

ABYSS 37



THE GAMING ALTERNATIVE

ABYSS MAGAZINE

VO 8, NO 1

EST 1979

SPRING '86

EDITOR/PUBLISHER: David Nalle

ASSISTANT EDITORS: Lew Bryson, Eric Olson
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: Tom Curtin, Jon Schuller,
John Davies, Carl Jones, David Hargrave, John
Bashaw, Jan Mierik

ABYSS is published bi-monthly by Ragnarok Enterprises. Subscriptions are \$7 for 6 issues, \$13 for 12 or \$18 for 18. Many back issues are available, send for listing. A sample copy is \$2.00. Add \$1 per copy for postage overseas, check or money order in US funds.

ABYSS and its staff take no responsibility for opinions expressed or statements made in ABYSS. Send responses to the author of the piece c/o ABYSS.

We welcome submission of any fantasy or gaming material. Payment is at a variable rate up to \$.02 per word in credit or cash. Artwork is also needed, payed at a parallel rate. Send an SASE for guidelines. We assume no responsibility for unsolicited submissions. Nothing is returned without an SASE. All contents are copyrighted 1985 for the individual authors. All rights revert to the author upon publication, although we reserve the right to reprint text or art paying at the same or a higher rate.

Business Office

1402 21st St. NW, Washington, DC 20036

Editorial Offices

3212 Red River #108, Austin, TX 78705

CONJURINGS

Gee, golly, look, JUMBO PRINT!!! Can you see it? Are you reading it? Yes, for the first time since ABYSS #4 we have expanded our print size, so you are reading text which is a glorious 20% larger! Can you believe it? Can you bear the excitement?

Popular pressure finally swayed the mulish individuals who run this magazine and we have expanded the print size in this issue. This is really an experiment for the time being, but will probably continue for at least one issue, with issues after that dependent on what you have to say about it. On the positive side, the print in this issue is definitely more readable. On the negative side, this resulted in my having to cut about six pages of material which I had planned to put in this issue. This doesn't really mean you are losing any material, because we cut down on wasted space this issue and have taken it to the maximum number of pages. Send in your cards and letters and let us know how you feel about the new type size in this and the next issue and that will help us decide whether to set a new format or go back to the traditional microprint.

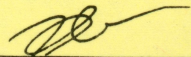
Other new developments of interest may catch your eye in the next few issues. Particularly notable is an increased amount of advertising and the

temporary elimination of the Feedback section which has been featured since issue 9 or so. We have been campaigning to get more advertisers for ABYSS so that we can keep the cost at its current level, and for once this seems to have worked, so you'll be seeing more ads from a variety of companies in the coming issues. As for the Feedback section, you're the one at fault, because it seems you weren't sending in your responses. Response this issue was below a statistically valid level, and there seems to be much more interest in sending letters to Echoes anyway. So, for the time being Echoes will have to serve as your only place for commenting on the magazine, and we welcome letters of all types. If enough of those letters demand the return of the Feedback form, we'll bring it back. Naturally, this didn't stop us from including a Ragnarok order form, which you'll find on the back cover.

As for the contents of this issue, they pretty much speak for themselves. We let 'In the Speculum' bloat up to a fairly monstrous size this issue, because with the demise of GAME NEWS someone has to provide good solid reviews of current games and aids. I hope you can live with it. I particularly recommend the Olson and Schuller articles this issue, as well as the adventure in the insert. 'Echoes' is particularly interesting this issue, for a timely bit of controversy over ORIGINS '86, so you should find some good and varied reading.

Because of the material cut from this issue next issue should be ready sooner than usual (like in this century, right?). It will include an adventure from Eric Olson, new fiction, a look at magic items in the campaign and more of the usual high-quality stuff, possibly including the first of a series of articles on classical mythology and another look at superhero games from Lew Bryson.

Until next issue, keep a hand on your dagger and an eye on your purse...



CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

Conjurings.....	Dave Nalle	2
Creative Campaigns.....	Eric Olson	3
In the Speculum.....		5
Castle in the Void.....	Dave Nalle	11
Characters by Design.....	Jon Schuller	21
Echoes from the Abyss.....		23
Mondo Combat.....	Carl Jones	27
Ragnarok Order Form.....		28

ART THIS ISSUE

Peter Chen (23, 25, 27)

All other art from Munchner Jugend
the best thing to come out of Germany
since Hegel and Ranke

CREATIVE CAMPAIGNS

ERIC OLSON

One of the major problems in gaming is the two-dimensional feel of most gaming worlds. Towns are nothing but taverns and magic shops. It feels like the twilight zone. Nothing happens or exists unless you are there. The entire world stops if you are inactive. It is an egomaniacs dream. The world revolves around you alone. This is ridiculous. Most characters (thankfully) are insignificant motes in the great scheme of things. Empires are born and die without the blessings of the player characters every day. While we all realize this, little if anything is done about. It is either too difficult or time consuming and the players aren't interested. If it is too much trouble or your players aren't interested, why bother creating a world. The players are playing to experience everything your world has to offer. Players won't show any interest unless you give them a sample of what is possible beyond the usual limits. Anyway, it's good to let the characters know that they aren't God's gift to the universe once in a while.

To put my money where my mouth is, the first and probably most important aspect of an interactive campaign world is its political system. A good campaign world will have a fairly sophisticated series of political alliances. These can affect the players and obviously the areas they campaign in. Wars, economic disruptions, political breakdown of authority, anarchy, witchhunts, etc. can have a major impact on the characters ability to accomplish the goals of the scenario. They can make even the simplest transactions difficult. This makes knowing the political scene very important for the characters; not just for the possible harm it can do to them, but to the possibilities fore benefit that might present themselves.

Second, the world should have well established religions and general religious practices of the various areas of the world. This shouldn't be too difficult as the ABYSS has buried you in gods articles (next I think we'll see 'Gods of the Sherpa Guides'). Almost more important than how the clergy act, is how the laymen/people react to their religion and to non-believers. Every religion has its dos and don'ts. For example, offering your left hand in a Moslem country is a grave insult. In olden times, it could have got you killed. That goes the same for ordering pork or even beef in some parts of the world. All of this can easily get the ignorant player characters in trouble fast. Remember what the angry townsfolk did to Frankenstein! It is important to not just know what the high muckity-mucks think but what the people you have to deal with on a day to day basis think and feel. PCs become more three dimensional with this kind of personal touch. Believe me, in the long run the players will appreciate it.

Along the same lines as politics is our third major topic, history. A good history gives a basis on which to build the future political conditions and alliances of your game world. It also gives a game greater internal logic and can be the basis of cultural data (ie migrations, old wars, etc). A good example to mesh the above would be the Sudetenland in WW II. Transposing that on a fantasy world, it could be area taken from a neighboring country several years ago. The population still sees itself as part of the old kingdom and resists integration with the new kingdom. This results in repression, heavy taxes, and the presence of a large number of troops. The population becomes sullen and suspicious of



strangers not of their ethnic group and are prone to rebel. This can make the area very tense and possibly hostile against the party. It could easily become a war zone (or the characters could make it one). Moving back to the history again, it gives the world a sense of permanency and realism (I know, it's a fantasy game, but a core of reality makes a fantasy believable).

Having explained what you need for a good gaming world, how do you go about doing it without killing yourself. First, draw up a time line history going back about 3-400 years for the major player areas in your campaign. Add to this brief thumbnail sketches of the major political events. You can easily borrow political events from European/eastern history, changing the names to protect the innocent. This is also good for giving personality to a country. You know that the country acts like the Holy Roman Empire or the Persian Empire so this helps you role-play the political and cultural aspects of the state. Using a medieval country and adding magic is also a way to accomplish this. I once played in 800ad England and all the players (myself included) were running around trying to find anything on this period.

Second, limit yourself in the number of major religions. I know that Dave is probably screaming right now, but history shows that there are only a few large religions active at any one time, the rest being extremely area specific, merely sub-forms of the major religions, or tiny sects. Having 800 major gods and trying to figure out how the worshippers act would be a royal pain. Also, have a center for each religion. Obviously this will be the core of their religion and the state it is in will probably be run by a ruler of the same religion. For large religions, these places will be centers of learning and would probably be university towns. The basic religion(s) of each state should be laid out before play, and this should effect the politics of the region as certain religions never get along with each other.

Finally, as I drone on, the main purpose of the article—preventing the world from revolving around the character. To prevent the world going to sleep when the character is not active, I suggest laying out a timeline for major political and religious events for at least the next two years. This should be a logical extension of your history (which should be getting more detailed the closer you come to the current day). You could cheat here and start your campaign sometime in the past of your already created history; say ten years before you ended it. This will give your world some vibrancy as wars will be going on in places close and far from the characters which may or may not affect them. What I've ponderously outlined does require a bit of work but it will pay off dividends in new adventuring opportunities and interest on the part of the players.



DRAGON TREE PRESS

Because fantasy should be more than lighting, and magic is never mechanical...

Playing Aids to Enliven Any Game System

THE HANDBOOK OF TRAPS AND TRICKS 9.50
104 non-killer traps & puzzles

DRAGON TREE SPELL BOOK 7.50
224 spells & 4 magic systems

BOOK OF ARTIFACTS 7.50
251 magic items & construction methods

AMAZON MUTUAL WANTS YOU #1 6.00
4 low-level modules with plots

MONSTER FILE #1 6.00
48 new illustrated monsters, all levels

"...clown, thou perishest; or, to thy better understanding, diest; or, to wit, I will kill thee, make thee away, translate thy life into death, thy liberty into bondage, I will deal in poison with thee, or in bastinado, or in steel; I will banish with thee, or in factio: I will o'er-run thee with policy; I will kill thee a hundred and fifty ways; therefore, tremble and depart!"
Shakespeare — AS YOU LIKE IT

Such labor'd nothings, in so strange a style, Amaze th' unlearned & make the learned smile.
Pope — Essay on Criticism

Self Addressed Stamped Envelope for free catalog.
Master Charge VISA orders



plus \$1.50 postage and handling
Send to:

DRAGON TREE

1310 College Ave Suite 1151 - AY
Boulder, Colorado 80302

"I encourage everyone to cast out the now fading material, because it is one of the best developed and imaginative role-playing campaigns I know of and should be available to players using any system."—Gene Hall (AD&D #38)

THE HAULS OF MONTY

Do God slaying adventurers get you down? Isn't it the pits when low level artifact collectors and walking magic stores mutilate your hardest dungeon? If you answer yes to any of the following, then **The Hauls of Monty** is for you. No level too great. No party size too large.



Send \$4.95 +
.50 handling to
BOVEN'S GAMES
Post Office Box 530936
Miami, Florida • 33153

IN THE SPECULUM MAGAZINES

VIP OF GAMING

DTI, POB 8399 Long Beach, CA 90808
APP:6 CON:4 VAL:4 PER:4 OVE:5

This curious new magazine is the apparent inheritor of SPACEGAMER, which has now become a section in VIP. On hand is the second issue, which is 68 full sized pages with fairly dense type, with a glossy cover. On the whole the art is awful, the print blurry and the layout extremely clumsy. This is too harsh. Most of the material is readable, it is just poorly organized and somewhat jumbled together.

I think the first problem with this issue becomes manifest on the first page, where it features a table of contents which bears little or no relationship to the actual contents of the issue, and which I found to be no help at all in locating the material advertised on the cover. For example, this is advertised as the 'Special Car Wars Issue', but no Car Wars items are mentioned in the table of contents. The issue then moves into an introductory editorial followed by an article about media attacks on role-playing and how to deal with them, followed by some plugs to get contributors, offering an enticing 1 cent per word, a rate even ABYSS can equal, a news section which seems to be about Gary Gygax and an interview with Greg Costikyan. All of these pieces are of some interest, but I've described them together here because their titles are all set in the same type and many of them begin in mid column, so there is no way to tell where one feature ends and the next begins. Then comes the Car Wars section, which purports to be a revision, but is actually just someone's house variants on the rules, not the complete overhaul the game needs so badly. This is followed by a somewhat more viable Dune expansion, which should be of interest to the half-dozen people who still play this mostly forgotten boardgame. Then there is a rather good, brief Car Wars scenario and what I think is a Star Fleet Battles scenario, though the way it is presented it may be an ad, as it seems to have been typeset by Task Force Games rather than DTI, and therefore looks completely out of place. From here we move on to a few computer and play by mail game reviews. This is followed by an article on SF and Fantasy gaming which starts out ok, but turns into a poorly organized set of charts and tables, essentially 'how to give your favorite D&D character a blaster'. Then we have another content oriented article on how to run and modify AD&D, combining the most obvious common sense with a collection of variants almost everyone has already thought of or read elsewhere. This is followed by what is probably the best article in the issue, some suggestions on improving the characterization of NPCs which is fairly basic, but still more sophisticated than I expected. Oddly, it is not credited to anyone. Then Marc Schwarz purports to tell us all we wanted to know about mystery games, and fails miserably, considering only boardgames and overlooking the problems and potential of the growing number of mystery RPGs. This is followed by a selection of reviews of AD&D products, which seem rather uneven in their perspective, with some irrationally critical and others practically fawning. Then the entire nature of the magazine changes with a collection of wargame reviews, a scenario for Cold War and a scenario for some unspecified game, which I think might be Richtoffens War. Then there are more reviews and a variant for Junta. Finally there are book reviews, some opinion pieces and cartoons.

Ok, what does this tell you about VIP OF GAMING? Well, it is an incredibly packed magazine, and there is some good material here. There are more articles here than in any comparable magazine, and thought the quality is uneven, some of the reviews and variants are of high quality. What should also be clear is that this is the single most disorganized jumble of gaming material I've ever seen. There seems to be no editorial policy or direction to the magazine. Articles are mislabelled and incomplete, reviews are scattered in between topical material, divisions between sections are unclear, and I couldn't for the life of me find the supposed SPACEGAMER section. Overall, it seems as if the editors haven't decided what kind of a magazine they want, so rather than be a good wargaming magazine or a good role-playing magazine they've decided to attempt both areas and fail.

