiments of civilization that the foreigners considered

minimal for survival. White canvas tents were pitched, and field furniture was assembled. Yards of rough mosquito netting were unveiled, swathing the area in a grey haze as the campfires were started. Porters sang to each other in their sing-song dialect, punctuated by yelps and whistles. The guide disappeared into the brush for several minutes, then returned nodding to himself. Moving to the assembled foreigners, he saluted them by touching his conical hat with a greyish crop, and spoke in accented English, overstressing certain vowels.

'Not long, Bwana. Sun goes down, animals begin heading for water hole. Soon we hear. Sport start then.'

The various people nodded and murmured their acknowledgements, and set about readying a veritable arsenal of weapons. An earnest young American in denim and a large hat turned from his roll pack of Spencer rifles, and addressed a grey-haired man, obviously British with his stiff pith helmet and monocle.

'So, what's the game here? All I was told was that this was the trip to take if I wanted some prime hunting.'

Great White Hunter at a glance

A light-hearted game, not a million miles from *Battleships* but adapted for a group of players and with a totally different setting. It's free, from:

http://www.notreally.co.uk/gwh

The British lord blinked and nodded, speaking as he accepted an unwieldy pistol from a turbaned servant of East Indian descent.

'Quite so, quite so, dear boy. We'll be heading out into an area of near total darkness, and hunting by sound. Everyone starts at different points about the watering hole, so we don't spook the animals, and send them all running in a single direction. We'll be in a valley where the wind's calm, so no worries about upwind and such. Just fire, and wait to hear if anything cries from having been hit. You can pretty much recognize what you hit by the sound of its cry. It's a little more difficult than a hunt on the savanna, but it also is the great equalizer. We all have an equal chance to slay the various beasts that reside in this section of the world. Why, last time I was out here, I came away with a lovely set of alligator luggage, and a pair of monkey bookends."

The young cowboy frowned. 'Alligator? I thought those only were in the Americas. My books said that there were crocodiles out here.'

The Englishman waved him off. 'Alligators, crocodiles, what does it matter? They're big, scaly, and dangerous. Plus, they look marvelous stuffed, and placed as my footrest. You'll also find snakes,

antelopes, and lions, just to name a few. Gorillas, too.'
He looked crestfallen. 'No hippos any more, I'm afraid.
Too unruly. Bloody beasts look like they should move slower than the royal yacht on the Nile at low tide, but you only cross them once with that attitude, I'll tell you that! They'll

seconds flat! Anyway, we have to make do with elephants now. But they're there, so it's possible that you'll end up with a set of ivory... well, somethings. You can only have so many trophies, you know, what?'

take down a grown man in a couple of

As he started to laugh, the other figures near them joined in, obviously familiar with the rewards of the exercise. A large man with a thick covering of facial hair and an odd-smelling cigar moved closer, slinging a rifle with an overly long barrel over his shoulder. 'Da, and there is also the title and prize, yes? What we're really here for, da?' The American cowboy's eyes widened. 'Title? Prize? I thought we were here to bag some critters and see the parts of the world that they only write about in the dime novels.'

The Englishman waved his hand dismissively again. 'Oh, nothing that monumental. A gentlemanly agreement, and all that. Just for bragging rights. No cash involved, just a title for having the most animals, or the most various set of trophies. We keep track at the end of the day, don't you know. Something to puff your chest out about after the hunt. Oh, and that reminds me. Make sure that you don't set up a stand to hunt from. We do keep track of all things that we shoot, and it has been noted in prior hunts that man is an animal at heart, and shooting another hunter can be counted into the total. So make sure that you keep moving, dear boy.'

Before the American could answer, the guide returned, the crop in his hand waving briefly at the various insects that darted about him. 'They come. Is time.' The various hunters began decamping, slinging weapons on their shoulders and adjusting ammunition pouches and bandoliers. The Englishman accepted a long double-barreled rifle from his servant, and briefly checked the load on the weapon. As he snapped the breach closed, he nodded to the cowboy. 'Game time, dear boy. Let's go, and show the world what hunting is all about!'

Zine Scene

The Game now Standing on Platform 5

JOHN HARRINGTON boards the train for a journey into Zine Games

IT WAS in that dead period after "O" levels when you are still obliged to turn up for school that I first came across **Railway Rivals**. The game was designed by a geography teacher from Wales and was perceived to be educational, which was why my teacher brought it in to amuse and educate

The obvious educational element is geographical; the game can be played on any of 176 different maps, ranging from the Isle of Wight to Middle Earth. A less obvious educational element is historical, in that it usually pays to build similar networks to those which were built historically, although obviously this does not apply to Middle Earth. All of which makes it sound like a dull and worthy game, whereas in fact it is a lot of fun; not for nothing is it second only to Diplomacy in the zine-based postal gaming scene.

Like football, Railway Rivals (RR) is a game of two halves. In the first half, the rival railway companies build track from their start town (each company will usually have a different start town), gradually building up a network of lines from town to town. Companies receive bonuses for being the first company to build track

being the first company to build tract to a town and one of the major decisions in this phase of the game is whether to race your rivals to the virgin towns, in which case your network might end up looking a bit higgledy-piggledy, or to stick to a game plan and build what you consider to be an efficient network.

The shape of your network will also be determined

by geography; do you spend money to blast through hills or take the long way round? Do you build bridges across rivers or go with the flow and follow the course of the river? Most crucially of all, do you pay your rival companies to build over land on which they have already built? Parallel building with a rival is prohibitively expensive but if, for instance, it is the only way in to a thriving metropolis such as London or Frankfurt, maybe you cough up anyway? In the second half of the game companies compete for contracts to deliver goods from one town to another (e.g. London to Nottingham). The companies win these contracts by racing along the contract route, with the winner receiving a full cash bonus and the runner-up half of the full cash bonus. These contract routes are randomly determined so you never can be sure that your arduously built route from Hull to London will ever get used, but the big cities will figure more often than the smaller ones.

Any decent postal game has player interaction and in Railway Rivals this primarily comes from companies teaming up to do joint runs, using some of the first company's track and some of the second company's network. As is so often the case, communication with your fellow players is vital for success. One final wrinkle in the game system is the ability to carry on developing your network in the racing phase. I am by no means a good Railway Rivals player and one of my major weaknesses is continuing to spend money on building track when I would be better off hoarding the cash,

for as you have probably surmised, the winner is the player whose company has the biggest bank balance at the end of the game. The game is obviously set in a period when railways made money....

As mentioned before, the game is probably second only to Diplomacy among zines, with over a third of active UK postal gaming zines featuring the game, including Cut & Thrust, which has the game's inventor, David Watts, as a GM. Probably the premier UK Railway Rivals zine is Devolution.

Last time I looked it ran 25 games of RR, but in the latest issue I notice new games starting on maps of Norfolk & Suffolk, Denmark, Yorkshire and Mallorca. If you have e-mail this zine is excellent value, as it is free, although you will have to pay a nominal game

fee to cover the cost of the map. Even the snailmail version is good value at 50p, although if you don't play in any of the games you won't find a lot of reading material in it. Another free e-

mail zine featuring Railway Rivals is Serendipity from John Webley, an Englishman living in Germany. The significance of his location is that he gets to see (and therefore review) a lot of the hot new German games

before they make it over here. Curiously

he does not run any of these German games in his zine and come to think of it, neither does anyone else, which suggests there is something about British

> and American games which lend themselves more easily to postal

play. I wonder what that is?

Running a "mere" 7 games of Railway Rivals is For Whom The Die Rolls, which has just won the 2001 Zine Poll. Railway gamers are well served by this zine which also runs a dozen games of 18xx (1830 et al), 2 of Lancashire Railways, 2 of New England Railways and 1 of Rail Baron. At £1.50 an issue if you played in all of the games this zine runs you'd be paying the equivalent of 3 pence per turn per game. Is that fantastic value or what? The only criticism anyone ever has of this zine is that there is not a lot to read unless you enjoying game reports, but that's like complaining about the quality of the food in the buffet car on a train that is never late.

Runner-up in the Zine Poll was Underneath The Mango Tree, from the impossibly enthusiastic Alex Bardy. The zine specialises in original but mostly light and fluffy games so the 4 RR games provide a bit of meat and potatoes familiarity. Of all the zines mentioned so far this has the most reading material. If "chat" is your bag then Ode is a good candidate. Even after 230 issues its editor, John Marsden is a man of forthright opinions, as befits a Liberal Democrat councillor. In addition to 9 games of RR the zine also runs a couple of 18xx railway games, proving once again what a fertile subject for games the railway business is. I suppose it is only fitting that as so many zines are read on trains that Railway Rivals should enjoy such a dominant position in the hobby today.