There is a great deal of potential in VIP OF GAMING, but it needs a strong hand to pull it into a coherent whole. I hear that the next issue, which is now quite late, has many of these bugs worked out, so perhaps we'll be running another review in a future issue. For the time being, check out a copy of VIP in your local store and form your own opinion, but I'm not sure it can be recommended as it stands. (Dave Nalle)

STARDATE

Dept P-30, 700 Orange St., POB 1992, Wilmington, DE 19899

APP:8 CON:4 VAL:6 PER:8 OVE:7

This is one of two fairly new gaming magazines published by Dana Lombardy and Associates International. STARDATE specializes in the products of FASA games, especially Star Trek and Dr. Who role-playing material, combined with significant elements of a SF and Fantasy fiction

A New Concept in Science Fiction Entertainment! \$2.00

STARDATE

December/January No. 9 The Multi-Media Science Fiction Magazine

COMICS BY
Steve Stiles
Grant Canfield
Matt Howarth

WHO'S DOCTOR WHO?
by David Buchhoff

STAR TREK:
Klingon Role-Playing Adventure

MORE JAYNZ SHIPS

FICTION AND ARTICLES BY
Charles Platt
Charles Sheffield
Thomas F. Monteleone
James Stevens
Ed Naha

magazine, all under the editorship of David Bischoff. An issue tends to run 60 or so slick pages with color covers in full size format. On the whole the art and design are excellent, though the editorial sections in the beginning are a bit confusing and some of the attempts at innovative design, like putting text in columns around other articles in boxes, take a bit of getting used to.

STARDATE is a genuinely interesting and unusual magazine. It combines a limited amount of useful material on Star Trek and Dr. Who with intelligent articles on gaming in general and the added bonus of excellent fiction from some of the best new writers in SF and fantasy, including names like Charles Sheffield, William Gibson and Charles Platt. I suspect this is the result of the influence of David Bischoff, the editor and Ted White, the editorial director. The issue I have on hand compares favorably with the best issues of DIFFERENT WORLDS in its early days, and approaches gaming with an intelligent and mature approach which is hard to find anywhere else.

Normally at this point I'd encourage you to go out and buy a copy of STARDATE or even get a subscription, but you get bad news instead. After some dozen issues STARDATE has stopped publication under somewhat mysterious circumstances and accompanied by intriguing rumors. There is a possibility that it will be bought or brought back, but I suspect that we can probably write it off as a dead issue. From where I sit, it had the potential to start a new renaissance in gaming journalism, but that possibility has been cut short and we'll be hard pressed to find as intelligent and varied an approach in what is now a vanishingly small selection of gaming magazines.(DN)

GAME NEWS/GAME TRADE NEWS

Dept P-30, 700 Orange St., POB 1992, Wilmington, DE 19899

APP:7 CON:4 VAL:7 PER:4 OVE:6

This is the companion magazine to STARDATE, also from the same publisher, so you can guess its sad fate. It is a magazine devoted almost entirely to game reviews with the novel approach of producing a separate edition for consumption by store owners and wholesalers and another to be read by gamers, with the former sort of an add-on to the later. It is published in a fairly slick full-sized format with about 68 pages per issue and another 20 pages in the special trade supplement. It is edited by Anne Jaffe.

In its early issues GAME NEWS was marked by a significant bias in its reviews towards reviewing favorably only those games which were supported by paid ads in the magazine, at least that is how it appeared, though Anne Jaffe assures me this was not the case. What certainly was the case is that reviews weighted such factors as appearance and on-the-shelf saleability of games rather higher than such things as playability and originality. To be honest, this practice seems to have come to an end as the review policy became regularized and recent issues have been full of fairly good reviews of almost every new game release with an emphasis still on the larger companies, though that is to be expected. There are also some nice features included, like game scenarios and variants, the occasional article or report, best seller lists and ideas on marketing games. All sorts of games are covered, from wargames to computer games to role-playing games.

On the whole, a month ago I might well have said that if you were thinking about buying a game and needed help deciding if you would, you should check the review in GAME NEWS. Now GAME NEWS has stopped publication under the same circumstances as STARDATE, and I'll be damned if I know where you can go to find a relatively fair and complete review of almost any game. Certainly none of the other large gaming magazines begin to fill the need for believable news and reviews for game player or game retailer. The termination of GAME NEWS is another notable loss to gaming, for with all its flaws it was turning into a good magazine and an invaluable resource.(DN)

NIGHTDREAMS

3212 Red River #112, Austin TX 78705
APP:4 CON:6 VAL:4 PER:7 OVE:6

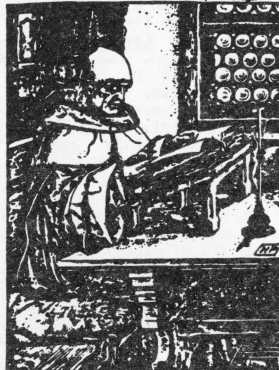
NIGHTDREAMS is one of several new fanzines produced here in the US. It is in digest-sized 8.5x5.5 format, with 28 pages in the current issue. Almost all of the art is from out of copyright sources and the general look of the magazine is sort of shabby, with computer generated graphics and rather cheap and uneven printing, though the layout and design seems to be improving from issue to issue. A sample copy is \$1.75 and a subscription is \$9 for 6 issues.

NIGHTDREAMS number two has just come into my hands, and the magazine seems to have developed and stabilized a bit since the first issue. Perhaps the most interesting article in this issue is the second in a series on 'Cosmogonies' by Ian Hense. This segment looks at 'The Creation of Man' and gives some fascinating ideas for creating campaigns and setting up a logical myth background. There is a fairly good AD&D scenario in this issue called 'The Number of Turn', an article on D&D and satanism, some brief but intelligent reviews, a rather annoying news section, a really weird short story, a selection of letters and a sort of pointless little article on AD&D fumbles, something I've probably seen about a million times in other fanzines. The 'Cosmogonies' article and the adventure are well above the level found in most smaller magazines, and the general tone and presentation of editorial and commentary segments is fairly engaging.

On the whole I think I can recommend NIGHTDREAMS. It is one of a very few fantasy-oriented games fanzines to show up here in the US in the last few years, and if it continues to advance in the next few issues and gets a decent readership it could be a first class fanzine.(DN)

NIGHT DREAMS '82

In this issue...
Cosmogonies
*A Day in the Life
by Diane West
*AD&D Spell Pambles
by Tom Sledge



THE DICE BAG

Force Publishing, 893 Mesa, Chula Vista, CA 92010
APP:3 CON:6 VAL:4 PER:6 OVE:6

This is another small magazine which I only just discovered. It has been going for fourteen issues, but its obscurity may be because it is the publication of a local gaming group and has not attempted any national distribution, though this may be changing. The issue on hand is number fourteen, and consists of some 24 full sized pages of xeroxed text and art. The text is readable near letter quality computer print and the art is relatively passable amateur stuff. I think the single copy price is \$2 or maybe a bit less, while the subscriptions are \$13 for 12 issues.

This issue impressed me as being a surprisingly intelligent effort for a fanzine, with well thought out articles and a generally mature approach embracing a variety of different games. This issue features the inevitable article on the controversial nature of AD&D, which is intelligent,

EREC and the

St.# 8060

PATHS of the DEAD



though it seems a bit insincere and is rather short, perhaps because it was intended for non-gamers to read and is reprinted from a high-school newspaper. There is a somewhat Moorcockian flavor to much of the AD&D material presented here, as found in an article on the Elric background called 'Melnibonéan Madness' and a monster called the Ekobiroen which is described in detail. There is an interesting short piece on the value of goods other than gold in a fantasy society, a fairly standard look at historical sources of dragon lore, a comic strip and several reviews.

Articles in The Dice Bag tend to be rather short, but for the most part they are interesting and well thought out. It is certainly not a flashy product, but shows good potential, and I can certainly recommend it to those interested in supporting the gaming small press.

GAMES

WEAPONS & CASTLES OF THE ORIENT

by Matthew Balent
from Palladium Books

This is another in Palladium's valuable series of campaign aids which detail arms and fortifications of various periods and societies. This book is in an odd 7x10in format, with glossy covers and 52 pages of dense text and illustrations.

Weapons and Castles of the Orient is very much of the same style and quality of the other books in this series, with similar problems and assets. The strength of the book is that it provides a great deal of information on weapons and armor of the medieval east, with detailed diagrams and basic description. A large number of examples are looked at, and as far as I can tell you get all the information you would need to cover this limited aspect of an oriental campaign. The castle section follows the same format of plans and maps with technical description, though it is not nearly as detailed as the section on weapons and armor, and would benefit greatly from more examples with greater variation. It could have been expanded easily to include more than just three major examples. Most of the illustrations are good, though some of the weapon sketches are rather clumsy, though they are functional.

Most of the information provided throughout the book is excellent and easily applicable, but there are areas which could be clarified and improved. One problem is that the stats for weapons are somewhat ill-defined, being kept generic but as a result not necessarily immediately valuable for some systems. They could have made weapon statistics like Dex, Parry and Symetry clearer by providing a few examples of more familiar weapons which most gamers would know. The only other problem I can see is one of general approach. What they have here is great, but I'd really like to see more text and explanation of fighting techniques and the nature of castles and battles in the orient. This function could also be served by some detailed historical examples, something which would be easy to get hold of from the extensive memoirs which oriental generals have been producing for centuries.

I can definitely recommend Weapons & Castles of the Orient as a useful background campaign for role-playing and war gaming, especially if your playing style makes personal combat and equipment are an important part of your campaign. Of course, the value of this information would be limited in a non-oriental campaign, but there seems to be a strong and steady interest in gaming in oriental settings. (Jon Schuller)

HAUNTED RUINS OF THE DUNLENDINGS

by Ruth Sochard
from Iron Crown Enterprises

This new module is described as 'ready-to run' for use with ICE's Middle Earth Role-Playing system. It is nicely produced, up to ICE's usual standards, with slick paper, nice graphics and



Based on THE HOBBIT™ and THE LORDS OF THE RINGS™, this package details the wondrous world of the White Mountains where the players of the Game-System roam the land. Discover the secrets of the mysterious South Stone of Breath and explore the underground paths of the Dead. Produced and distributed by ICE. CROWN ENTERPRISES, INC.

pleasing art. It is in 8.5x11in format, with 36 pages of text.

Haunted Ruins of the Dunlendings differs from other MERP aids in that it is devoted almost exclusively to adventure scenario material, without the extensive background aid found in other aids, such as Erech and the Paths of the Dead, which provides the general background and setting in which these particular adventures are set. I've always liked the background aids which ICE provides for Middle Earth, but the scenarios in those aids have always been a weak point. This new approach seems to have solved that problem with a vengeance, because the three scenarios provided here are well developed and generally first rate.

The first scenario is 'Adventure at Anghen', which is a well-constructed tower adventure. Essentially the situation is passive, but there are several ways to approach it which the GM can fit to the types of characters being used and their objectives. It is not the most imaginative adventure I've seen, but it is intelligent and the situations are well keyed to a detailed background. The second adventure is 'Adventure at the Seven Stones', which I was particularly impressed with. The setting is an ancient holy place, and while it is not all that original, I liked something about the unusual design and style of the site. There are two different ways to approach the adventure, depending on the orientation of the characters. The final scenario is 'Adventure at Hogo Tarosvan', which deals with an ancient underground village of the Daen. There are several possible approaches to the situation. These are all outstanding scenarios, not because they are exceptionally original, but because they are intelligent and logical, capable of being run in a single session and providing excellent storylines, detailed NPCs, and a variety of intellectual and physical challenges for the characters.

Haunted Ruins of the Dunlendings is not without flaw. It really is a collection of haunted ruins, so the adventures are all enclosed, underground, dungeon-type scenarios. The package would work a bit better as a whole with more variety, though that problem could be taken care of easily if you are running a full-scale MERP campaign, with aids like Erech and the Paths of the Dead filling in the gaps. Another minor annoying area is that there are player characters provided for the players to

use, though it is noted that other PCs could be used instead. This may be helpful in making sure that the adventure runs well, but I also think it has the potential to discourage campaign-oriented play and reduces the devotion of the players to their characters.

I can strongly recommend Haunted Ruins of the Durlendings for MERP players and perhaps for players of other fantasy games who are willing to do a little adaptation. It is a high-quality adventure collection typical of the excellence which ICE strives for. (DN)

TOP SECRET COMPANION
by Merle M. Rasmussen
from TSR, Inc.

This is a new aid for TSR's espionage game Top Secret. It is a soft bound 100 page book with a rather unattractive glossy cover and rather shoddy printing and graphics on the cheap-paper interior. Altogether the production is below the standards one expects from TSR. It is particularly marred by the strange gray blotches on the sides of the pages and in the gutters which make it look like it was cheaply xeroxed. In addition, the section headings are set-up to look like file headings in a secret document, but they just end up looking sloppy and unattractive when the actual text is nicely typeset. The layout is particularly awful, with a three-column format which seems to cause untold difficulties for the editors and results in large inconvenient gaps in the text and a lot of confusion when reading. It is especially hard to tell where one section ends and another begins.

As far as contents, this is a mixed bag. Some of the material is fairly interesting, such as the selection of new Areas of Knowledge (equivalent to skills) and the development of new bureaus and divisions. There is a rather simplistic section on developing new missions (adventures), which offers a few good ideas and some really bad ones, like a random mission generation system. There is a useful and informative section on travelling and its dangers, though there are notable errors, such as having commercial travel by sea cost half what it does by air. The next section is called 'Hostilities' and essentially looks at combat, adding a lot of fancy hardware and gore-filled detail to the basic system. There is a lot of useful information here for dealing with special situations, but for the most part it is a collection of combat complications which may be valuable to some gamemasters. Next are useful sections on special equipment of all sorts. This is followed by the inevitable section of hardware, with lots of weapons described. The last section of rule additions is a collection of courses at 'Espionage College' for training characters, which is a rather good idea. The book wraps up with a mission/adventure. 'Operation MeltDown' presents a rather predictable scenario about KGB interference with a US/European space project. The presentation starts with an extensive time-track background. The scenario as a whole allows very little latitude of action for the characters, except for a great deal of freedom to follow false leads. There are a number of situations to deal with, mostly a challenge to tactical rather than role-playing skill. There are a selection of characters provided for the players to use. The scenario is not very imaginative, but should be very easy to run. It might have been better to provide more than one scenario with a bit less detail and a bit more originality to them.

This sort of material is really needed to expand a very limited game. While the Top Secret rules can't be discussed in detail here, it should be noted that they suffer from some of the same problems as D&D, such as unnecessary restriction of character development and excessive reliance on random factors. Some of the material in this companion is clearly aimed to flesh out background and character options to make up for these limits to some degree. Unfortunately, this companion also shows the perpetuation of some of the conceptual errors which marred Top Secret as well. One of the

particularly offensive sections is the one on 'Vital Statistics', which attempts to substitute random rolls and tables for player imagination in generating a character personality. I was particularly bothered by a bizarre political alignment system which seemed to have little grasp of real-world politics or the relationship between different political philosophies or between politics and economics, not to mention containing internal errors and inconsistencies. This section will certainly confuse most of the readers and offend those who understand it. The biggest real problem in this companion is the general attitude which substitutes die-rolls for role-playing and imagination and which has clearly targeted it for a fairly young and unambitious audience. Aside from the mechanical faults the problem here is not in what is provided but in how much more could have been done to make this a really worthwhile role-playing aid.

Despite these criticisms I will certainly recommend the Top Secret Companion to Top Secret players, because it does have a lot of useful information, and if you can stomach the problems with Top Secret or are still playing at this level, the background and data will be quite useful to you. For those interested in espionage aids in general there are far other systems and more advanced aids which might be better bets. (JS)

DARK CLOUDS GATHER
by Jim Bambra & Phil Gallagher
from TSR, Inc.

This is the seventh module in the UK series, produced in the standard TSR format, with a compact text booklet and a wrap around color cover with maps. The production and presentation are first class and the material is clear and easy to follow.

The formula which TSR dictates for its modules seems to have been sent over to England as well. Dark Clouds Gather follows standard patterns quite closely. Surprises are kept to a minimum, there are only two new monsters and the setting is depressingly familiar. The mission is to clear the Arakocra bird-people from accusations of crimes against local humans. The adventurers have several challenges to face in doing this, including freeing an agent of the Arakocra, finding a magical skyfish in the crystal citadel of the Arch-mage Devalr, with which they can take on Yesorkh Pahyeh the evil leader of the snow-demons. This breaks down into a four phase adventure with challenges of increasing difficulty. This is a practical and playable way to present the scenario. The events and encounters in the first section are pretty standard and very combat oriented. In the second phase the adventure becomes even more combat oriented, essentially an aerial assault. The third segment is the body of the module, with a number of encounters including the few decent non-combat encounters, mostly involving magical apparatus. The final part covers the confrontation with Yesorkh Pahyeh, which is mostly just a series of combat encounters while trying to get to the primary target.

As you might have gathered from this short run-down, this is a heavily combat oriented scenario. Nonetheless, there are aspects which are more sophisticated than one might expect, and there are situations to be solved and some mental challenges for the players. This is a formulaic adventure and there is far too much combat, but this is a good adventure for the type of adventure which it is, and I think I can recommend it, especially for AD&D players who like combat and tactics and aren't yet ready to try another system or a campaign with a stronger role-playing content. (DN)

MASTER PLAYER SCREEN
from TSR, Inc.

I'm not sure why I'm reviewing this item, but I've never reviewed a DM screen before, so it is an opportunity to sound off on the topic in general. The Master Player Screen is a three panel fold-out of charts and tables for 'Master-Level Characters',

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Official Game Accessory

MASTER PLAYER SCREEN

Featuring The Spindle



plus a mini-module called 'The Spindle of Heaven' by Bruce Nesmith.

The screen has the information you need to run AD&D at this level. It has extended level charts for combat, saving throws, thief abilities, cleric turning and experience, plus spell lists for Clerics, Magic-Users and Druids. All basic stuff available for easy reference. Certainly this is a functional aid, though I don't think much of an aid designed to put a barrier between the players and the GM, physically imposing the mechanics as a barrier to communication and imagination. There is also one technical problem. Because of the way it is folded so that it can have a cover and a blurb, the spell lists are on the DM side, when they should really be on the player side with the experience tables. This could have been fixed by putting the blurb on an insert or folding the screen a bit differently. It also seems that it would have been nice to put on some of the less familiar and more complex tables, because from my experience most of these can be recited from memory by rabid players and GMs or else are only referred to occasionally.

'The Spindle of Heaven' is a very brief scenario, a quick trip through a desert to a dungeonly-like site in the shape of a spindle where they end up facing a selection of elementals lead by a Greater Djinni named Pasha. It is a short scenario, dominated by combat, a miniature version of the standard TSR formula. What makes this interesting is that it is intended for 'Master-Level Characters', which means 26th to 36th level, but from the characters I've seen of that level this scenario would be a breeze. I think that the average character in that range, if working alone, might have some trouble, but it would be a cake-walk for three or more characters, and a normal-sized party of 4-6 characters would never even have to breathe hard. This module brings home the fact that there really are no AD&D monsters who can stand up to characters of this level and that on the whole AD&D monsters are grossly underpowered when opposed by a party rather than individual characters.

I can neither reject nor recommend this aid. For those who use DM screens it will work. For those who do not, it is of no interest. For my money the later group have the right idea, but if you like charts and tables here they are.(DN)

THE LAST RESORT

by Kim Eastland
from TSR, Inc.

This is an adventure for the West Coast Avengers, so it already has a strong mark against it, as they have to be one of the least interesting superhero teams around. It is in standard TSR format, with a separate folding cover and a separate text book, plus a large tactical map.

The Last Resort is a mission to rescue Iron Man from the Mandarin. It consists primarily of a series of encounters with different villains. It is essentially a shooting gallery where they face a series of foes (Plantman, Blizzard, Pyro, Whirlwind and Radioactive Man). Then they get to the 'Caverns of Chu', face The Mandarin and are, of course, victorious. This is dull, it follows an obvious formula, and the closest thing to an innovation is that Iron Man is captured and they are not just going to whomp on the villains for some trivial reason.

This is sort of like a beauty show for minor Marvel heroes and villains, and any decent referee could have run this or an identical scenario without this module, without even writing himself any notes. This sort of formulaic design is a problem in some AD&D modules, but when coupled with the sterility of Marvel Superheroes, the lack of originality in most of Marvel's universe and the triviality of the West Coast Avengers, it becomes a formula for a strong sleeping draught.(DN)

STAR TREK THE ROLE PLAYING GAME

from FASA

This is the official game which brings to life the world of the popular TV and movie series for role-players. The recently released second edition, the basic version of Star Trek: the Role-Playing Game includes three books, the Star Fleet Officer's Manual, the Cadet's Orientation Sourcebook and the Game Operations Manual. These three rule books are presented in a functional format, with official looking blue covers, clear print and graphics and photographic illustrations from the TV series. The deluxe edition also includes the Star Trek III Starship Combat Game and deck plans for a Klingon ship and a Federation ship. All of this comes in a rather attractive box illustrated in color. The basic set sells for \$12 and the deluxe set for \$25.

The heart of the game is the Star Fleet Officer's Manual, which contains all of the basic mechanics for play in 40 compact pages. The mechanics are surprising in their simplicity. There is little space wasted and most possibilities are covered. The main flaws in the mechanics may not actually interfere a great deal in play for gamers who are not too choosy. Because of the simplicity of the rules and the familiar topic this could be a particularly good game for introducing new players to SF role-playing, though it may not serve so well for more demanding and experienced gamers.

The Star Fleet Officer's Manual starts out with an excellent general introduction to the game and the very idea of role-playing, perfect for preparing novice players. To create a character the player generates a number of descriptive characteristics (Strength, Endurance, Intellect, Dexterity, Charisma, Luck and Psionic Potential) and from these he finds additional secondary characteristics, most of which are used in combat. Some of these are modified for the race of the character. This part of character creation is very random, but there are some discretionary points to throw around to give the player at least a little control of how the character comes out.

One of the major flaws of the system is that it tends to force players to follow certain professions and backgrounds, as laid out in the prior experience system of the Star Fleet Officer's Manual, though this could be adjusted by a good DM so that players could be rogues as well as heroes of the federation. Training at Star Fleet Academy gives characters the skills they need to survive in

this complex and competitive future. Unfortunately, this training process is rather overcomplicated, though it gives some idea of the administrative structure and it is heavily dependant on random rolls giving the player only limited control of how the character comes out, though by repeating training in particular areas to improve the skills he wants, a player can attempt to guide how his character develops. All this training and learning experience takes time, and this should lead to physical degeneration to balance off the benefits, but the rules for aging are rather vague so there is no real reason not to take as much training and experience as is offered. In addition, it is impossible to really do badly in training, to have blots on a character's record or to be kicked out of the service. The worst possible outcomes are being assigned an undesirable posting, and even that is negated in the Final Tour posting, where prior performance in service is ignored so that your character is more or less guaranteed to be on a first-class ship. The Luck characteristic is very important in training and in determining the kind of service record which the character builds up, becoming the key to success in Starfleet.

The combat system completes the Officer's Manual. Combat is fairly simple, with an Action Point system to enhance realism and a good selection of combat options available, taking it far beyond just shooting or striking a foe. Unfortunately, there is little relationship between the skill and combat systems, so there is no difference in fighting style or technique between characters, merely different levels of competence. While the basic mechanics are simple, with one roll to hit and another to determine damage, a large number of situational modifiers are figured in depending on the conditions of combat, adding some complexity. Particularly useful are the lists of weapons, the rules for special types of combat and a detailed analysis of medical treatment and recovery from damage. This book concludes with a valuable glossary, something which every rule system should be required to have.

The Cadet's Orientation Sourcebook is the kind of manual which would be handed to a new cadet on his first day at Star Fleet Academy. It includes a brief history from the 20th century to the present time, a section explaining important technical terms, racial descriptions of major friendly and hostile spacefaring races, a current interstellar political analysis, technical descriptions of equipment and provisions, and a look at Star Fleet Command, how it operates, the chain of command, the various divisions, insignia, ship classifications, etc. Particularly interesting are a description of basic procedures for dealing with encounters in space, and a section of statistics for familiar personnel taken from the TV show, so that players will have known referents by which to assess the ability of their own characters. All of this is presented very much in the tone of a basic training manual, and gives players an excellent feel for their position in the universe of Star Trek. This is a must read for new players and will provide an excellent perspective for those unfamiliar with role-playing games.

The Game Operations Manual provides the specialized information needed to GM Star Trek plus background data which is not necessarily available to the players or their characters. It also gives excellent guidelines for creating and running a campaign. This is done step-by-step, going over all of the aspects of play from the Gamemaster's perspective and providing passable advice and background as well. The book opens with a simple explanation of how to design and run adventures, with fairly basic systems for random creation of worlds, civilizations, alien races, creatures and human or non-human non-player characters. Specialized record sheets are provided to record all this information. All of these creative things are done by rolling on random tables, and while these tables work well and are an excellent crutch for the novice Gamemaster, more experienced campaign designers may wish to use them only as

guidelines and resist the restrictions which such systems place on the imagination. These tables will produce a workmanlike background, but they do not substitute for the originality and creative genius which are necessary for an enjoyable and lasting campaign. Unfortunately, this is not made completely clear in the Game Operations Manual. The strongest part of this book is probably the section on 'Presenting Scenarios', a step-by-step guide which tells Gamemasters how to run adventures and goes over the material in the Star Fleet Officer's Manual, explaining, clarifying and adding detail. This includes a shorthand summation of all the mechanics, which is actually a good bit clearer than the 'slow' version presented in the Officer's Manual and definitely handier for experienced players. There is also an extremely short (2 pages) set of starship combat rules and rules for adapting other FASA starship combat systems. I would tend to recommend using the rules given here instead of the Star Trek III: Starship Combat Game, because these rules are brief, they work, and they keep what should be a role-playing game from getting mired down by what is essentially a board/strategy game. The information in the Game Operations Manual is detailed yet simple, ideal for preparing the novice Gamemaster, though some parts can be passed over by more experienced GMs as familiar universals of role-playing.

The deluxe edition we also includes the Star Trek III: Starship Combat Game and sets of plans for Klingon and Federation ships. Of these, the combat system really isn't needed, unless you like to bog down your role-playing with detailed space combat. The focus of role-playing should be the characters, and detailed space combat turns them into little more than numbers. What really cannot be dispensed with are the deck plans. These are the one essential bit of information missing from the basic game, and they should really be included in reduced form in the Game Operations Manual or the Cadet's Orientation Sourcebook. It is nice to be able to see what your ship looks like and where you can go on it, and helps immeasurably in getting players to visualize their surroundings.