Next issue, continuing the theme of concentrating on the mainstay games of the zine based postal hobby I shall be taking a look at the footie zines. Details of all the Zines mentioned in this article included in the Zine Listings on page 45.

Lands of Elvaria

Sepheri's diary continues

SARAH CALLAGHAN and her character report ...

Sepheri Mirrorkin's diary, entry 4

Spent day shopping. Never quite realised before how difficult it is to spend 2,500 gold pieces in backwater like Frontier. Bought sexy new armour, specially silenced, as well as loads of the cool stuff (inc. box to stop potion bottles being smashed). Even went so far as to buy horse, though only know two things about horses - legs go on each side and falling off is bad!

Met up with others going on mission, and got told didn't need horse after all. Got given ring of transportation and breathed big sigh of relief. Am convinced horse doesn't like me.

Others going on mission look a lot more experienced - carrying lots of magical items as well. Trying not to get nervous, or wonder why I volunteered in first place.

Phew, thank Alwane that's over - first cavern we went to was crawling with giant spiders. Freaked a bit, fired my crossbow bolts at a few of the spiders, but they were splatted really quickly by the rest of the group. Feel a bit left out actually, others seem so much harder and able to deal with stuff. Wonder why I'm here...

Sarah Callaghan's diary, entry 3

Phew, first fight over and done with. As I had sod all idea about how fights actually worked, and how lethal they could end up (and also because I figured Sepheri would be nervous her first time out adventuring, especially with such an experienced group) I gave orders for her to stay well back and out of the way of the others.

As it turns out, I needn't have worried: along with that particular turn came a message from Mark Pinder, the GM, encouraging me to be a bit more daring and imaginative when it comes to thinking up cool magic items and stuff to use. So I put my thinking cap on and came up with a few potential mirrors, and a possible magic ring. Mark was back to me about them in the next turn to give me costs and game stats for them. Two of the mirrors I'd thought of already existed in game, but the ring and the third mirror didn't. Unfortunately, even though I'm acquiring new imager abilities and new potion recipes left, right and centre, in the middle of a cavern surrounded by hordes of hostile spiders is not the time or place to try making any of them!

Sepheri's Diary, entry 5

Eurgh!! No one said there'd be exploding spiders down here! Entire group nearly got nobbled by exploding spider with constricting legs - others got out alright, but I had to rely on divine intervention to get self out from constricting spider leg grasp. (Thanks Alwane!) Collected some spider silk, was very difficult to cut, so have small sticky ball now. No idea what to do with it yet, but might come in useful one day.

Tried general chitchat with the others, some not forthcoming at all (Like Pearce, the human ninja - all he said was that he like vodka martinis. Said something about stirred and shaken as well, but gave up trying to talk to him at that point.) Millicent (halfing druid) v. nice, chatted lots

Lands of Elvaria at a glance

Long-running fantasy RPG from Mark Pinder, periodically revised to allow for new players. Startup + 3 turns for £10, following turns £3.50 each.

about fashion and then dropped bombshell - said that not all of the mirrors were removed from my blood! Does explain why imagery getting easier though. Curse you Dark Overlord! Curse you!!

Uhoh, Spike (warrior cleric) found big shiny spiky mirror ball up ahead, looks like they want me to deal with it...

Sarah's diary, entry 4

Aha, a chance to show off in front of the other characters! And prove that I'm not just a passenger! Here's hoping it doesn't go horribly wrong!

Sepheri's diary, entry 6

Note to self, new bag mirror v. useful for trapping suspicious unidentifiable things that float in mid-air. When get back, work on variation of bag mirror that will hold magical items and nullify their power. Others v. impressed when caught flying mirror in bag mirror. Ha! Not useless after all! Go me!

... Eurgh!! No one said there'd be exploding spiders down here! ...

Sarah's diary, entry 5

Success! Hurrah! I think I'm getting the hang of this ...

Sepheri and me are both getting really confused though. She's been doing her best to find out about her mother by asking around. She's actually got a few answers from one of the NPCs, but the entire back history of Elvaria seems to be as riddled with holes as a Swiss cheese. Islands that were discovered last year have always been there, new races pop out of the woodwork at the drop of a hat, and vast world-changing events take place once a week and twice on weekends. I've even heard that the whole world was destroyed on more than one occasion, but it's still staggering on. This does mean that absolutely anything can happen, but coherent it ain't

Sepheri's diary, entry 7

Reached centre of cavern complex, totally covered in spiders, but has interesting looking altar and curtained alcove across on the other side. Identify mirror useless at doing scanning of large areas, need to make new mirror to do that when get back. Am going to take climbing potion to climb over to altar and see what's behind the curtain.

Why is it that evil necromancers always feel need to gloat? Made it across cavern, chased by loads of spiders while others tried to splat spiders without hitting me. Looked at altar - didn't recognise it and got sidetracked by screams of others being caught in magic webs. Quickness potion meant I didn't get caught - but instead got invited to dinner with dread necromancer Gyzan. Have accepted, hoping to stall for time for others to get free. Also want to find what he's planning. Just hope food edible; necromancers not known for their taste in cuisine...

Sarah's diary, entry 6

Another note from Mark this turn, again encouraging me to pull mirrors out by the bucketload when I need them, as I get XP for using the things. There's also news of a game newsletter coming out in the next month or so, which should improve the level of player and character interaction.

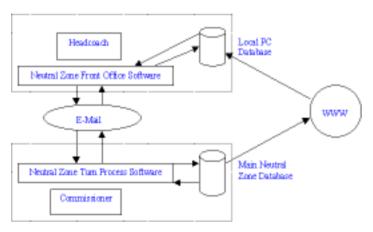
Neutral Zone

American Football PBEM - Design Notes

CHRIS SADLER's game plan for the development of Neutral Zone

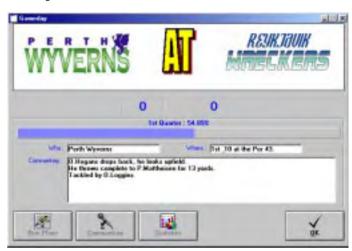
SINCE THE first time I saw a computer in 1984, I'd known that I wanted to be involved with them in some way. A friend had a ZX Spectrum and he'd amazed me by showing me how it could be programmed to do what you wanted. It would be a few years later before I owed one myself and began to teach myself how to program, a journey which would eventually see me become a programmer by profession and create **Neutral Zone** American Football PBeM.

After a friend patiently introduced me to the rules of American Football I used my new interest to aid me with learning how to program. Armed with books on the game I created a Shareware American Football game on the Amiga called *Necessary Roughness*. About 10 people paid the £5 fee, each of them suggesting improvements to the game. I took their suggestions on board, and added a lot of my own to design the basis of a new game - under the working title of *Necessary Roughness 2*. The game was to be a cross between a management game and an arcade game. I worked for months on the computer, simulating games based on the players, plays and various attributes involved. The Amiga sadly faded away as PC's took over the market and the game sadly faded away with it.



I left University and found myself a job as a Trainee Visual Basic Programmer. I had no previous experience of Visual Basic or programming on a PC platform and was told to sit and teach myself Visual Basic for the first couple of months at the company. After trawling through the very boring chapters of a Teach Yourself book I eventually reached an interesting chapter on Databases and Database design. Using databases in an application opened up a lot of new possibilities and I decided to dig out my out Source Code from the Amiga and attempt to create the Simulation aspect of *Necessary Roughness 2* on the PC using an Access Database. Before long I had created the first instance of Neutral Zone and four colleagues in the office would be my testers, each having their own team version of the software.

The 'Office Version' was based on a ten team league. The players had three main attributes, SKILL, SPEED, and STRENGTH. Each coach would select his starting players and a percentage of rushing plays and passing plays and the game would churn out a result and statistics by running the entire game based on these percentages. The game proved to be very popular, coaches would run across the office and work out trades before the next game was played and some heated cross-office rivalry were created! It was here that the idea for an e-mail turn based game was born



I started to work on Neutral Zone in the evenings after work. The first steps were to design the game. This was to make clear what the game was to do, how the software was going to work and how the database should be designed. To play the game over the internet, a way to update user's software with the latest game information had to be thought of. The best solution, given the volume of data involved, would be to upload the databases to a website. The users would then download the latest database and this would update their software accordingly. The next thing to consider was how users would submit orders. Ease of use was top priority and it was decided that the software would keep a track of all the orders for a turn and produce a text file with these orders in them. The user would then send this file via email to the GM. The software could then simply read in the orders when the turn was processed.

The way a game was processed had to be completely overhauled. The 'Office' version of the game churned out results based on percentages entered, whilst the results were realistic enough the system was too basic to use. A

complete re-write of the simulation was needed so that each play was processed based on a specific Offensive and Defensive selected by the head coach and the attributes of the players involved. This aspect took time, using many NFL Fact and Record books, general American Football books, watching games and talking to people. It was important to get the simulation as accurate as possible as it is the heart of Neutral Zone.



Once the simulation was in place, the rest of the software was developed for the coaches to manage and run their teams. This 'Front Office' software gives the user full control over his team. I wanted Neutral Zone to be as simple, yet powerful as possible so that it would attract players who did not necessarily have American Football knowledge and allow them to compete with the more experienced players. I did, however, want to simulate a lot of the aspects of American Football including Trades and Free Agency which can be over complicated. To balance this out, a simplistic salary system was used which helped to cut down on the complexity of these areas.

After advertising on a website, 30 coaches downloaded and set up the software and were ready to play test the game. This was the acid test of the game to see if all the effort was worth it or not, to see if the game simulation stood up and performed as expected. It soon became apparent that the 30 coaches would be very valuable to the game, as ideas how to improve the game and error reports were e-mailed in over the next few months. With every software product there are always bugs and the main priority is to eliminate these to provide a fully working system. Enhancements to the 'Front Office' software followed and the game began to grow and take shape over the following year. It was one of these players, David Hagman, who offered to redesign the website. His new-look site was a vast improvement over the plain site that we had at the time and work then began to allow the GM Software to create updated web pages at the click of a button, thereby saving a lot of work.



After three years starting up, the Neutral Zone software, both for the coaches and for the GMs, is constantly being improved upon. With each new player, new ideas are suggested and discussed on the league and technical mailing lists. Each idea, and there are a lot of them, is noted in a document and prioritised ready for development. The latest additions to the software have been to upgrade the game commentary to be more descriptive and to add screens to show the Head To Head statistics of teams in the league.

The future of Neutral Zone looks good, with plans to enhance some of the existing game options such as the Rookie Draft and Gameplanning, Contracting and to add many new features to the software including Gameplan Designer, Team Captains, Stadiums/Crowd Attendance and new statistic screens. Ideas are also underway to enhance the Web Site to use Active Server Pages, allowing lots more statistics screens to be easily created, and in the future the possibility of being able to log on to the Web Site and complete a full turn via your browser rather than the 'Front Office Software'.

From its roots Neutral Zone has come a very long way and has developed from an idea kicked about to a very enjoyable PBeM. With technology improving all the time and a long list of enhancements, the game and software can only improve and grow from here.

Neutral Zone at a glance

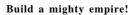
Management game of American Football, played only by email. Setup and following turns are £1.25.

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Quest GME

Player's Verdict

DAN REED adds his comments to those printed last issue ...

IN THE beginning there was **Quest**. For a teenager who had been introduced to the game by a mate he role-played with, it was fantastic. Everything was new, with lots to learn and we could roam a world and kill monsters and each other. What more could anybody ask?

That feeling lasted about four months. In that time, I'd met up with some people and joined an alliance. Instantly I got a complete spell list, loads of tips on 'building the group up', essentially turning the game from a thing of wonder to power-playing. I could now send a turn off once every ten days with the exact things to do in the exact sequence to get as much good as possible in the shortest time. I kept up with it for a year or so, but the magic was gone, thoughand inertia that kept me going. When University beckoned, lack of cash was the game's death-knell for me.

I was tempted back a few years ago when I heard of the Second Age. Dynamic combat based on a multitude of factors. No longer could a 'best' way be preached from the rooftops (although a few tried it...) A vast improvement over the old game, not least in the quality of the battle reports. It's fun to look for comments - bouncing a Goblin King's head off into the distance can really make your day! So I took the game up again. It was vastly better than before, and as long as all you wanted to do was kill things you couldn't ask for more from a fantasy PBM. But it was still essentially two-dimensional, role-playing was done solely by mailing list and could not be done within the game. Slowly the players were drifting away again, in search of a game that was more than a 'zoo'. While there were quests you could get from temples and libraries, you could only read that a stinger plant had stolen a kettle worth 15,000 gold so often without realising how shallow the illusion of the world setting was.

Then came the suggestion of moderation, first broached at one of the twice-yearly pubmeets by KJC. We were sold a vision, one that answered every role-player's dream. We would be able to interact with settlements, turning them into more than a collection of shops for the first time. In the future, we might even be able to run them! For the first time, a human would do more than add coding and input turns. This would give us global regional and local plotlines, each interacting to give a tangled web of intrigue. There were worries and concerns of course, especially from those who hadn't role-played before and didn't realise what they were missing. But the overall feeling was very positive.

So here we are, in Quest:GME. Four moderated worlds, with turn-speed running from twice a week to fifteen days. Is it everything we were promised? Hand on heart, I can only say yes, but with more to come. Alliances are key to the game now. They have allegiances with power blocks running from the city they chose for their home base, to the temple of one of the deities in the game, to the Bankers and Merchant's guild. Every cycle, the alliance gets a few Special Quests from their liaisons. At first they were simple, little more than 'go and kill these monsters', or 'send some groups here to preach to the people'. To aid us in completing these, and to do other things that we want to do, we get a number of Special Actions, allowing us to do things not possible under the old rules. And as the worlds have progressed and matured, more features creep in. It's a constant evolution, both in terms of the game and the moderation. On my last turn in one game, for instance, I got the following. My characters can dream now!

'You are stood in a picturesque village, which village it is cannot be determined. It is the middle of the day and the sun shines brightly. A storm suddenly gathers overhead, the speed and intensity of which is unnatural.

The wind picks up and the dust is blown about. Your mouth has the taste of ash. The village cottages are now burnt and it is from their blackened remains that the ash comes. Darkness envelops the vision and the characters wake up unsure what to make of this.'

How this plays out is largely up to the players. Do we go in search of the village, ignore the dream or actively seek to bring it about? It depends on how you see your group, and what aims your alliance has chosen.

On the game program side, we get access to skills specific to moderated actions, from deciphering runes to forgery. Powers exist to be won, beyond those possible to learn from normal play. Artifacts, special locations and glimpses of the promised global plotlines are all becoming apparent. Some of the simple quests we got at first turned out to be not so simple investigate a city's fortifications? no problem. But there's a little niggling doubt from the phrasing of the result. Are we being paranoid? Maybe. Should we just tell the liaison what we got from the result: 'the fortifications seem to be ramshackle and poorly maintained'. Well, we could have done, but I'm glad we didn't! Suspecting something fishy, especially since the city was run by wizards who worshipped an evil god, we decided to dig a bit deeper. The alliance used another special action to petition our city for a scroll to let a party detect powerful magics being used. When the party got there, another special action to use the scroll. Expensive? Two thirds of a month's special actions and 10,000 gold just because an alliance member thought the word 'seem' was significant? Many would think so, and it was possible that we were about to waste them...

'The characters discreetly use the Power Scroll. With a sense of power the characters' senses are flooded with the numerous powers that are in use in the city. Slowly the characters are able to direct the detection power towards the city's walls and see what is truly there. Through the illusions the characters can see evil looking war machines, hordes of runes and portals, the entire city's defences appearance is one giant illusion of decay. The officials likely hope that anyone attempting to capture the city will believe that they only need to commit a small force.'

This is only a taste of the complexity now available to those who look for it in Quest. For those who only want to kill things, little has changed - they can still do so with little of the moderation affecting them. But for those who want to play characters able to really change the world, and cope with plagues, wars, plots and intrigue a whole new world of play is available.

If one criticism could be laid at KJC's door, it could only be that they've made players hungry for so much more. A few want everything to happen yesterday of course, but the improvements are coming thick and fast, enough to keep all but the most impatient satisfied. Personalities from the most blinkered Holy Avenging Knight type to a fiendish behind the scenes plotter, spymaster and kingmaker are now possible to be played by interaction within the game, rather than around the edges by mails and posting. I should know, because in separate games I play both!

'Knowledge is Power' can be a motto for many games. Before, Quest was so well known that everybody had access via a website or ten to just about everything about the game. This is no longer the case, something that can only be good for the long-term appeal of the game. I cannot see a point in the future where boredom is likely, I really can't - the game is unrecognisable from the humble beginnings it came from. An oak amongst PBM games is growing tall and wide, and will go yet further.

The Displacement Engine

Chapter 5: Vital questions start and conclude this story ...