Star Trek the Role Playing Game has its share of flaws, but it comes close to achieving just what it should. It recreates the Star Trek environment very convincingly, repeating familiar background information, expanding and fleshing out the setting, encouraging players to embark on new adventures in a well-known background rather than just reliving the adventures of the Enterprise and her crew. All this is done with reasonably simple mechanics. This makes Star Trek a good game for new players, with a familiar and well detailed topic and mechanics which will not intimidate the neophyte. For the more experienced player Star Trek is probably less attractive because of the randomness inherent in the mechanics and the limits placed on character background and development. However, advanced players should be at the point where they can look beyond these restrictions and take advantage of the background and basic ideas to play at a level suited to their ability. (DN)

VICTORIAN ADVENTURE

by Stephen Smith
from SKS Distribution
79 Hainton Ave. Grimsby, S. Humberside, ENGLAND

This game is billed as 'the first truly British role playing game', an interesting claim with some logic too it, for the topic is the most British of all eras the reign of Queen Victoria. The rules come in a single inexpensively produced booklet of 52 pages in British 8x12in format. The art is awful, but the layout is very straightforward and the type is pleasingly readable, though there is a good bit of wasted space.

To start the game a character is created with 8 stats which are rolled randomly on 2D10. Some secondary descriptive stats are found by rolling on special tables. These include an appropriately large number of stats regarding social status, a nice idea, though it would have been far more interesting if character creation included some

CASTLE OF THE VOID



INTRODUCTION

This adventure is set in the world of Uttgart. More detail on the world and background can be found in the six issues of the Uttgart Adventure Series and in the forthcoming Uttgart Worldbook. This is an unusual adventure. It is not tied to any of the other published adventures set in this world, but having the background might be useful.

It is particularly important to keep in mind that the specific setting for this adventure is unusual in its complete violation of many of the presumed laws of physics. Uttgart is a flat world, or to be more precise, it is a partial hemisphere with a gravitational source somewhere below the concave side and people living on the convex side. To all appearances for those living on the convex side it is a round world, until they reach the edge, which consists of a ring of bottomless cliffs

and waterfalls which fall forever in space turning to vapor in the vacuum. Hanging in space beyond this limit are a series of small island segments which have broken away from the main body of the planet, many of them supporting atmosphere and life. This situation is maintained by the power of Lord Qurzon, though he has long been absent from the world and the magical power which keeps this situation stable is steadily deteriorating. The action in this adventure takes place at and beyond that edge.

ADVENTURE SET-UP

The actual motivation for this adventure could be flexible, depending on the setting in which you want to use it. The essence should be that the characters are faced with a question or problem

which can only be resolved by resorting to the wisdom of the greatest sage of the times, Hlanal the Ancient. This can be an easy situation to set-up in most campaigns, where this sort of situation arises all the time.

For a campaign set in the standard Uttgart background several options are possible. One workable situation might be that Xotan, Regent of Lokrona, sends the party to discover the disposition of the soul of his late father Xeron, something which often troubles him. Naturally, he would pay agents on such a mission well. An even stronger motivation could be created if one of the characters became afflicted with a rare disease, such as some form of lycanthropy, perhaps as the vengeance of some powerful mage, and needs to have this curse lifted, something which may only be in the power of someone of the magnitude of Hlanal.

ENCOUNTERS IN THE ISLANDS

During much of this adventure the characters will be travelling through the islands on the edge of the world. In this area there are several possible encounters, depending on where the characters are, some encounters possible at sea, some possible on land. Given here are the major possible unusual encounters, where they happen and how likely they are. One encounter or another is likely to happen every 12 hours or so while travelling. These are in addition to the usual encounters with fellow travellers, wildlife and locals.

Priests of Akarna(Lithare, Tsadon, Khildon)

It is quite likely that travelling characters on land may encounter priest in gray robes travelling alone, preaching the teachings of the prophet Akarna, a teacher who arose in the western isles after the Karma Wars, and was assassinated by agents of Gilrod who wanted to discourage his non-violent, anti-magical teachings. Naturally, the martyrdom of Akarna caused the faith to spread rapidly, so that now members of the order can be found all through the islands. They forswear violence, and heal the sick and wounded. However, before they will heal anyone, they insist that the wounded person forswear all violence, with powerful oaths by appropriate deities. If the person is ill, they insist that he forswear the use of magic with equally powerful oaths. If these oaths are broken, the vengeance of the gods will be upon the forsworn person, and the healing will wear off immediately. Priests of Akarna are often of non-human races, including some very unusual species. They also show up quite often in the most remote and unexpected places, especially if they are needed there.

Void Storms(At sea, Tsadon, Ulsaad, Lithare)

The area near the rim of the world is rather unstable, and it is possible that those travelling here, especially at sea will encounter rather dangerous atmospheric disturbances which are the result of pieces of void material breaking away from the void and drifting into the planetary sphere. These so called 'Void Storms' are accompanied by raging winds, dry lightning, and a destructive core which will actually disintegrate matter. On entering such a storm every character must make a roll within 3xSTR on 10100 to avoid being sucked into the vortex and disintegrated in the core. Those disintegrated will take 10100 overall each round, but may make the same roll mentioned above each round to be thrown clear.

Void Demons(Tsadon, Ulsaad, Lithare)

These creatures are denizens of the void, charged with maintaining its unique laws and properties. However, some of them like to wander the rim of the world and cause trouble for those they encounter there. They tend to travel in groups of 3, and delight in sporting with their victims. They have no regard for human life, and feel no compunctions about killing anyone they come on, though they might spare amusing humans on a whim.

Kolmanaji(At sea, Ulsaad, Tsadon)

These are the 'People of the Shark', seagoing fishermen from a tribal society found on several of the islands. They sail out to search for large ships in long, thin oared boats without sails. They often venture far from port, and may be found in a 'lash-up', essentially a seagoing camp, where a number of these boats are lashed together in the middle of the ocean, tents erected, and watches kept during the night. More detail on the Kolmanaji and their practices is provided in a later section. An encounter with a lash-up might be useful, as they are often meeting places for several tribes, and can develop into markets for goods and information with as many as 100 boats lashed together.

Karchari(At sea)

These are the most horrible of sea-monsters, sharks the size of houses, measuring as much as 60ft in length and vicious man-eaters to boot. In addition, they have a native cunning and the wit to know that they can attack small boats and break them in two with their powerful jaws, and even butt holes in the hulls of larger boats, dumping their succulent cargoes into the sea. Karchari generally travel in disorganized packs, essentially a group which feeds together, so if they set their sights on a boat it may be in serious trouble, as there may be as many as two dozen of them in a pack and they are notoriously hard to kill.

THE ARRIVAL AT ULSAAD

Hlanal's castle is on the island of Phajior, which floats in space beyond the edge of the world. It can only be reached by sailing the Great Sea of Chunors until one reaches one of the islands on the rim of the world and then finding some means of transportation from there to Phajior. The ideal island for this purpose is the island of Ulsaad, as the natives are relatively friendly and it is closest to Phajior, with a promontory which projects into the void.

Ulsaad is one of the less populous islands on the worldrim, inhabited by the Kolmanaji, or People of the Shark, who live in villages along the coast. They are friendly to visitors, and will direct them towards the pinnacle on the end of the island. Each Kolmanaji village has at its center a temple to Manaju, the Shark God, and if they arrive at the wrong time, the characters may witness a sacred ceremony in which all of the people in a village row their fishing boats out into their harbor and sacrifice three young children selected by lot to the sharks which have been summoned. Also, it is possible that people in small boats, like a landing craft used to get ashore because of the shallow sandy harbor, may be attacked by Karchari, or Great Sharks. Karchari are large enough to take out small boats, and they are sacred to the Kolmanaji, so if one is attacked or defended against, chances are there will be Kolmanaji fishermen nearby and they will be glad to ritually execute (and cut up for bait) any who commit crimes against these children of Manaju. Aside from these possible situations dealing with the Kolmanaji should be fairly easy.

The inland parts of the island are abandoned, save for herds of wild goats on the rocky crags. The progress along an expanded goat trail to the pinnacle is fairly easy.

Once they reach the bald peak which projects into the void, they can see Phajior hanging in space about three miles away, and can see the sun glinting off the towers of Hlanal's castle. On the crag is a large gong made of some black metal, which is inscribed with runes all around the edge. An inscription in the center of the gong reads 'Sound once if you wish to cross'. When the gong is sounded it will echo through the void. If it is sounded only once, it will bring Q'rule'a, the gatekeeper of Phajior across the void riding on a Voidragon. It will also attract 103+1 additional Voidragons of various sizes who will arrive 1012-6 rounds before Q'rule'a and attempt to feed on the

characters assembled there. When he arrives, Q'rula'a will drive off any attacking Voidragons. If the gong is sounded more than once the number of Voidragons summoned is multiplied by the number of times the gong is sounded and Q'rula'a will not cross the void.

CROSSING THE VOID ALONE

Should they offend Phajior somehow or wish to take their own way across the void to Phajior, they may encounter several problems.

First, there are the Voidragons, which have already been mentioned at length. Next, there is no air beyond the edge of the world, as that is what makes it a void, so they will have to travel some three miles without breathing and facing the dangers of depressurization. Next, there is no real friction and limited gravity in the void. If they leap for Phajior, their momentum will theoretically carry them across. Unfortunately, there is a gravity source located beneath the shell of the world, so they will also drift slowly downward, passing beneath Phajior by more than a mile, should they choose this course. Taking this into account, most forms of flight will be useless. Wings will just be a hindrance in the void, and magical flight will be extremely hard to control, yielding far too much force, and possibly resulting in a fatal collision. In general, crossing the void unaided can be considered dangerous.

THE MISSIONS OF Q'RULA'A

If they successfully contact Q'rula'a, he will explain that there is no way that they can see Hlanal without presenting an appropriate gift. He notes that the sage is ancient and has become cantankerous, and is known to have worked horrible transformations on those who did not please him with some attractive or remarkable trinket. He cannot in all conscience allow them to pass to Phajior unless they have something which will assure that they will not offend Hlanal with their presence.

It is hard to gauge just what would be an acceptable gift, but he can make a rough judgement. Basically, any unique, major magic item which has flashy and original powers will serve, but it should be something of extreme artifact power and heretofore unseen. Weapons are pretty much out as gifts. Chances are that most parties will not have such an item or wish to part with it. Fortunately, Q'rula'a happens to know where they can find several things which would mollify Hlanal, all of them nearby.

These items are the Homonculus of Tsadon, the Orb of King Ulfrain of Lithare and the Sacred Comb of Seistos. None of these will be easy to obtain, and he can tell them that the Orb is one of the most prized possessions of King Ulfrain and will not be given up easily and that the Comb is guarded by a creature called the Great Bear of Khildon. The three potential gifts are located on the islands of Tsadon, Lithare and Khildon respectively, and all are in locations known fairly well to the natives of those islands.

Q'rula'a will keep an eye out for their return if they go to fetch one of these items.

The Homonculus of Tsadon

On arriving at this island questers will be directed to a craggy peak at the to the south on the voidward island of the two. The Homonculus is imprisoned in a large, sealed cylinder of magically treated glass. Coiled around this to assure that it will not be stolen is a Great Rock Cobra.

Once the homonculus is revealed it is shown to be a small man, about a foot tall, perfect in every way. It has supernatural powers and can communicate with the minds of those around it, encouraging them to free it by breaking the glass around it. In return it offers to grant almost any power or boon, to give them their greatest desire, and they get the feeling that it could do this. In fact, it can, but if freed, it is much more likely to use its power to destroy and beguile the party,

as it holds all human life in contempt and yearns to punish mankind for the indignities which it has suffered throughout its life. If no one voluntarily frees it, it may attempt to control each member of the party once, and each character has a 1/4 chance of resisting this domination, but once failed that person will be and remain in the control of the homonculus until released or the death of the homonculus. If the roll is made successfully, that person can never be controlled by the homonculus after that. For AD&D substitute INT for WIL. Note that if other tactics fail, the homonculus will be openly abusive and obnoxious, causing all manner of noise and trouble as long as he is with them.

The Doom of Lithare

King Ulfrain holds his court in Fheligar, the main port of Lithare, and it is fairly easy to achieve an audience with him for a decent sized bribe, say 200+GD. When he meet the king they find him to be distracted and obsessed with an unexpressable impending doom which he claims his island kingdom faces. He will be of little help to them and will not offer up the orb, though he does mention that he would give anything to someone who could save his kingdom from its doom.

After they meet with him and go away unsatisfied, Saeculus, the court mage, will seek them out and offer to show them the doom that the island faces, if they want to attempt to deal with it. He will take them to the voidward edge of the island where they can look down to see that a huge beast which Saculus calls the All Devouring Maw is chewing its way into the island, undermining it so that it will eventually crumble away into the void. If they wish, they may attempt to face the beast or find some way to destroy it or drive it off. An added danger here is that the creature is about a mile away, down a sheer cliff-face from where they view it, plus the atmosphere below them becomes increasingly rarefied as they approach it, requiring standard rolls against asphyxiation and losing their hold to the solid land as they descend.

If they do destroy or drive off the beast the king will indeed give them anything they request, including the orb.