FIVE VICTORIANS, by chance and by Sir Rawley Withycombe's Displacement Engine, have arrived in 1650. They're startled to recognise the woman whom they've just saved from being hanged for a witch as Victoria, Queen of England in 1850. Perhaps their Queen has been conveyed to 1650 by Sir Rawley at some date in their future? So should they expect to be charged with treason? Oh dear ...

VICTORIA seems confident and cheerful, presumably accepting that her visit to the scaffold is an entertainment controlled by Sir Rawley. Sir Rawley himself is pale and trembling, however, stunned by her question, 'Where is Albert?'

Where indeed? What to do? Sir Rawley splutters and bows, speechless.

Tennant is concealed from the Queen by his repair work on the Engine. He judges that it must be some later manifestation of Sir Rawley who has brought her here to 1650. And if so, there must be another Sir Rawley and his Engine not far away. Will it be dangerous if the two Sir Rawleys encounter each other? It's probably better not to find out! Tennant urgently gestures to Adolphus that it's important to move Victoria away.

While Adolphus doesn't entirely understand the danger, he recognises a difficult social moment, and he is, after all, a gentleman. 'Let me escort you to Prince Albert, ma'am,' he cries, bowing deeply, 'and this clerical gentleman, the Reverend Horatio Percy, will assist us.' The vicar is delighted, looking hopefully for a puddle over which he can spread his coat.

Victoria hesitates. She's experienced some events which have been a little disconcerting, but isn't ready to acknowledge anybody who hasn't been formally introduced to her: there are limits. Fortunately, Sir Rawley regains his powers of speech just in time to murmur an introduction, 'My nephew, ma'am, Adolphus Withycombe. And Horatio Percy, vicar of St Cuthberts, Hampstead. Both gentlemen from our own age, 1850...'

Reassured, the Queen cries 'So amusing!' and trips confidently away with Adolphus and the vicar, in the opposite direction to that in which the crowd had fled. She seems to know where she's going, along a dry track leading south through woods.

Panic grips the three who remain - Sir Rawley, Joseph Rouncewell and Charles Tennant - for several minutes:. Rouncewell hopes that his chance of a future knighthood isn't totally lost: 'Perhaps we should follow the Queen, Sir Rawley? Your man can guard the Engine meanwhile...'

Tennant sees a flaw in this suggestion, 'What will happen if we meet ourselves, Sir Rawley?' he asks, nervously, 'Won't this flout your laws of Time and of Motion?'

'Hmm, they were theorems rather than laws,' replies Sir Rawley, 'but it seems prudent to avoid meeting our future selves here, just in case Time forces us into a painful and possibly fatal Coalescence!'

Then an anguished cry is heard in the distance. The figure of Horatio Percy appears, running frantically and shouting, 'Demons! It's the grey demons! They're assassins! Help!'

'Damnation!' curses Sir Rawley, 'Such a beautiful theory, too, such neat equations, and now fully proved by experimentation ...'

'Are we thinking the same thing, sir?' asks Tennant.

'Yes, alas. Only one thing for it. I must return to the time in my laboratory before we first set out together, and leave myself a warning

against carrying royal passengers. That should prevent this tiresome hiccup ...'

So to Horatio Percy's horror, they respond to his cries by entering the Displacement Engine and vanishing with it!

What happens? Does Sir Rawley's plan work or are Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, the vicar and Adolphus eradicated by a TimePolice corps, in 1650? Has Benjamin Garland perished in 1950? Are Patience and Silas marooned in their future? Perhaps a shimmering cloud emitting cries of 'Up! Down! Back a bit!' is seen for some months in 1851, to no avail ...

Yes, Silas definitely stayed in 1950. But public conveniences for women seem Patience's sort of brilliant idea, for 1851? Benjamin Garland's story may just possibly have inspired H G Wells? Rouncewell, Adolphus and Horatio Percy may have chosen to lead quiet lives? Did the monarchy survive or were the Queen and Prince replaced by look-alikes for the sake of public safety?

Clearly, however, Sir Rawley never resumed experiments with his Theory of Displacement ...

Many thanks to all readers who sent in ideas! Next time, we start **The Lost Gold of Stronnmark** - a similar idea to the Displacement Engine, but set in the award-winning gameworld of Midhir.

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Spiel 2001

PAUL EVANS (Pevans) on the world's greatest games fair ...

The annual games fair in Essen is the biggest games event in the world. Last October's event was no exception with 147,156 visitors coming to look at some 200 new games. As always, even four days does not allow you to experience more than a fraction of the show. This is therefore my report on my personal experience at this year's Spiel.

The fair opened on Thursday morning and my first move was to take the tour and check out what was happening. Some time later I fetched up at the Warfrog stand where I was introduced to Martin Wallace's latest game, **Liberté**. Players score points for contributing to the performance of the three factions in the French revolution. After four elections, the game is over and the player with the most points wins. Except that an election may also end in a landslide for the revolutionaries (reds) and the player with the most red points wins. Alternatively, the whites (Monarchists) can stage a counter-revolution and the leading player in white wins. So, there are three different ways of ending the game and winning. This is a cracker of a game and one I can't wait to play again.

I also hit the Amigo stand and tried a couple of their new games. **Gargon** is another in the company's series of card games in small boxes. It's an interesting light card game - the kind of thing German game designers excel at. The aim is to collect scoring cards in the six colours - lower value cards being worth more and a zero doubling your score. As the backs of the cards show their colour and must always be visible (even in your hand), all sorts of tactical ploys are possible. With three players the options were clear and the game was fairly controlled. I can see it being more random with more players.

In contrast, **Big Deal** is a big boardgame with cards, money, resource markers and other odds and ends. It is a company and share-dealing game in which players control companies and stage and defend takeovers. Cash can be raised by selling shares or resources back to the bank and there are several other wrinkles to the game. It ends when one player is bankrupt, at which point the player with the most valuable portfolio wins. This is an interesting game that provoked some ding-dong battles. I look forward to playing it again.

I tried two games on the Piatnik stand. **Meridian** is a pretty abstract game that didn't grab me. Players get limited opportunities to play stacks of pawns (a bit of resource management here) between each pair of parallel lines (meridians) across the board. The aim is to gain control of the islands, which run across the board at 90 degrees to the lines. Once everybody's played their pieces you score up. The other was **Cortez**, set in Tenochtitlan as the Conquistadors and Aztecs struggle for control of the temples at the centre of the city. There are lots of things you can do in your turn, limited by the cards you hold, and again you have to manage your resources. I found it an interesting strategy game, with lots of possibilities. Then somebody discovered that, according to the rules, everything is negotiable! This might add a different dimension to the game or it might cause the whole thing to drag interminably. Another one to play again, but it looks like it could be good.

Adlung are the stars of card games and, as usual, had a slew of new games. I tried three. **Pompeii** is a pattern-matching game. You have to lay cards so that they do not match the cards next to them. But you score by getting cards that match in the same row, column or diagonal. Luckily this is a fairly light game, otherwise it would be a real brain-burner. A neat game, but not really my cup of tea. **Alibi** has a dozen suspects with a selection of different characteristics (length of hair, body shape, clothing et al). The rest of the cards show different characteristics. Players play in turn, building up a set of characteristics around the table. Any time there's a set of five matching characteristics for a suspect, you arrest them. So you try not to let too many characteristics build up - or play an Alibi card to prevent a suspect being arrested. The game works, but it's very slight. **Winhard** is clearly aimed at

children with its bright illustrations of squirrels and nuts. Players are trying to get rid of their cards, playing higher or lower than the card currently on the top of either deck. Certain cards switch the direction between higher and lower, which is the key to getting rid of all your cards. I expect it to make a decent filler.

Vabanque comes from Winning Moves and has a casino theme. It is played over exactly four turns, in each of which players decide which of the gaming tables they will try to win - or steal - by playing cards face down. Once they've taken their winnings the players increase the stakes for the next turn. The game boils down to the bluff and counter-bluff in playing your $cards, which is not enough for me. \ Winning \ Moves \ also \ had \ \textbf{Ulysses}, played$ across a board of the Mediterranean. Each player has four (secret) goals to reach; first to achieve them wins the game. Each turn one player proposes where Ulysses' ship moves next. The others can challenge and there's lots of card play. This was another game that felt slighter than it looked, but it may have been unbalanced with only three players. Interestingly, Jumbo's new board game is Odysseus and also has hidden objectives for each player. This time Odysseus moves round the abstract board, encountering various adventures. Each player scores points for three types of adventure: first to ten wins. Again cards are used to decide where the ship moves. This time each player is also backed by one of the Gods and can use their God's power once a turn to help. I can see this being a fun family game.

Kosmos had a substantial range of new games and I only played a few of them. Bali is designed by Uwe Rosenberg. As you'd expect, there are intricate rules for what cards you can play when. However, the basic idea is to get the prince to move to one of the four islands where you will score points rather than your opponents. One of the features of the game is that each player has a different hand of cards at each island and plays with the appropriate set. Neue Entdecker is an updating by Klaus Teuber of his Entdecker from a few years ago. The players explore the blank board, laying tiles to show islands and sea. You get the opportunity to place pieces on new islands and score points when they are complete. There are several differences in the detail (particularly in the way discovery chips are found and scored), but it is essentially the same game as the original. Der Herr der Ringe: Die Gefährten (which I think translates as Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship) was just one of the LotR tie-ins. This one covers the journey in Fellowship of the Ring. The players are hobbits. Each turn they get an event card and each rolls dice to move down the trail and to give their fighting strength for the turn. Then a card is turned for an opponent to fight the lead hobbit (first - the others get involved if he loses). Along the way the players score points and the winner is the player with most when they reach Amon Hen (where the fellowship is broken, of course). The game is quite fun and has some nicely worked mechanics. However, nobody could describe it as a deep game.

US publisher GMT Games was at Spiel this year for, I think, the first time. Amongst the games on display was **Flagship**, which is available to preorder. This is a card game of spaceship combat along CCG lines. You start with a number of spaceships in front of you and a hand of cards. You play cards to add weaponry and crew to your ships, to boost your attacks and to defend against your opponent. You attack your opponent's ships, with the aim of destroying his flagship, but each ship you attack with will be less able to defend itself. With several different races to play, each with their own strengths, the game has plenty of re-play value.

All in all, my favourite of the games I played was **Liberté**, but there were plenty of other interesting games at the show. I look forward to playing more of the new games over the next months.

A longer version of this article is available at: http://www.pevans.co.uk/Reviews/Spiel2001.html



[This column attempts to simulate a crowded barfull of PBMers swapping experiences. It contains readers' uncensored comments, with no attempt to maintain fairness and balance; editing is only done for grammar, clarity, brevity and (occasionally) libel avoidance! In general, it's unwise to put too much weight on a single report, whether rave or curse. Readers are asked only to comment on games of which they have recent personal experience and to mention specifically if they are only giving a first impression. Unattributed comments, usually in [], are by the editor.]

Comments received from November 18th

David Blair, Colin Combes, Colin Danks, Larry Deyell, Bruce Edwards, Colin Forbes, Patrick Gleeson, Martin Helsdon, Andy Kendall, Greg Lamb, Joe McCarthy, Carol Mulholland, Steve Treavett, Ben Williams, Wayne Yeadon

GAMES FEATURED THIS ISSUE

Aspects of Might

Wayne Yeadon - 'Got interested in this due to the idea of using Tarot as the basis for the game world. Not entirely sure what to make of it all thus far, as I haven't hit on what I can and cannot do yet. Just exploring and finding my way around in the early turns. Perhaps I am not making as much of the game as I could be? I haven't got involved in the role-playing side on the astral web, mainly because I don't see much of relevance to my characters. Finding others who share the same aspect is a good idea, but one of my characters isn't having much luck in this so far. Will be interesting to see how the game develops though and also to see if I can get more into what is going on.'

The Chevian Chronicles

Colin Forbes - 'It's all gone a little quiet - but hey! Rob and Sarah are getting married and most people got the Babylon 5 videos they were after in the Christmas sales. (This and many other japes can only be understood by signing up to a game and the State of Mind mailing list).'

Middle Earth PBM

'An interesting closed-end simultaneous game, based on the Tolkien world, running mostly once every two weeks with a lot to do for the 25 players in each game.

There are two sides, with ten nations each, and five neutrals who can join either the good or the evil side. One side or the other wins the game by eliminating all the nations on the other side and there is also an individual winner who comes closest to being the biggest, richest, and strongest nation at the end.

After playing several games, I found that, of the 25 nations, a few win frequently, quite a few win occasionally, and a few never, or almost never, win. In many games, several nations are eliminated even from the side which is ahead in the overall game. The weakest nations and those which start the game in the most vulnerable positions tend to be the ones eliminated, so your chances in the game depend a lot on which nation you happen to play. The game requires an extended learning curve, however, and an experienced

player can often keep a weak nation afloat, especially if his allies assist him when the going gets tough.

The game has been played virtually unchanged for many years and there are enthusiasts who have played dozens, perhaps hundreds, of games, and know by heart the entire "playbook", as it were, for all 25 nations. If there is one or more of these on your side and you can get him to mentor you, your chances of a better result improve markedly. The experienced players get to know each other and coalesce to form "grudge" teams which are virtually unbeatable, unless opposed by an equally experienced team. You can play through the regular mail but those who get their turns emailed, and email each other, have a marked advantage over the postal players unless they use the telephone a lot. Still, the "average" game consists mostly of players climbing the learning curve, and even the weaker nations can offer an interesting experience, perhaps even more exciting in a nail-biting sense, where anticipation runs high waiting for the next turn to arrive. Log on to ... www.MiddleEarthGames.com to learn more.'

Colin Forbes - 'Face to Face game: Another excellent, though totally mad weekend in Cardiff at New Year, saw 15 or so players get through 14 turns in two days. The pace was frenetic, the fun was immense and the cold pizza was, er, less enjoyable. Plaudits to Clint and the lads who not only put up with the invasion of his own home for a weekend, but also played a valuable part in the moral victory of the Dark Servants - hurrah for us! A special thanks to the amazing people who input the turns and were so good at spotting errors - without you lot it would have been impossible! PBM face to face is really an experience to remember. Why not ask your GMs if they can arrange something - I'm sure this would work with many other games. World Championship update: Sad to say, the match between the UK1 team and the USA1 team ended when the US team (ably led by Ben Shushan) honourably accepted the surrender offered by the UK team. Although both sides had suffered casualties and the Free Peoples were making some headway in the centre of Mordor, the collapse of the Rhovanion front meant that defeat was inevitable.

However, UK team morale is intact - after all we have taken two points from our two matches against the US team, which many judge to be the best team in the competition. In fact, we're rather looking forward to our next match (probably against Scandinavia or the UK2 team).'

Patrick Gleson - 'Excellent game, solid GMing, it's just a shame some of the players are **** (the description I want to use probably wouldn't get printed in the pages of Flagship). I'm in a three week game, though I would definitely consider a faster turnaround if my real life allowed such a thing. It does seem odd, though, that the game remains very much the same as it was when it first came out. Why no development over the past ten years? Sure, there are two new(er) scenarios, but these do not have a great reputation amongst most players, and are more or less clones of the original game except for the starting positions. It's a shame, since so much could be done with this game system. I understand that the current GMs are not to blame for this, the onus for game development resting with the licensors in the USA. Americans!'

Quest GME

Wayne Yeadon - 'The November pubmeet was a good opportunity for players to discuss perceived problems and have them explained by Bat, Mica and Steve from KJC. Lots of useful information was given out, making these meets worth attending. Some changes are due to take place in the game, which could have a dramatic effect on play, especially on the combat side of the game.

Most alliances have now made it to rank 2 and it is good to see experience being awarded now, for the completion of alliance quests. The alliance quests were put on hold over the Christmas and New Year period, giving alliances the chance to clear any outstanding quests and make a fresh start when it all kicks off again. 2002 should be a great year for Quest GME will all the new stuff that should be coming into the game.'

Colin Forbes - 'Just starting up in this game and it's obvious from the rulebook and start-up material that a lot of work has gone into the game since I last played it. Looking forward to this!'

ADVENTURE GAMES

Dungeonworld

Wayne Yeadon - 'The guild quest that one of my characters is taking part in, has started to make good progress at last, after a period where we had no firm direction as to what was happening. All the characters are working together much better than they were before. My other character should be able to experience more, as he gets a vital piece of equipment pertaining to his class. Once he has this, the game should become more enjoyable (not that it isn't!), as he can explore things that are more relevant to his class.' Greg Lamb - 'Yes, I'm still playing in DW on the free game offered by Madhouse a year or so back. Say what you like about the guys in the asylum, they can put resources behind their games that nobody else in PBM has access to. Save perhaps KJC, but they've taken pains to exclude themselves from the hobby whereas Madhouse remember their roots. Steve Tierney got in touch asking for us to spread the word a little, and that seems a fair trade to me. Trouble is that almost nothing has been happening in the game recently. The group I'm in ventured warily down to the feared second level of the Pits, and subsequently spent an awful lot of time walking around aimlessly, making maps and waiting for something to happen.