The Great Bear of Khildon

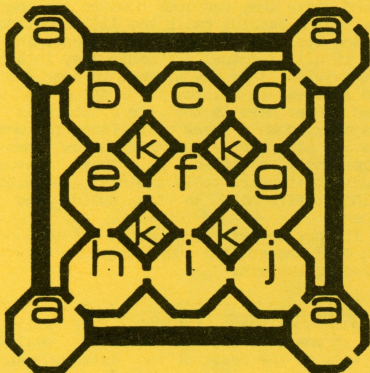
When they reach Khildon, they will probably land at one of the large number of small fishing villages on the coast of the island. At any of these villagers will gladly direct them to the location of the Great Bear of Khildon, who resides in a cavern in a high mountain valley in the center of the island. Getting to the valley is fairly easy as well, with few impediments. Once they enter the valley, the bear will seek them out, mainly out of curiosity. They may be surprised to discover that the bear can speak human speech, and that it does so rather intelligently. It will freely offer them a piece of the comb of Seistos, which it keeps in the entry to its cavern home. However, it will offer no more than three pieces, and will give those only if members of the party can answer some riddles successfully. He has three riddles, and will give one piece of comb for each riddle answered properly within a limited time, like 10 minutes or so of real time. The riddles are as follows:

I wake the young man
and bury the old
I conquer mountains
and I calm the sea
Warriors yearn
to fill me with gold
And women comb
their hair with me

We are the horses
in the charge at dawn
We are the armies
at the walls of the world
Where we pass
all works will be gone
We are beats from the heart
of the Serpent curled

I am the dearest gold
of the weary warrior
Borne by a knight
with a barbed lance
Sleep is my gift
to king and counselor
My lovers are lusty
and quick to chance

If they fail to answer any riddles the bear will be sorely disappointed in them and shoo them off. If they attempt to steal the comb or take it by force the bear will fight against them and use his considerable magical powers against them as well. If they do well on the riddles they might have more comb than they need, so they might be able to eat some. If the comb is consumed, the eater must roll within WILx3% (use WIS in AD&D). If this roll is failed, he will then make all possible efforts to commit suicide on the spot or at his first chance thereafter. If the roll is made, the character gains 103 on CON and 103 on INT.



IN THE CASTLE

The castle on Phajior is made up of a series of towers of glass and metal, and Q'rula'a will allow them to enter at any of the four main corner entrances and find Hlanal on their own. What they do in the castle is up to them and they will neither be escorted or interfered with in any way. The sections of the castle are described below, keyed by letter to the map.

Note that all the walls of the castle, except those facing on areas marked K are made of solid black crystal, while those facing on areas marked K and the roofs of the different towers are made of a milky-clear crystal. All of the openings marked for doorways are filled with a concealing mist which cannot be seen through, but which can be passed through freely.

A: These are entry towers with high domed roofs of clear crystal and walls of dark crystal. Within each are posted two Guards and there are rooms within each tower which house 12 guards each, housing the full complement of guards for the castle between them.

B: This room has at its center an interesting scene of statuary, featuring Hlanal in the center, in a commanding pose outside a pentacle in which stands a large and nasty looking demon. All of the statues are painted and look extremely lifelike, and in fact, if the pentacle is breached, the demon will be freed and cease to be stone, at which point it will attack and destroy the party before departing with their souls for the nether regions.

C: In this room there is a section of the floor marked off in a grid pattern of eight segments in the colors White, Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple and Black. Each of these can be stepped on directly from outside the grid area, or the area can be easily walked around. Stepping on the different sections teleports the stepper to the place in Uttgart to which that section is keyed. White teleports to a Saursen caravan camp in the heart of the Dashtar desert. Red teleports to the plain outside of Melanir the fortress of Gilrod, ruler of the planet. Orange teleports to an abandoned temple in the eastern city of Lakrono. Yellow teleports to a ruined plaza in the abandoned city of Zushran (See Citadel of Zushran). Green teleports to the heart of the Wasted Lands in Dyvan. Blue teleports to the sunken city of Old Ulkhar, 300Yds beneath the sea and two miles out from shore. Purple teleports to the metropolis of Zardast. Black teleports directly into the void beneath the planet. Many of these areas can be fatal or extremely dangerous. Some are detailed elsewhere as noted, and all can be found in the upcoming release Worldbook I: Uttgart.

D: This room is similar to room C, in that it presents a scene in statuary, showing Hlanal controlling what appears to be a sphere of black, condensed void substance which floats unsupported above the ground. Hlanal is a statue, but looks very real. The void sphere IS real, and anything which touches it will be instantly absorbed and destroyed. Persons touching it should save to see how much of their arm and body is absorbed, even if they touch it with a weapon or tool.

E: This room has a pentacle inlaid in silver on the floor. Anyone walking through it has a 20% chance of disappearing and being directly transported to hell. Around the walls are bookshelves and scroll cases. If they stop to read it should be possible to find almost any spell related to demonology or sorcerer magic here, though there are no pens or blank paper, and if anything is removed from the room it will burst into flame, leaving a residue of sticky ash which will cling to the thief and mark him for his deed.

F: This central chamber is the chamber used by Hlanal for meditation. At first they may think that he is a statue, as he is not moving at all and does not seem to breathe. He is seated in the lotus position, floating some four feet off the ground with no visible means of support. If touched, he will be awakened, but otherwise he will be oblivious to their presence. If they do wake him up, he may be rather cantankerous, so they should produce their gift as quickly as possible. If he likes the gift, he will answer their question or grant a reasonable magical boon or aid. If the gift is unacceptable, because it is too ordinary or insignificant, he will not hesitate to turn them all to toads, cockroaches and fleas, or if he feels kindly, he may just afflict them with horrible disfiguring boils, leprosy or scrofula. His powers are great and hard to classify, but he can easily have his way with most characters and fill almost any request if the mood takes him.

G: This room is another workroom, featuring a fully equipped forge and a work bench with a selection of rare metals and vials of powders and liquids. None of these are labelled visibly, but those who can see magical markings will notice invisible and unreadable runes which identify them for Hlanal. These substances could be tried, but the result might as well be completely random, and can be rolled for on most any random power table, such as the one provided in Challenge of the Toymaker.

H: This is similar to room B, featuring a statue scene of Hlanal with a newly forged sword. The sword and the mage both appear to be stone, but if the sword is touched, it seems to change in appearance to become a greyish black metal blade inscribed with spidery runes which glow a pale yellow. Anyone attempting to take the sword may do so, but once it is taken it cannot be removed from your hand by any means except severing the hand, and it will force the bearer to attack any creature

encountered which is of extraplanal origin (demons, gods, spirits) on sight. It is +4/+3 and does 10D0 base damage as well as giving the bearer 30% resistance to magic.

I: This is the last workroom. Marked out on the floor is a large triangle superimposed in a circle, used for the summoning of the spirits of the dead. In wracks on the wall are small bottles containing the powdered essences of notable dead people for use in summoning up their spirits. On a book stand in one corner of the room is the Book of Verkana. It is open to a page and there is writing on the left page, but not on the right. It cannot be accurately read by anyone of human intelligence and the pages cannot be turned backwards, though they may be turned forwards. Anyone who does attempt to read the text on the visible page will read it as an account of their travels during this adventure, including events of which that person or even none of the members of the party are aware. This information will be interspersed with a large amount of irrelevant and confusing material.

Finally, if someone reads to the end of the text they will notice that it seems to be writing itself slowly as they read, continuing onto the next page.

J: This is the last of the display rooms, featuring a statue of Hlanal dealing with what seems to be a human being composed of green slime who is melting into the floor with a look of horror on his face. There is danger in touching the apparent slime, for though it looks like a mere image, it is real, a virile carnophage which will seek out any flesh that comes near it and consume it rapidly, doing 10D0 in the first round, 1018 the second and so on, declining by 2s to nothing until it is done.

K: These chambers between the rooms are surrounded by crystal and visible from the rooms they border on. Each holds a huge Void Guardian, a powerful demon held in stasis, but capable of being released by Hlanal on command. They look dead, but those who are perceptive can detect slow but steady movement.

APPENDIX: CREATURES & CHARACTERS

Described below are all the creatures, groups of people and unique characters mentioned in the text of the adventure, with their statistics and powers. Information for both Advanced Dungeons and Dragons and Ysgarth is provided.

PRIESTS OF AKARNA

AD&D STATS

AC:4 SIZE:M ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Any Weapon
 HD:5 MOVE:10 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:45 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:50% ALIG:C/G

YSGARTH STATS

AR:35 AV:2/2/2 MP:240 DEI:Akarna ATTACKS: Not usually
 DC:7 DR:35/35/35 AP:60 ALI:5/16
 MR:25 HP:45 ST:10 HEI:5'10"
 RC:7 FP:60 RN:5 WEI:180

These priests are dedicated to non-violence and to healing the afflicted wherever they may find them. However, they will not raise the dead, though they will arrange for reincarnation. They can work most any normal healing spell and will do so, but only for those who swear potent oaths to forsake violence henceforth, with those oaths being enforced by crippling curses and the immediate cancellation of any healing. They wear grey robes and are pledged to poverty, though some are unscrupulous and may take payment for their work. Note that a large number are non-human.

VOID DEMON

AD&D STATS

AC:-2 SIZE:M ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Disintegrate for 3D20
 HD:12 MOVE:15 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:125 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:60% ALIG:C/E

YSGARTH STATS

AR:75 AV:5/5/5 MP:200 DEI:Ourzon ATTACKS:(L2)Disintegrate(MD60)
 DC:15 DR:75/75/75 AP:75 ALI:1/4
 MR:75 HP:125 ST:8 HEI:7'
 RC:15 FP:100 RN:12 WEI:100

These creatures appear as tall, thin humanoids with totally black scaled skin, long, pointed ears, rudimentary black leather wings on their back, powerful extended jaws and fangs. They have a number of magical powers and their very touch causes disintegration as noted, and they can also fire bolts of disintegration. Other powers include the ability to survive in almost any conditions, invisibility, teleportation and immateriality, including the ability to pass a blow directed at them 30% of the time. They also regenerate up to 5 HP per round.

KOLMANAJI WARRIORS

AD&D STATS

AC:3 SIZE:M ATTACKS (NO/DAM):One Spear for 1012
 HD:4 MOVE:10 SPECIAL ATTACKS:None
 HP:55 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:None
 MR:35% ALIG:N/N

YSGARTH STATS

AR:45 AV:2/4/3 MP:50 DEI:Manaju ATTACKS:(LR2)Spear(MD12)
 DC:10 DR:45/45/45 AP:60 ALI:9/10
 MR:45 HP:55 ST:13 HEI:5'10"
 RC:10 FP:60 RN:6 WEI:190

These are typical stats for warriors of the Kolmanaji tribes of fishermen in the islands. Some aspects of their culture are described elsewhere in the adventure. Aside from this they are mostly of standard human stock, somewhat swarthy, with long brown hair plaited and layered with whale oil. They wear beards and mustaches which are also braided and plaited.

KARCHARIAD&D STATS

AC:-7 SIZE:L ATTACKS (NO/DAM):One bite for 2D20
 HD:20 MOVE:18 SPECIAL ATTACKS:None
 HP:300 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:None
 MR:65% ALIG:C/E

YSGARTH STATS

AR:80 AV:18/16/14 MP:0 DEI:None ATTACKS:(M1)Bite(MD40)
 DC:30 DR:15/25/35 AP:60 ALI:5/8
 MR:0 HP:300 ST:7 LEN:50-8'
 RC:0 FP:75 RN:20 WEI:2000-3000

These are the greatest of sharks, huge beasts more than twice the size of the largest terrestrial sharks. They travel in packs and feed on anything which moves. They are not particularly intelligent, but are vicious by instinct.

VOIDRAGONSAD&D STATS

AC:-5 SIZE:L ATTACKS (NO/DAM):8breathe Disintegration 2D20
 HD:15 MOVE:50 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:150 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:75% ALIG:C/E

YSGARTH STATS

AR:75 AV:12/9/7 MP:150 DEI:Unknown ATTACKS:(L1R1)Claws(MD20)
 DC:20 DR:45/65/95 AP:75 ALI:3/8 or (M1)Disintegrate(MD40)
 DR:75 HP:150 ST:5 LEN:30ft
 RC:15 FP:75 RN:15 WEI:1000

These are among the more fearsome denizens of the void. They live in caves on the rocky underside of the world-rim and feed on people and things which venture close to the edge. They are long and serpentine in form, with black scales which give off polychromatic color reflections in the sun. They have no legs, but have large wings suited to use in void or air. Their main attack is their breath, which disintegrates their chosen targets as if it were a ray, doing located damage. They are of low human intelligence, though older specimens are much more intelligent. They travel in small family groups. They are capable of communicating with each other and the oldest and largest know human tongues as well. They are pretty much immune to magic and the oldest and most powerful can also work a variety of spells. The stats given are for the average Voidragon. Infants will be about half as powerful and the most ancient ones will be about twice as powerful. They can regenerate up to 8 HP per round.

Q'RULA'AAD&D STATS

AC:-7 SIZE:M ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Starlance 2D20
 HD:16 MOVE:10 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:120 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:80% ALIG:N/N

YSGARTH STATS

AR:90 AV:10/10/10 MP:180 DEI:None ATTACKS:(LR2)Starlance(MD40)
 DC:15 DR:65/65/65 AP:75 ALI:11/11
 MR:70 HP:120 ST:4 HEI:7'
 RC:15 FP:60 RN:16 WEI:350

Q'rula'a is the guardian of the passage to Phajior. He is a strange entity imported from a far world. He appears to be roughly humanoid, but he is rather squat and heavyset for his height and seems to be made of layer upon layer of grey-stone, which seem to slide back and forth on each other in a surprisingly fluid way. He is armed with a long lance called a Starlance, which fires beams of light. In addition he can work a wide selection of spells, especially having to do with transport and earth magic. He also regenerates up to 10 HP per round. He is genuinely helpful, but extremely serious about his job and the protection of his master.

GREAT ROCK COBRAAD&D STATS

AC:-2 SIZE:M ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Bite 3D12
 HD:10 MOVE:7 SPECIAL ATTACKS:Spit Acid 1D20
 HP:80 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:None
 MR:60% ALIG:C/N

YSGARTH STATS

AR:50 AV:5/5/5 MP:0 DEI:None ATTACKS:(M1)Bite(MD36)
 DC:10 DR:70/60/85 AP:75 ALI:7/9 or (M1)Spit Acid(MD20)
 MR:50 HP:80 ST:8 LEN:8'
 RC:10 FP:75 RN:10 WEI:190

This is a mighty serpent native to Tsadon's hill region. It has an acid bite which acts as a poison when it gets into the bloodstream, doing an additional 4D20 of overall damage unless a save is made to take half damage. In addition, it can spit its acidic venom for external damage over considerable distance, though this attack does not carry the additional poisoning damage. This one has been enchanted to guard the homonculus.