If I'd been paying to play I suspect I would have dropped during this period, but since the unlimited free turns offer was still going strong I kept sending in the orders. After this had gone for rather too long, one of the party got in touch with Madhouse, and it turns out that the maps of the second level were never fully completed. And with unerring accuracy, our group has been wandering around one of the empty areas, without room descriptions, monster generators or treasure, wondering why it's so quiet. Oops. Steve has promised to correct this as soon as possible, so things should get noticeably more interesting in a turn or two. I'm almost certain that this is a good thing.'

Bruce Edwards - 'Land of the Dead: The group who decided to seek the demised King Mark are still exploring the Mausoleum where they arrived. If you don't have e-mail, than you are definitely at a disadvantage as messages abound on the Yahoo network. To my knowledge, we have not yet lost any of our starting party, but the monsters we've met don't seem to be too tough...'

Monster Island

Bruce Edwards - 'Got involved with the US game via the Internet, and one player has just suggested a Challenge for 2002 to all players. The GM has agreed to a lower turn fee and 15 players have started brand new monsters with a view to comparing stats every 10 turns. Initial calculations show that Bignoses get the best start with Normans last due to a low initial badness. Could this spur jaded UK players to do something similar?'

ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Einstein's Lot

Carol Mulholland - 'Some time since I sent fresh orders in, but it's good to know that my character is now out of a church which was growing more creepy by the minute, with voices in the wall, demanding to be let out, ulp. Alison's middle name isn't "Buffy"! She seems safe enough in the village pub for the time being, but I'm starting to feel that she's in dire need of a friend. That's going to mean setting out again, though. And an effort to telephone her tutor hasn't succeeded...'

Worlds Apart

Martin Helsdon - 'Colin Andrew's campaign is starting to grow well beyond its Saturnalia roots, with an enhanced skill and magic system. The atmosphere is also darker, brooding and dangerous, for along with a change in the names of the gods, their nature, and the perception of their worshippers has significantly changed. The four, perhaps more, worlds of the campaign offer different cultures and climates, but all appear equally challenging. The whole experience is quite different from Saturnalia, and well worth a try.'

Xott Grande

Larry Deyell - 'More well crafted turns from Mr Dunks, which are prompting a lot of head scratching within our party of misfits. Intra-party strains are starting to become apparent as the adventure winds on, and one can only wonder if they'll get to the bottom of their problems before they wind up maiming each other! To tell the truth, we were a bit lost for a while, but after taking a major leap of faith (Ho-ho-ho, an in-joke!) everything seems to be on track again, or as on track as it ever was.

The turns are a joy to read, well written and Tony sets up the drama very well indeed. What more can I say than that I really can't wait to receive the next turn?'

HISTORICAL POWER GAMES

Primus Inter Pares

Andy Kendall -'Interesting to read Darryl's alternate view of past events.

Could do with new players in the cities, and these should be willing to think independently. There's a big political divide just waiting for some newcomers to fill the gulf and restore sanity, or of course to create havoc if they so choose. The interaction score in the ratings seems very low-getting anywhere in politics requires a fair amount of contact. There is an egroup IC forum, but I would advise people to avoid this early on. Anyone who remembers the Flagship email debate from a year or two ago would recognise just about every problem discussed. It's quite possible to play without it - I do. The rulebook start-up advice is a bit out of date - I think it's better to ask the GM for a clue on what to do initially (my advice is start a 15-year old trader and nothing else, and wait to see what other players suggest).'

Steve Treavett - 'In Rome at the moment two political sides have most definitely formed. Those that can put up with the disgusting behaviours of the Cornelii and Marcelli, with the trade off of controlling the balance of power, and those that still believe in the Republic and will do everything they can to try and defend the system.

A Eutropian Tribune recently took the most extreme action that he could by calling for secessio. This legal action led to his Pater Familias being summarily demoted from the Senate by the Marcellan Censor, and he himself being subjected to an arrest attempt by the latest in a long line of corrupt Corneliian Consuls. Both actions completely illegal!

All in all a great time of political struggle in Rome and just the kind of dispute that I think the simulation was intended to produce in the first place. All the established gens are desperately appealing to new players for their support, particularly as new gens can easily have members elected Tribune of the Plebs. This is giving any new entrants to the game more bargaining power than ever before. Never fear though, the side of decency, justice and republican behaviour will eventually win...'

HISTORICAL ROLEPLAYING GAMES

En Garde!: Les Petites Betes Soyeuses

Colin Forbes - ' The game is hotting up from my lowly perspective. Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in the Princess Louisa Light Dragoons, the lower ranks are also filling up and now we're off to the front for a month. Here's hoping for plenty of loot and glory to go with it!This is a relatively basic version of En Garde! run by the most veteran EG! GM of them all (sorry Paul, but it's true!). However LPBS runs to very regular deadlines and, moreover, comes in a nicely presented zine style format which also includes some other games (Great White Hunter and Star Trader amongst others).

Stop Press: I've now been knighted by His Majesty! This gives me scope to develop some political ambitions ...'

En Garde!: Paris Tribune

Colin Forbes - 'Only just joined this, but at a mere two quid for the rules and free thereafter, you really can't argue! My initial inquiry was dealt with very swiftly and in a friendly manner.'

EMPIRE-BUILDING GAMES

Prometheus

Andy Kendall - 'Moderately simple game, which could be played as wargame or empire-building. At turn 8-9 of game 1, it looks as if starting location might have an unbalancing effect. Not big enough yet to hit the order limit, but this might affect the bigger nations to re-balance things.' **David Blair** - 'Just waiting for the next game to begin, having filled up the starter sheet. Judging by the reviews so far, I am looking forward to this one'

Patrick Gleeson - 'Game 1: Although I got off to a flying start, I am beginning to think that my initial strategy may have been flawed. I suspect establishing as many settlements as you can, early on, leads to a distinct advantage later on in the game. My position seems to be close to at least two others, so war may well be on the way, though diplomacy is well under way to prevent, or at least hold off, the inevitable.

Game 2: My initial orders went well, though we're only on turn 2. This game has been set-up with all starting positions being rather similar, which is good as it prevents random factors playing too big a role in how powerful nations become. It will be much more a test of skill. Needless to say, I will be adopting slightly different tactics to those I employed in game 1!'

Ben Williams - 'This looks simple enough, and indeed is to start with. In fact I did wonder whether there was going to be enough to this game to hold my attention. After all, it does rather resemble certain computer games (Civilisation springs to mind) and at first glance seems to run quite slowly. Now that we're about ten turns into the game however, I am finding my orders getting longer and longer with each turn. I've just set up my first couple of Define Abbreviation orders: a rather handy way of defining a long string of orders that you may want to repeat at regular intervals, with a simple code. This will hopefully help me keep within the order limit in future!'

Tribe Net

Joe McCarthy - 'The cannibalistic Slavers of the PoG were spotted north of the Iron Ford down in Itama. What were they doing there? Looking for trouble? It seems that trouble found them as the elite fighters of the Velvet Glove caught them and wiped them out to a man. In the meantime, summer is turning into fall in the northern reaches and there is no sign of the Bushido tribes at all. The seaport villages that the Bushido Staffords so laboriously built are abandoned and in ruins. After so much bluster, the Bushido tribes have left their territory and now the North is Host. Only the Sbaras seem to have the courage to remain close. Silence reigns in the West, and though it is known that mighty forces are at work there, as yet nothing has shown itself.

When one has the imagination and the drive Tribe Net gives many exciting directions. But one cannot be led; the player must choose his roads for himself.'

FANTASY WARGAMES

War of the Dark God

Colin Danks - 'Still going strong with War Of The Dark Gods run by Titan Games. Game 2 had been a bit slow turn around but everything seems to be back to normal.Looks like the Alliance of Light is going strong. Due to problems in December this game is being played free, can't complain about that.

Have already signed for the next new game which should be starting soon. If you like large fantasy armies and a hugh number of troop types to choose from then this is the game for you (the maps are one of the best I have seen).

NON-FANTASY WARGAMES

Austerlitz

David Blair - 'TBA Games run dozens of this Napoleonic economic/wargame at a time. Currently in two, having had to pull out of one (as

Russia) whilst being crushed by far superior forces, and actually being on the winning side in another whilst playing as Sweden.

In AU157, as Ottoman Empire I am waiting for the proverbial to hit the fan as war is raging all round me but I am not involved in any of it. (My spy tells me France is landing troops just outside Cairo which I own, so my involvement could be sooner than I think).