THE HOMONCULUS OF TSADONAD&D STATS

AC:1 SIZE:5 ATTACKS (NO/DAM):None
 HD:13 MOVE:4 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:40 INTE:H SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:100% ALIG:C/E

YSGARTH STATS

AR:30 AV:1/1/1 MP:500 DEI:Ourzon ATTACKS:Magical
 DC:5 DR:75/75/75 AP:80 ALI:3/4
 MR:30 HP:40 ST:0 HEI:1'
 RC:5 FP:60 RN:13 WEI:15

The homonculus is a nasty little demonically inspired creature created by an ancient mage as a familiar who has acquired a great deal of magical power along with a bad attitude. He will do anything to be free, but is not to be trusted, though he may fulfill his promises on a whim or if he sees future benefit in it. The glass jar he is in is magical and holds him imprisoned unless it is broken. He should have a full selection of spells, especially those involving mind control or enchantment of one kind or another.

THE ALL DEVOURING MAWAD&D STATS

AC:-5 SIZE:XL ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Bite for 10D12
 HD:30 MOVE:100 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Below
 HP:750 INTE:L SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Below
 MR:100% ALIG:C/N

YSGARTH STATS

AR:100 AV:30/30/30 MP:0 DEI:None ATTACKS:(M1)Bite(MD120)
 DC:100 DR:30/30/30 AP:45 ALI:3/10
 MR:0 HP:750 ST:0 LEN:500ft
 RC:0 FP:120 RN:30 WEI:20000

This is a huge beast of the void which looks somewhat like a whale with black skin and a double hinged jaw which can open into an aperture some 300ft in diameter, capable of consuming almost anything with a ridge of super hard bone which serves instead of teeth. Its favorite food is rock, so it is making a concerted effort to eat the planet, something which it does constantly, as it needs to eat 24 hours a day to stay alive. Its saliva has a disintegrating function, and its main defense, aside from its armorlike skin and huge bulk is in the form of small Voidragons which live in its skin in a symbiotic relationship, feeding on annoying things like humans who want to kill the Maw. So, any humans bothering it will be attacked by as many as a dozen of these half strength Voidragons.

THE GREAT BEAR OF KHILDONAD&D STATS

AC:1 SIZE:L ATTACKS (NO/DAM):2 Claws 2D12
 HD:15 MOVE:12 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:100 INTE:H SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:70% ALIG:C/G

YSGARTH STATS

AR:60 AV:3/3/3 MP:210 DEI:Ourzon ATTACKS:(L1R1)Claws(MD24)
 DC:20 DR:35/30/25 AP:50 ALI:4/16
 MR:15 HP:100 ST:6 HEI:8'
 RC:10 FP:90 RN:15 WEI:500

This is a magical bear, blessed by the gods. He is intelligent and able to converse and has some magical powers, essentially those of the druid with a selection of nature related spells. He is generally friendly to humans, but guards the Comb of Seistos carefully, and has been charged to give it to no one who is unworthy, which he determines by their behavior and ability to answer his riddles. Note that as he is immortal, if killed he will return to life fully healed at the dawn of the next day, but he is not vengeful unless the comb he guards is stolen.

CASTLE GUARDSAD&D STATS

AC:2 SIZE:M ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Any Weapon
 HD:6 MOVE:10 SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
 HP:75 INTE:M SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
 MR:40% ALIG:N/N

YSGARTH STATS

AR:45	AV:4/4/4	MP:50	DEI:Sathanas	ATTACKS:(R2)Any Weapon
DC:10	DR:45/45/45	AP:60	ALI:11/11	
MR:45	HP:75	ST:12	HEI:5'10"	
RC:10	FP:75	RN:6	WEI:190	

These are standard stats for the human guards employed by Hlanal to guard his castle. They are chosen from men of the islands for their integrity and ability to keep secrets as well as their pure combat capability.

VOID GUARDIANS

AD&D STATS

AC:6	SIZE:M	ATTACKS (NO/DAM):Disintgrate for 4D20
HD:16	MOVE:15	SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
HP:175	INTE:M	SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
MR:80%	ALIG:C/E	

YSGARTH STATS

AR:100	AV:8/8/8	MP:250	DEI:Ourzon	ATTACKS:(L2)Disintgrate(MD80)
DC:20	DR:90/90/90	AP:75	ALI:1/4	
MR:100	HP:175	ST:4	HEI:9'	
RC:20	FP:100	RN:16	WEI:180	

These are larger versions of the standard Void Demons, of superior status and with somewhat greater powers. They can work a selection of transport and enchantment spells, pass blows 50% of the time, can teleport, go invisible, go immaterial and use their disintegration power. Plus, they regenerate at a rate of up to 12 HP per round.

HLANAL THE ANCIENT

AD&D STATS

AC:8	SIZE:M	ATTACKS (NO/DAM):No Weapons
HD:30	MOVE:6	SPECIAL ATTACKS:See Magic Below
HP:90	INTE:H	SPECIAL DEFENSES:See Magic Below
MR:100%	ALIG:C/N	

YSGARTH STATS

AR:40	AV:12/12/12	MP:900	DEI:Ourzon	ATTACKS:No Weapons
DC:5	DR:60/60/60	AP:75	ALI:8/12	
MR:60	HP:80	ST:0	HEI:5'4"	
RC:5	FP:90	RN:30	WEI:100	

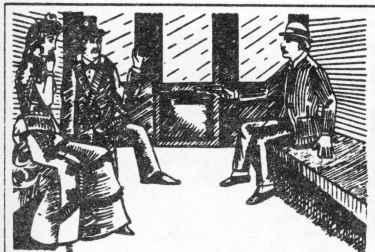
Hlanal is one of the most ancient mages on Uttgart, from the great generation of mages who ruled before the coming of famous powers like Spielsatzenbrachen and Gilrod. Of his generation only he and Dabesh the Glazomancer survive. He is a sage and diviner of extreme power, but is a recluse and is not eager to aid others unless skillfully enticed. He has command of a large selection of transport, enchantment, necromantic, sorcerous, alchemical, divination and information spells and specializes in interplanar magic and all sorts of information magic. He has a high regard for human life, but little tolerance for annoyances, so rather than killing those who bother him without justification he is likely to eliminate them as a nuisance, though without killing them, like by transforming them into something nasty. As far as aiding those who please him, he can grant almost any wish or answer almost any question, but will be annoyed by trivial and self-servingly unimaginative requests.



Victorian Adventure

by Stephen Smith

The first 'Truly British' role playing game



measure of freedom of choice in any of its elements. There is a selection of skills available to characters by point allocation based on the Mental Strength and Education stats. Skill use and advancement is based almost exactly on the RuneQuest system. The combat system is fairly simple, an improved version of what is found in RuneQuest type games, without an activity point system or hit location, but with characteristic based initiative. The two main problems with this system are that defensive strategy seems not to have been considered and that specialized skills play no role in combat, with your ability based entirely on experience and basic stats. In fact, as it is set up a character can be an active boxer and have that experience automatically improve his skill as a fencer or marksman. Magic in the system is covered extremely briefly, in the form of spiritualism. The rules in this section are extremely vague, but seem appropriate to the background. Given next is a selection of background information on history and technology and a timeline of wages and prices for the period. There are also some useful hints on developing scenarios and campaigns and suggestions for designing background characters, as well as notes on supernatural dangers and monsters. The final item in the rules is a brief, rather basic adventure called 'Bane of the Downs', which should serve as a good basic introduction to the system. There is also an index and an abstract of tables.

Victorian Adventure seems like a good idea which has been executed with only a limited amount of effort. The mechanics are highly derivative and rather primitive with far too great a reliance on random rolls, and there needs to be a great deal more background development and perhaps another scenario or two. The game is simple and has some interesting ideas, but there is just not enough here to support a lasting campaign. (Jon Schuller)

CASTLE THRAX

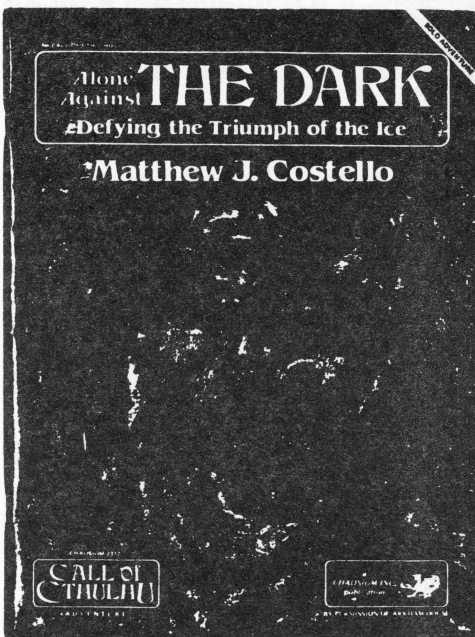
by Paul Burdick
from Spellbinders Games
327 Zeller Ave., Akron, OH 44310

This is a multi-player solo adventure for use with AD&D, though most of the material is not

system specific and few rules are really required for play. It comes in a single booklet in full-sized format with some 30 pages. The type is large and somewhat sloppy and a lot of space is wasted, but there is some nice art and standard numerical room designations are easy to follow.

Although this is from a small, little known company, which seems to have grown out of a local store, this scenario seems to have little new or innovative in it. It is pretty much a standard dungeon crawl, though it is well put together and presented. There are some novel situations and a few interesting encounters, some of them fairly sophisticated, but for the most part it is just a progression of puzzles and battles. There is even a random encounter table to be rolled on while going through the adventure. Solo adventures are by their nature extremely limited, and as AD&D solos go, this one is really fairly good. Certainly it is better than anything equivalent offered by TSR.

If you come to **Castle Thrax** expecting something novel and exciting you will be disappointed, but if you are an AD&D player and enjoy solo adventures, it might be for you because it is a cut above the usual solo module. (Dave Nalle)



ALONE AGAINST THE DARK
by Matthew J. Costello
from Chaosium

This is a solo adventure for **Call of Cthulhu**, a game which you should never really play alone, at least not if you value your sanity. This scenario is a single book in standard large format, with a total of some 72 pages. The first thing which struck me about this adventure is the art. There are illustrations of the major characters and some of the scenes by someone named Krawczyk, and they are amazing. I can't imagine what they paid this fellow or where they found him, but he is not just another illustrator. He is a genuine artist and his work captures the feeling of the horror which is the world of H. P. Lovecraft in a way achieved by few others except perhaps the late Lee Brown Coye. In fact, his illustrations are so depressing that they almost made me reluctant to go through the adventure.

The adventure itself is very well structured. It is intended for a party of four investigators

who undertake to stop sinister forces from turning the world on its axis and reinstating the reign of the Old Ones. You can get an idea of the nature of the adventure from the fact that those four characters are for the use of one player on the assumption that each will die in turn and be replaced by the next. The adventure actually breaks down into several segments, all of them well detailed and challenging, though some elements are more interesting than others, with the sequence regarding the Karpathos Device being particularly interesting. I particularly like the fact that even if you succeed in the adventure it is quite possible that you will die in the effort or at least lose your mind.

More than any adventure I've seen for Call of Cthulhu to date, this adventure really captures the feel of the game, though one result of this is that playing the scenario can be extremely depressing, but that is the nature of the setting which Lovecraft created. (Carl Jones)

MAN TO MAN

by Steve Jackson
from Steve Jackson Games

This is the first volume of a new role-playing system from Steve Jackson, the successor to The Fantasy Trip. This book covers character creation and combat. It is 64 full-sized pages of text with a color cover and clear, readable text. Some of the art is good, but most of it is fairly mediocre. Most of the layout and design is first class, with the exception of some of the tables which have problems with shading. One of the more interesting aspects is the use of a sidebar on each page, running commentary and suggestions on nearby text, an appealing innovation also found in other new SJG products.

The rules start by outlining the four basic characteristics, which pretty much match up with those from TFI though the names have been changed to protect the innocent. There are no secondary stats and the rules move right on to skills. Ability with all skills is based on DEX and the number of points spent on that skill. The same points can be spent on special advantages. The best thing about these points is that they are the same points spent to get your basic stats, and all these purchases are done on a flat one for one basis, with the only weighting being found in the skill section, where skills are broken down into 'Easy', 'Average' and 'Hard' classifications. DEX figures very highly in skill, so it is much more important to max out in DEX than to spend for individual skills. There is a section on generating a description for the character, followed by the section on weapons and how they work. Weapons are broken down into two simple groups, by cut and thrust classifications, with different actual damage modified by bonuses for the type of weapon and the STR of the character. Weapon information along with combat tables and the like can be found on a set of removable central sheets. Armor and shields are also covered. Such defensive equipment both stops damage and gives characters some basic defensive ability. The character creation section wraps up with some basic rules for non-human races, based on the old idea of bonuses and reductions of the basic characteristics.

The next major section covers combat, and together with related segments this fills up most of the rest of the book. In general combat is highly tactical, with a hex display provided and a heavy emphasis on movement and facing, rather in the tradition of TFI. Surprisingly, there is no activity point system, and most unusual actions are handled as special cases with individual solutions, some of which, like the concept of 'all out attack' vs regular attack would be easily solved with such a system. One of the real problems with combat is that it involves two rolls. First, the attacker rolls to hit and then the defender rolls for a parry or other defense. These two elements could easily be combined into one roll, though that might reduce the feel of participation for the defender. After hitting, damage is rolled for and reduced by

the appropriate value of any armor. Damage is to the general Health of the character, with different effects depending on the amount of damage taken. Special rules are provided for unarmed combat, essentially classifying unarmed attacks like weapons, with some special cases. After this basic look at combat advanced combat is discussed, with great elaboration of movement and facing rules, specialized positions, aiming, attack and defense strategies, hit location, critical hits, critical misses, special rules for close combat, for missile weapons and for special combat options like surprise, subdual and shield bashes. There are also rules for attacking inanimate objects, using opportune weapons and additional guidelines on wounds and fatigue. Finally, there is a very brief section of scenarios, which consist of a selection of four basic combat situations roughly outlined and keyed to the floor plans provided in the tear out section.