In 150, all hell is breaking loose with Holland, Ottoman Empire, Sweden and Italy all ganging up on Gt Britain (myself), Morocco, Spain and Russia, with Prussia sitting still doing little more than prancing about. He will have to take sides soon, as it is finely balanced, and the winners will soon swallow him up.

TBA also organise a New Year deal where by paying an amount you get a bonus percentage. Last year I got £50 bonus on a payment of £200 so was able to play most of the year in four games (fortnightly turns) with no further dip into the pocket.'

Company Commander

Colin Combes - 'Game 8: Here are my impressions of the new game, which is just getting under way.

After a short wait my bundle of rules arrived in the post, all neatly presented in an A4 file. I have to admit to being a little overawed by the level of detail, but this soon passed as I sat down to work out the basic game mechanics. With over 150 different types of units, ranging from raw recruits to Scud Missile launchers, the scope is amazing. The game has a good economic base, with various types of industry, allowing the player to utilise various natural resources, such as sugar (plantations), oil and lumber. Everything has to be kept supplied, and resources can only be sold from ports and border warehouses, though there's always the Black Market, which means transport units are vital in moving men and resources around. As Jason (GM) says "buy every truck you can lay your hand on, and then some". Talking of the GM, I have to say he's very approachable, and I've bothered him with a number of email queries already, which he has answered quickly, so that I can get on with my first set of orders.

So, initial thoughts: great depth, good sense of "atmosphere", massive game area (all shown of maps provided) and excellent game mechanics. Can't wait for the results of my first turn!"

Crisis!

Colin Forbes - 'Understandably on hold for a while, though TimePatterns hope to resume current games before too long. This leaves me on tenterhooks - will I have enough troops to capture New York and gain another recruiting base?'

LT Wars

Bruce Edwards - '*Game 2* has finally finished, and somehow the Tortured Souls rose up to second place. East End Boys picked up first place.

Game 3 will finally end in five turns, so I'll write more then. For those who remember the game reports, Wasters are still clinging to the lead with Dark Earth very close behind. This is going down to the wire.'

SPORTS GAMES - AMERICAN FOOTBALL

PAFL

David Blair - 'Agree with Peter Thornill's comment last issue that it is a great American football simulation, but in the interim period whilst the GM stopped the game - around six months with little information coming out - I took up a few other games. I hadn't the time to pick up on my three teams but hope to go back in at some point, GM permitting!'

SPORTS GAMES - WRESTLING Trinity

Greg Lamb - 'With several WPBM games in danger of folding due to time constraints on those running them, this ambitious project has the potential

to bring a new lease of life for the genre. A merger of several existing games, with multiple GMs to counteract the workload, Trinity will aim to bring together the best features of its predecessors but keep up the turnaround, which has long been the main downside to the current WPBM games. At the head of the GM table are Rich Fryer of the JWA, Chris Bury of Fed X and Steve Scaffardi of the IFC. Also involved is Russell Smith of WOW, one of several guest GMs. The roster will be drawn from those of the existing games, primarily the JWA and WOW, and kicking off the game will be a set of tournaments pitting the various title holders from the merging games against each other to determine the first champions of the new federation. Previous mergers and combined efforts in WPBM have met with mixed success, so how will Trinity fare? The website can be found at:

http://watchers.port5.com/ along with message boards for discussion of the game.'

WEB-BASED GAMES

DungeonWorld-Brokenlands

Wayne Yeadon - 'I am enjoying this free online version of Dungeonworld, having had about ten turns so far. Playing a character type I have not played before, so this gives me another way of seeing the differences between characters' types, that I might not seen otherwise. Not being able to buy things is a pain, but heck, I am still alive at any rate. Long may my bard continue to sing and play in tune (which reminds me, I need to retune my lute!).'

Space Troopers

Wayne Yeadon - 'This is the new, free, online game from KJC, using the Quest game engine. In the early turns of this, lots of players lost their squad of Troopers, so care is needed if you want to stay alive! The Mega-Corporations are developing quite well, with the players in them working together to make their Corp the most successful, whilst trying to disrupt the progress of the others.

Managed to survive a few turns without any loss myself, until I came across a Sentry Turret belonging to one of the other Corps! Lost 3 Troopers in that fight. May have to ditch the quest I accepted now, as it's too far away and I can't see my two remaining Troopers making it that far unscathed. Back to Base to recruit I guess.

Due to the success so far, KJC are thinking of opening up another game where you can pay to play, bringing with it, its own advantages, like running more than one squad and gaining extra abilities with more features in the game itself.'

WORLD GAMES

Kings of Karadon

Andy Kendall - 'I thought Duncan's intro to the game last issue covered exactly the things people need to know. Game 2 has slowed due to personal matters (we've been informed fairly consistently on these by the GM). Haven't a clue where it's going to head off next plotwise, though.'

Patrick Gleeson - 'Turnaround is slow at the moment, but there's so much to do with every turn I really don't mind. I wonder if there might be a market for a simpler version of this system, essentially taking out the hand moderated aspects and having a fast turnaround, computer mod version. There would be some work needed on some areas of the game, military stuff mostly, but it shouldn't be too difficult.'

Ben Williams - Tve just started up in game 2 and must immediately say that, if you've only played the closed ended versions of this game before, you're in for a shock with the open ended games now running! Turns are longer, more detailed in terms of quests and events and the newsletter is lengthy, to put it mildly. I was impressed to see that the rather dubious random events have gone (you can't really react with them in the closed ended versions I have played before) to be replaced by GM-moderated blurbs based on local and world events. In all there's much more to think

about and the depth of the world that was always apparent is finally being utilised.'

Realms of Israa

Colin Forbes - 'Annoyingly I missed the last turn, but the beauty of the system is that your nation is unlikely to fall apart as a result of a missed turn. Turnaround is slow, but the GM is friendly and the game is both excellent and cheap for what you get.'

GAMES IN PLAYTEST

Destiny

Larry Deyell, our reviewer comments - 'And it's, "Spaceward Ho!" with Madhouse's "Open-Ended Pulp Space Opera". Start-up has gone smoothly, and any problems I've had have been dealt with quickly and with patience. Not going to tell you much more than that, because I've got a full Playtest Report to write later in the year - suffice to say that it is Very Madhouse, with the emphasis firmly on "Pulp Sci-Fi". And I like it. If you want to have a gander at what's going on, you should head for either Madhouse's web-site, or better still, the Destiny mailing-list - where you can also follow the misadventures of "Gorril the Cook".'

On Stellar Seas

David Blair - 'Just received the rules for this new venture into Space by Sven Bauer. If I get really interested in this then it will be good. Not my normal cup of tea but will playtest games for anybody that wishes me to. This game seems to be largely diplomatic, and uses exploration and victory points in a big way. However I can report better when the games starts, so stand by for more next issue, once I've played a turn or two - I have to go now and re-read the 18-page rule book.'

[As David says, note that this is a playtest, which has not yet started. The contact email is svenbauer@home.com]

FIRMS

Madhouse

Andy Kendall - 'Not sure I agree with the editorial comment about playtesters not sending rumours. Given the effort to set up a game, I can understand the wish to sort it out and issue a more polished game. If it's not open to joining, not having rumours doesn't seem a problem.'

[A valid point, but aw, all editors are inveterate keenies: we love to have our greedy appetites whetted long in advance...]

Please get all contributions for Flagship 96 to us by March 23rd 2002.

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THIS IS a list of (mostly) European PBM firms thought by FLAGSHIP to be operating at the time this issue was cookeast, Dave, 2 benefron Rd. Basingstoke, Hants RG21 SLW published. There is no cost to GMs for this listing, which we publish as a service to our readers. GMs listed below EM. dargeness GMs game register on the following pages. GMs to whom payment should be made ? Coopera, Quincy WEB: http://lineefloors.com/ WEB: http://lineefloors.com/ WEB: http://lineefloors.com/ WEB: http://lineefloors.com/ Cooperating (by advertising, or a mention in Spokeamen or players' comments in Remours). WEB: weeksite: http://web.adoither.com/kr.coerns

We ask GMs and our readers to check the listings here and verify their accuracy; please notify the editor if you find an error or noision. Readers are advised to send an ASE tarler than money to GMs who aren't obviously operating (by advertising, or a mention in Spotecamen or players' comments in Rumours).

We also include Websites, Email addresses and GM phone numbers (where the GMs have given permission or they've amounced the number as a service to players). However, please play fair: only call at reasonable times (or the specified times if they've given) and try not to pin the GM to the playors of house.