This is very clearly the first book of a system, because it is far from complete. This is a book on combat, presenting an excellent character creation system and a playable basic combat system, though much of the advanced combat will tend to just bog down play. The scenarios, which are merely battle set-ups make it clear that this is just a game of combat, not really a role-playing game, though it could become part of a greater whole which might be a fairly good role-playing system. There are some notable mechanical problems with the rules as well. The division into basic and advanced rules gets somewhat confusing, with references from one section to another causing some disorientation. The largest flaw may be in the skill system, which provides only combat skills, with nothing which will flesh out a character or make him anything more than a fighting machine, though this might be repaired in later volumes. The most pervasive problem is probably that combat is just a selection of rules developed out of The Fantasy Trip and other sources and cobbled together without being an integrated whole or having any guiding logic, though this could have been helped a great deal by some sort of action point system. In addition, although the basic system is quite playable, the reliance on tactical exactitude will work against role-playing in a campaign situation, and at the most basic level the mechanics really have not advanced much beyond where TFI was five years ago. There are good points as well. The basic character creation from a single fund of points is very flexible and shows good potential, and the mechanics of the skill system, if not the selection of skills, is excellent.

Man to Man is a well presented, playable game of combat, but it is hard to see how it will grow into a complete role-playing game, because so much of the combat system seems to preclude integration with the background and character development elements which make a complete role-playing game. I suspect that most players of The Fantasy Trip will be pleased with Man to Man because it is essentially a more modern and sophisticated version of Melee, if not in specific mechanics, at least in concept and intention. For others Man to Man could be an interesting resource, providing good ideas for players working with hybrid systems and willing to search out elements like the character creation system which are innovative and could be easily adapted. It will be interesting to see the what becomes of Man to Man and how it grows into Steve Jackson's Generic Universal Role Playing System when magic and background rules are added. (DN)



CHARACTERS BY DESIGN

JON SCHULLER

There are already plenty of systems around for creating AD&D characters, most of them based around the idea of some method of random die rolls to determine the character's basic statistics and the selection of character classes based on how good prime requisite stats are.

This traditional sort of character design system is practical enough, but it has the disadvantage of giving the player no control at all over how his character comes out or whether it resembles the type of role he wants to play. The result of this is usually that the player finds some way to ignore the character creation system by rolling many characters and picking the most desirable or by just picking stats to suit his needs. This is basically a good thing, but it exists outside of any accepted structure of the rules, and without control, this sort of free-form character creation leads to excesses and abuses.

In designing a recent AD&D tournament scenario I decided to let players create their own characters so the Gamemasters would have another area in which to judge their playing skill. It was soon clear that just letting them roll their characters would take a lot of time and be essentially meaningless, no matter what rolling system was used. An alternative system had to be developed and it seemed logical to use a point-allocation or purchase type system, a more sophisticated version of the basic systems found in games like The Fantasy Trip and Champions where players have a set number of points to spend to establish their character. Unlike these other games which use that sort of system only to generate initial characteristics this system grew beyond that point to cover all of the aspects of the character which were pertinent to play.

This character design system works exceptionally well in AD&D tournaments and is also well suited to use in setting up characters to join an existing campaign when you don't want them to be much lower level than the rest of the characters. It will also work for creating new characters and can easily be adjusted for the level of play of the campaign by reducing the number of Creation Points available. The prices can also be adjusted to represent items which you wish to make more or less accessible in your campaign.

The real value of this system is that it is fast and easy to use, totally fair without random factors, allowing a greater measure of freedom for the players. Each player starts from the same point and a character will succeed or fail on the ability of the player.

To start out each player gets a fund of 80 Creation Points to spend on setting up a character. 80 points is about right for a campaign where characters will be of 1st to 3rd level starting out. If you wanted to keep character levels down you might go as low as 70CP, but any lower would be ill-advised. For a slightly more powerful campaign you might go as high as 100CP, which might yield some characters as high as 8th level. Basically, you can figure that each 5CP over 65 will add one to the highest level of characters in a group.

Creation Points can be spent on just about anything, on characteristics, to determine the level of a character, to determine his character class or if you wish to make the option available, to purchase special equipment, including magic items. Characters will not have any possessions or attributes unless they spend CP on them. Making such things as character class and experience level saleable may seem a little radical, but it is a great way of limiting overpowered character classes and providing for a small individual variation in level to make characters a bit more different.

After spending his CP the player will still have to use the normal methods to determine secondary attributes, including spells, weapon proficiencies and ability percentages. Note that money is one of the things which can be bought, and the rate for this might need to be adjusted to fit your campaign economy.



When creating a character all of the standard limits apply, especially with characteristics, so that no stat can be lower than 3 or higher than 18. If a player wishes to buy a stat higher than 18 there are special costs for increasing beyond that point. Note that split class characters must pay for the experience levels of both their classes as well as any special cost to be of that character class.

Given below is a list of things which CP can be spent on with their costs. It is important to remind the players that they have to buy everything, so if they don't buy any experience levels or a character class they don't have one and suffer appropriate penalties.

ITEM PURCHASED	CST	MAGICAL ITEM PURCHASE	CST
Each 1 Point of ST,IN,WI,CO,DE or CH	1	+1/+1 Weapon of Choice.	4
Increase 18 stat to 18(01-50)	1	+2/+2 Weapon of Choice	8
Increase 18 stat to 18(51-75)	2	+3/+3 Weapon of Choice	12
Increase 18 stat to 18(76-90)	4	+4/+4 Weapon of Choice	16
Increase 18 stat to 18(91-99)	8	+5/+5 Weapon of Choice	20
Increase 18 stat to 18(00)	16	+1 Armor of Choice	4
First Experience Level	0	+2 Armor of Choice	8
Second Experience Level	1	+3 Armor of Choice	12
Third Experience Level	3	+4 Armor of Choice	16
Fourth Experience Level	6	+5 Armor of Choice	20
Fifth Experience Level	10	Potion of Healing(per 3 points)	1
Sixth Experience Level	15		
Seventh Experience Level	21		
Eighth Experience Level	28		
Ninth Experience Level	36		
Tenth Experience Level	45		
Fighter, Magic User or Cleric Class	0		
Thief Character Class	4		
Illusionist or Paladin	8		
Druid Character Class	12		
Ranger or Monk Class	16		
Money(each 100GP)	1		

There are things which can be added to this list, most notably some of the new character classes and higher levels, if they are appropriate. Where you would place new character classes would depend on how powerful you feel they are, with the cost commensurate with their power, and levels over 10th increase in cost by the same pattern.

Depending on the nature of your campaign, especially if it has a high-power orientation, you might want to include a selection of special items to be bought with CP instead of purchased with money or acquired through experience. This list would have to be made available to players and be carefully selected and priced by the GM. It could include standard magical items plus unique items which you want to have out for particular reasons. It might also include unusual background advantages, like social connections, special skills or abilities, acquaintances, standing in a guild, etc.

Provided below are some examples of standard minor magical items and their possible costs in CP. When buying a weapon or armor with CP the character would also have to be able to pay money for it equal to the plus of the weapon multiplied by its normal cash cost. The CP are being paid in order to buy the unusual opportunity to spend the special cash cost for that weapon or armor. For many campaigns and for starting characters this sort of thing might be best eliminated or strictly limited.

One good general recommendation for GMs to keep in mind is to create a few characters this way yourself before using the system. That way you can see how it does for the kinds of characters you want in your campaign and adjust the costs accordingly.

Taken as a whole, this system offers many more options to the GM and players in an AD&D campaign. It lets the GM set the costs of things which he might consider to be overly powerful and to weight the aspects of his campaign which he wants to emphasize, while at the same time it allows the players a large amount of freedom in creating characters while working within those strictures which the GM has established. It might seem contradictory that the GM should gain control while the player gains freedom, but the elimination of random factors opens up a lot of room for both parties to take advantage of. This combination of player freedom and GM control allows for better role-playing and assures that characters will be in tune with the power of their setting.



ECHOES

FROM THE ABYSS



Dear Dave,

Enclosed is a money order covering the cost for two more years of your excellent magazine, ABYSS, as well as the adventure, Citadel of Zushran. I love what I have seen so far of the Ysgarth system; it is definitely superior to AD&D, which is short for Additional Dross for Dummies. I will absolutely never play another game even if they threaten to bury me under all the tons of offal and garbage that they try to pass off as "game aids". I will get into the superior points of Ysgarth as opposed to AD&D in a moment, but I have just a couple of problems with the first book: first, what does the skill "RAN", entail, and second, why is riding a horse so difficult? I feel sorry for all the generals who send their cavalry into battle, only to see their troops promptly fall off their mounts. (a character with a success rate of 95%, the highest attainable, will fail once every two minutes.) Possibly the skill is only to be used when a difficult maneuver or tactic is attempted, so possibly I just answered my own question. At any rate, I eagerly await the Magic volume; I camp out by my mailbox every day for it.

There is no doubt that if Ysgarth enjoyed the vast distribution that AD&D does, and if it was created six years ago with this base, it would be the most popular FRPG around. It isn't the munchkins fault, really; they can't help it if they are preyed upon by some greedy game company desperate for their dollars. At any rate, I hold before me best of Dragon Volume II. E. Gary Gyax writes that realism cannot, insofar as we on Earth, 1985 define real, exist in a pure fantasy game. It facilitates play-suspends our disbelief, as it were-however, if a realistic base is provided upon which fantastic elements can then be layered upon. AD&D, with its virtual attitude of "here are the things you can be, and none other", its combat system, where a single arrow cannot slay a 10th level character, no matter how well aimed or how powerful a force is behind it, where said character can jump off a 60 foot cliff and survive (I could go on and on), these only serve to say to you (or me) "this does not make any sense!" Logic tells you that said crossbow, when fired at point-blank range into someone's brain, will most likely kill; in Ysgarth, this is most certainly the case; maximum damage of 20, which is 4X damage, enough to kill; in AD&D, maximum damage is a ridiculously low figure of 4! Hardly enough to scratch a powerful character, even if the archer has specialization in said weapon, which will raise MD to 12, still not enough to make Asmodeus quiver in his slippers. Even though the chance of rolling a kill with the YRS system is low, it is there, enough to discourage our devilish friend from destroying a man who just pinned his hand to the wall.

Magic is another bugaboo, a pet peeve if you will, that irritates the Hades out of me as regards AD&D. There are only two mage classes given (with a third on the way) that a character can be; there is virtually nothing else, other than differences in spells between mages, that differentiates one wizard from another, and if Zmog the Arch-Mage doesn't have Meteor Swarm, he sure as hell is going to research it! In YRS, there are at least 25 different ways a mage can cast a spell; this insures that there is individuality from wizard to wizard, as well, as far as I can determine, several different areas that one can specialize in, though one is free to mix spell types as much as allowable within the rules; I will know more when Book Two arrives at my lonely location in the world.

I have tried to get area shops to carry your products, but with no success. They tell me, if I'm lucky, that they have your address, and will write you as soon as possible. If you want, I'll be happy to GM a Ysgarth scenario at GENCON, or JAXCON SOUTH in March, assuming that there is one, of course. Will you set up a booth at said convention, or what? Please let me know. Also, I am an aspiring fantasy and SF writer and would be glad to send you some of my (admittedly raw) work. In closing, I will say that YRS shows that someone put plenty of thought behind it; now I have a game that will allow me, both as player and GM, create a world that will not restrain me as far as creativity goes, and to play characters that are not arbitrarily limited as far as what they can and cannot do, both PCs and NPCs.

David Ackley
Jacksonville, FL

[This flattering letter brings up some interesting items which might be of interest to ABYSS readers. First, I encourage you to do like David and ask your local store for Ragnarok products. If enough of you do this, believe it or not, they may actually start carrying them. They can place wholesale orders through The Armory, which is our main distributor. Next, if you are interested in writing for ABYSS, just send in a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope and we'll use it to send back guidelines for submissions to ABYSS. Finally, David mentions a number of suggested revisions for Ysgarth and has some questions on the system. Rather than deal with these questions here, I just thought I'd mention that anyone who has any edition of Ysgarth or To Challenge Tomorrow can get a free sheet of appropriate errata and revisions if they send a SASE for us to send it back in. These sheets contain rule corrections, additions and updates. Remember to specify the game and the edition which you want errata for.---DFN]

Dear Dave,

Having just received ABYSS #35, I was brought to a halt by your editorial on ORIGINS. As a member of the LA ORIGINS committee, I am deeply disappointed that an editor of a national magazine would stoop to chauvinism, half-truths and questionable logic to simultaneously attack both the ORIGINS just past as well as LA ORIGINS, while wrapping the piece in the guise of doing it for the good of gaming. Really Dave, just what were you trying to say?

Your opening sentence "After... a series of dubious locations, ORIGINS finally returned to Baltimore, its real home" is pure chauvinism at its worst. In case you don't believe the GAMA mandate (and your phrase about a national convention), ORIGINS is the National Game Convention. It exists to promote all aspects of the hobby and is mandated (as well as by example) will be staged at sites in all regions in order that all sections of the country can, over time, participate. Now, did you see anything in there about Baltimore being "its real home"? The United States, if I am not mistaken, is its real home. Or are we talking about ORIGINS the Baltimore Regional Convention, open to anyone wanting to show up?

I had not noticed that WORLDCON, the international Sci-Fi convention, was only being held in the States. It is international and it gets held all over the world.