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War of the Dark God	C-F	Fantasy War	NIL	е, р	£6.00	2	£3.00	,	87a, 89a
War of Wizards	C-F	Fantasy War	WWG	9	Free	0	Free		•
War of Wizards	C-F	Fantasy War	WWG	e	\$ 7	2	\$1.40	,	
Warlord	C-F	Wargame	KJC	ď	£3.00	3	£2.20	,	61-62d
Weapon, The	C-F	Sci-Fi	VdF	9	€3	0	€3	(e)	85a
Wild World Web	О-Н	Misc	RCW	е, р	£9.99/year	,			•
Winning Post	M-0	Sport - Horse Racing	GLO	Д	£25.00	10	£2.50	,	58a
World Fictional Wrestling	0-н	Sport - Wrestling	BRY	۵	Free	0	£2.50	,	•
World War I Battles	M-F	Historical: Power	AGM	۵	£5.00	0	£3.00		78s
World War IV	C-F	Modern War	PAG	е, р	£10.00	3	£3.00	-56a, 5	9-61d, 76a
World War IV	C-F	Modern War	LOC	9	Free	0	3 Euro	-56a, 5	9-61d, 76a
Worlds Apart	0-н	Fantasy RPG	AND	Д	£4.00	4	£4.00		- 92s
Wottascore	M-0	Sport - Soccer	CAM	Д	£10.00 per	season	€0.00	,	41a
WOW	0-н	Sport - Wrestling	SMI	Д	£3.50	0	£3.50	,	92a
WW IV Blitz	C-F	Modern War	PAG	Д	£10.00	2	£2.00		74s
WW IV H2H	C-F	Modern War	PAG	Д	£5.00	3	£1.50	,	64s
Xott	О-Н	Fantasy RPG	DUN	Д	£10.00	7	£2.50	,	33a
Xott Solo	Н-0	Fantasy RPG	DUN	ф	£10.00	2	£2.50		•

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Psychopath, www.psychozine.co.uk (Web publication only.)

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Playing with Pain

PATRICK GLEESON asks: Computer games or Books?

JUST AFTER finishing reviews of a couple of computer games for an amateur zine, I came down with a bad flu for a couple of days: not the porcelain kind, luckily, just the shakes / shivers / bad muscle aches etc. Shuddering with chills and wracked with pain, I had no great desire to rise from beneath the covers to sit before the cold blue screen of my monitor. I could not concentrate on work or sit in a desk chair, so I just curled up and read a lot - about 250 pages of very small print in a new, expanded and unabridged edition of Twenty Years After, Alexander Dumas sequel to The Three Musketeers. Love that book. Always felt I had the heart of a musketeer (even if my college fencing coach thought I looked more like Alan Hale than Errol Flynn). Another Dumas book in the series, Vicomte de Bragleone arrived in the mail during my illness (thanks to Amazon online for that!) It follows Twenty Years After. The next book after that in Dumas series is Louise de Valliere; which is on order from Amazon.co.uk. It fills in the space between Vicomte de Bragleone and Man in the Iron Mask.

These are books. They are like portable computer games. You can take them anywhere. They even have a great save game feature (called a bookmark). They do not require batteries or power packs or a wall plug. (Although they do require a light source to activate; they are not solar-powered). They run on any operating system, sound or video card you have installed in your brain, regardless of your RAM or storage capacity. Even the oldest and slowest machines with fragmented memories can run them at near-top efficiency. Amazing. I think the trend may catch on.

I am not being totally facetious. I spend a lot of time with computergames and with books. I am constantly subjected to advertising that seeks to lure me into buying a game by telling me it will take 20, 60, 100 or more hours to get through the game. This is a selling point? Do you realize that for every 20 hours spent playing computer games you could read a great work of literature, or two not so great works, or even a couple of dirty novelettes? Or see ten movies (well, ten normal movies or six *Titanic*-size flicks or watch the *Sorrow and the Pity* five times - but only if you have been very bad in a previous life or were a rather nasty person in Europe in the 40's). Such endless possibilities!

Telling me that a game is good because it will take 100 hours to play is like selling me art by the foot. (Oh that Mona Lisa is quite charming, but don't you have something a bit wider, after all, it has to go over the sofa in the living room.) Bigger is not always better (well, maybe in *Playboy!*) Bigger also means more pain. Now, Ilove gaming. Ilive it, breathe it, feel it crunch beneath my toes (well, maybe not that), but it is just that computer gaming, despite its many wonders (and I do enjoy those wonders) has four serious drawbacks. The first is PAIN. I am talking about the finger joints crackle, neck-rick and spinal tap (not the band) kind of pain. Add to this menu of self-inflicted torture serious, blurry eye strain, brain-in-a-vice headaches and, yes, lower back stabs and flat-bottom/sweaty pimple butt melancholia. To this agonizing and unrelenting physical pain we have to add another malady: long sleepless nights. This is the second drawback:

The Groggy Grognard

Face it, when else can you put in this 20 or 60 or 100 hours required to find the foozle, conquer the universe, build Cleveland or complete the Daytona Disc 500 except late at night? It is either then, or give up family time or work time. Even if you set aside a time: "Oh honey/kids, dad's gonna go play on the computer for the next six hours," it is not the same as "honey/kids, dad's going over to Charlie's house to play games with the guys." It does not ring true.

You of course pay the price at work or with the family, as your blearyeye sleeplessness makes you grumpy and irritable, and of course robs your body of the rest it needs to recuperate from the pain you inflicted upon it by staying up all night to rescue Princess Metal Bra from the evil wizard or to once again prove that Manchester United will win the Premiership once again thanks to your your enlightened managerial skills. At about four in the morning they all kind of merge together, so you may find you have tried to substitute Princess Metal Bra for David Beckham for all you can remember.

This leads to the third in our litany of pains: Limited Social Contact. Unlike board games, miniatures, cards, family games or sports, or even play-by-mail, computer gaming is almost totally devoid of the face-to-face, exchange a joke, look deep into the eye of the opponent kind of experience that make other kinds of games more social events than contests or puzzles. On-line gaming, even with someone you know, is a bit better, but only in the way phone sex is a step beyond solo sex. Playing solitaire with a computer game is a lot like playing solitaire with... ahem. (I'd better stop there; I don't want to wind up before the Congress.)

Were this all the pain, we might say "Lead on, Macduff" but it is not. There is the greatest pain of all. The fourth and final step into the void: The Pain of Waste. When things go wrong in a computer game, it is hard or impossible to fix. You've watched games crash. You have been unable to restore positions you've worked hard and long to acquire. You have run into some bug or (even worse) some intentional block placed by a sick designer that makes you want to scream or call tech support (which often costs, or else may require hours or days of waiting).

When you fail to get a satisfactory answer or are told you have to restart and write off the last ten hours of your life, you are likely to do as I have done and hit the door on the drive, pop out the disk and play Frisbee. (Or load the CD in the toaster for the "flaming CD poptarts" effect as in *Small Soldiers*). You think I am kidding? *Panzer General* is still imbedded in the wall on the other side of my office at home. Ask my wife.

Floppy disks sharing the Pain of Waste

A particularly heinous (and sadly commonplace) crime of computer game makers is the Bug-Fix Patch Of No Return, that you install (sometimes these are necessary to complete a game) after you're countless hours into your glorious saved game. Oh, the agony! - when you discover that the fixed version won't run saved games from previous versions of the game, and/or the patch replaced all of your saved game slots with blank entries!]

Now, many games are a joy, are enriching or are just plain fun and relaxing. Others are or get to be a chore, especially those which come with the top four downsides listed above. The frequency and degree of occurrence in 1, 2, 3, and/or 4 can really get you to the point where you curse yourself for wasting so much time. You wish you could rub the lamp and get a wish to turn back time, or start to pray for a power outage just so you can STOP the PAIN. Now, lest you think I have gone waaaay off the deep end (instead of just wading a bit and dipping my toes in the river of no return), let me reassure you that I love gaming. I especially love board games, card games and miniatures. Eleven of my board games have seen shelf life. I continue to design board games. I have been doing computer game columns and beta testing since the days of the 48K Atari 800. I have many favorite computer games and there are many other computer games of which I have wonderful memories of playing alone or with friends - on-line, hot-seating or, my favorite, "us against the computer." My nephew, who is 8, is especially fond of "me and my uncle against the computer." Proof that quality time and computer gaming are not necessarily exclusive of each other. Rest assured, I love games. I will keep gaming. I will keep writing about games. I will keep introducing others to games.

BUT, I am tired of the pain. I also need to sit down, peacefully, with a good book - nay, a GREAT BOOK - and enjoy that most wonderful of all video cards, RAM chips and operating systems: the imagination.

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