The "benefits of having the convention in Baltimore" do exist and are important. People know where to go, who to talk to, how much it will cost to travel there, etc. I might even grant you that the people staging it might have more experience at the job. But these reasons do not negate the mandate mentioned earlier.

As for LA ORIGINS, where did you get the idea that Memphis was also being considered? Your job as a journalist is to present facts. If you had been to the GAMA meeting at ORIGINS 84 in Dallas, you might have noticed that only LA made a site presentation. Nobody else made a bid. Knoxville was mentioned as possibly being maybe interested, but someone not from there made that statement. Of course, you might not have attended that meeting (you are a GAMA member, aren't you) but you might have checked with the Site Committee on this point. Gotta watch those facts Dave, they can bite if you are not careful.

Also, you state that the last west coast ORIGINS "fopped"? Funny thing about that point. We are not, nor have I or the LA ORIGINS group ever worked or been associated with the group that put on ORIGINS 81. But when it was there, I had a good time. When I came back, most everyone that I knew that went there said they had a fair to good time. Not a great time, but they were glad they went. About 3-4 months later, the articles denouncing that particular ORIGINS came out. They told of the problems, the in-fighting between GAMA and the organizers, the bad set-up, etc. And do you know what? I cannot find anybody out of those who said they had a good time before you will now admit that they did! They all had a bad time! The convention was a flop! Talk about the power of the press to erase memories!

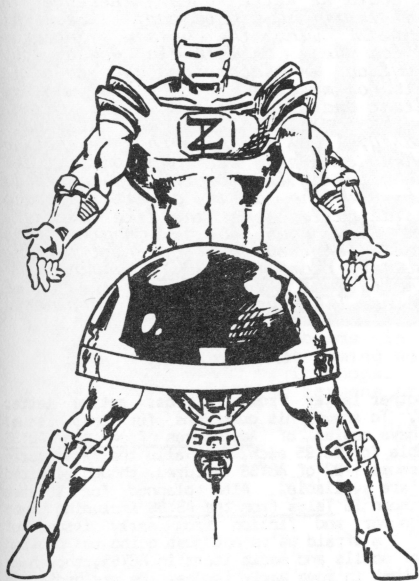
I suggest that you give LA ORIGINS a chance, since I'm not sure that you know much about the inner workings of conventions. At least your article/editorial didn't show any such knowledge. That comment about working just as hard to give seminars as the convention management/staff while the convention gets twice as much money per hour as you folks did does show a lack of appreciation on how conventions are run. Too many people think all one does is rent a site, print and mail flyers, offer free admission to the referees and open the doors to the money. As a stab, I will wager that all up, you folks put in 8 hours to prepare and stage seminars. Assuming a convention running four days, twenty hours a day, (because it does), the direct hour time base is therefore 80 hours.

Now add in the time involved in site selection, negotiation and floor planning (8 hours). Remember the time needed to write, proof, change, proof the changes, print and mail the flyers (8 hours). Don't forget about registering all the preregistrants (6 hours). You must organize the staff, create the schedule, change, recreate the schedule again and then reorganize the staff (15 hours). How about writing all the advertising, calling up potential displayers, mailing and delivering all the flyers and responding to all the answers (78 hours). Toss in organizing and overseeing set-up and takedown, doing and processing surveys, convention paperwork and finances, renovating mailing lists (17 hours?) and we are talking another 70 plus hours of overhead time. Maybe you can see now why organizers feel (and they are not totally right, either) that your time, important and necessary as it is, is not as valuable per hour as their time is. Don't forget, most organizers don't get paid for most of this time either.

Which leads into the subject of questionable logic. If you, as editor, want to address the fact that ORIGINS may be turning into a money-hungry, scam convention, that is fine. We in LA would welcome your constructive suggestions on improvements and standards. Having run 16 conventions over 9 years, we still don't know it all. ORIGINS is a convention for the entire hobby and not a scam convention trying to soak the attendees. However, in trying to make this a point of concern, you talk about yourself being due more money in terms of "rampant greed". And your last sentence mentions your company attending GENCON where in dwells an "El Dorado of money clutching munchkins." Really got a good feeling in your wallet, er "heart" for your loyal customers, eh Dave? I mean, couldn't someone look at that line and question your integrity, your purpose and your scam potential? Words can cut both ways Dave, and a wise editor chooses them carefully. Keep in touch

Gary E. Smith
Financial Officer
LA ORIGINS 86

[I had originally planned a long and involved response to this letter. I suspect that the letter and the article to which it is responding speak for themselves, but there are a few points I'd like to clear up. For more discussion of this topic you might look up my article in the current issue of ALARMS & EXCURSIONS.]



One thing to make clear at the outset is that I do support LA ORIGINS and hope that it will be a success and brings ORIGINS the national status which has eluded it to date. I'm not going to go deeply into my qualifications as a convention reviewer. It is sufficient to say that I have attended over 50 and been involved in organizing over a dozen. I do apologize for making that Memphis/Knoxville error. However, if another site was not considered then one should have been, and it makes the whole choice of sites somewhat suspect. An election with one candidate doesn't exactly characterize democracy. I would have loved to have been at the meeting to participate in the choice of locations, but I was running a seminar at the time, something I suspect will not be happening at LA ORIGINS.

Comments on the failure of ORIGINS '81 were based on reaction immediately after the convention from acquaintances who are part of that core of 800-1000 people who travel to ORIGINS wherever it may be. They didn't like ORIGINS '81, and as far as I could tell that was their opinion from the moment they returned from the convention, as I spoke to several of them within a week of the convention.

The comments here on the relative effort of convention organizers and seminar organizers makes it clear to me that Gary has as little familiarity with seminars, which seem not to be part of the West Coast convention experience, as he mistakenly thinks I have with convention management. I suspect that his estimates of time required to manage and set-up a large convention are quite a bit too low, as he is probably finding out at this very moment. Our preparation time for the slate of six seminars we would have run for ORIGINS this year would have been about 4 to 8 hours for each of the panel members (3 to 5 people) plus additional preparation time (say 8 hours per seminar) for visual aids (slide shows, handouts, etc). There would also be some expense involved in preparing these aids. The main point I wanted to make about seminars, however, is not how long it takes us or how much work it is for the con staff, but that the effort we and other seminar givers go to is not worth it if it is a money losing proposition. It need not make a profit, but it takes time and effort to give attendees a seminar worth going to, something which is educational and informative, not just game companies plugging their wares. From what I have seen, this sort of promotional seminar

is all too common and should not result in any sort of reward other than publicity, but something like our audio-visual presentation on 'Siege Warfare and Medieval Fortifications' which had over 100 attendees at ORIGINS '82 is a major undertaking of real value to gamers and an effort worth rewarding. Our seminars feature legitimate, professional historians and game designers speaking in fields in which they are expert, quality and effort worth at least some reward considering the great expense of such things as travel and lodging which seminar fees only ameliorate slightly.

From things I've learned recently, I suspect that part of Gary's misunderstanding stems from the fact that LA ORIGINS plans to charge a single fee for the entire convention this year, an interesting change from the past, and something which makes the sort of events which I was particularly concerned with rather unlikely administratively. Traditionally ORIGINS has had a basic fee for the convention which covered staff efforts and expenses and then there were added fees for events earmarked specifically for the cost of the facilities for those events and at least in part for the people running the events. With a single fee, the idea of an independently contracted event goes right out the window, as almost every event will have to be under the direct control of the convention management, a far more unwieldy system which seems to keep prices down but severely limits selection and variety for the attendees. Under this sort of single fee I can see how you Gary might think it unfair to pay seminar givers, as it would be impossible to estimate their fair take out of a fee paid generically for the convention. In fact, a general fee really is no savings for the attendee, because they are paying for a full slate of events even when they may only want to attend one or two, not typical, but possible. I know that at past ORIGINS I've spent most of my time in open gaming and rarely attended more than 4 events. So, if the entry fee were \$15 and events cost \$2 or so each, a person could play in 5 events, plus demos, dealer room and open gaming for \$25, roughly equivalent to what the average attendee would get involved in for a flat \$25 fee. I realize that it is too late to change to this system which has been used at previous ORIGINS, but it will be interesting to compare the results this year with this tried and true system. Since I've moved west I've come into contact with lots of single-fee conventions, which seem to be a western phenomenon, and I have found them to be universally dissatisfactory, offering an extremely limited selection of events because they rely entirely on the sponsoring group for a pool of talent, so that only the game interests of that group are represented, not really giving a fair selection to attendees. A perfect example of this can be seen in WARCON at Texas A&M, which has been becoming more and more inbred as time has gone by, with a corresponding decrease in attendance and involvement so that there is some question as to whether it will continue after this year.

I do want to make clear that I really don't think that ORIGINS is becoming "a money-hungry, scam convention," and I think that this will be particularly true of ORIGINS this year in LA, which I suspect will be run with earnest integrity, though I doubt it will have the depth and breadth of events featured in previous years, because few if any long term event runners like WMFCS, who have run about a dozen tournaments at each of the last 3 East Coast ORIGINS or ourselves will be participating, except perhaps as gamers or solely to sell products and run purely promotional events.

I encourage ABYSS readers to attend LA ORIGINS and I hope that through your participation and the earnest efforts of DTI and the ORIGINS staff it will achieve the success which, so far, it has only been able to find in Baltimore.--DFN]

Dear Mr. Nalle,

Just a few words of comment on ABYSS

#35.

Well, to start with, it was not at all what I expected when I first pulled

it out of the package. I guess I was looking for something more along the lines of DRAGON or WHITE DWARF, so I guess my first impression wasn't too good. I had thoughts like, is this all I get for two dollars?; it's so small, and there's no color. Let me say though that the more I read the more I liked, so that my first impression proved to be wrong. Although the format is not the large and flashy type the real product, the articles, are generally good quality, interesting material.

I was especially impressed by the article On Golem Construction, by Don and Rosemary Webb. It was filled with a great deal of very useful information and innovative ideas and the way it was presented was very imaginative.

I also received a lot of enjoyment from the short story 'The Eye of Odin' and found the articles on 'Totems' and the section of game reviews in 'In the Speculum' to be pretty interesting reading.

What I found I liked the least was the quality, or lack, of the illustrations throughout the issue. These are poor to terrible and some are barely perceptible as to subject. My other gripe is the small print. It is almost unreadable when first encountered but after a while I got used to it and I do realize that it allows for a great deal more words per page. So I guess that is some justification. But it doesn't lessen the eye strain.

On the subject of illustrations, have you ever considered running an ad in ABYSS soliciting amateur art and offering, say, a free copy of the ABYSS in which the artist's work is published? Who knows what might be discovered.

Well, I've rambled on long enough, so that'll be all for now.

John Vanella
An Interested Gamer
Rivendale, GA

[Well, as you may have noticed, he print this issue is 20% larger than in previous issues. I also hope that this expansion will contribute to a general improvement in the appearance of the art and magazine in general. Speaking of art, we will gladly accept it, from amateurs or professionals, and unless they insist, we will do better than give them free copies. Art is paid for in cash, as noted on the opening page, and we will also send a free copy of the issue in which it appears. A few artists are working with us regularly now, but what we have found for the most part is that most of the art which we get just isn't good enough to use, though we are always glad to offer constructive suggestions even if we don't use the art.--DFN]

Dear ABYSS Staff,
Yet another chapter in the saga of ABYSS comments comes. As a whole ABYSS #36 was a fairly good issue. 'Conjurings' had the usual drivel, though I think I'll send in seven bucks instead of ten for my renewal, guys. As for the piece 'Magik' by Dave Harrgrave, I thought (and I'll try to be a gentleman like he asked) it was pretty useless. Most GMs know everything as to magic sharing in campaigns already. Why not use this space to give us new spells or magic items to use in our campaigns. African Cults' was fairly good, and for the most part it was something we could use in our campaigns, unlike 'Magic'. In the Speculum was far too large. I hate reviews. You did far too many. Cut the

reviews to about five per issue. The space could be better used. 'Revenge in Rio' at least had a good map. 'Seabone Encounters' wins the Golden Succubus Award for best article in ABYSS #36. Eric Olson is becoming my favorite contributor more and more. This was an excellent and useful piece by Mr. Olson. You ought to sell posters of this guy! Seriously, I was thinking that marketing something like pins with Cranford art and a catchy saying to promote ABYSS would be great! Also, how about a little space set aside called something like 'Wizard's Corner', to give us five new magic items or spells per issue. Also, start selling Adventures from the ABYSS again. I desperately want a copy of this. Until next time, I bid you peace and happiness.

John Green
Chicago, IL

[Another letter from our most active letter writer. To answer his questions for this issue. We do have copies of Adventures from the ABYSS available for \$3.95 each, with all the adventures from issues 1-22 of ABYSS featured, though limited copies are available. Also planned for release fairly soon is Tales from the ABYSS including much of the humor and fiction from early issues of ABYSS. I'm afraid we're not just going to publish lists of spells and magic items in ABYSS, though we did do that in some early issues. We may begin to feature articles from time to time which include such things, but random, unconnected collections of magic items and spells wear awfully thin rather quickly. For an example of how we'd prefer to deal with this sort of material see 'The Art of the Practical Artificer' coming in next issue.--DFN]

Ysgarth

A Revolution in Role-Playing

Ysgarth is a world of magic and fantastic powers, embodied in a game system which has been developed and tested over half a dozen years, growing to meet the needs of imaginative players who want to be creative without artificial restrictions. The rules emphasize role-playing and character development leaving lots of freedom for player and game master. Ysgarth is realistic yet surprisingly simple so you can create a real character in a believable fantasy world. Ysgarth is a revolution in role-playing.

Ysgarth comes complete in three books. *RoleCraft* covers character generation, skills and combat with all the basic mechanics and over 200 skills fully described. *SpellCraft* examines magic and religion with 500 magical skills and spells fully described, complete rules for spell casting and details on over 200 religions, magic guilds and colleges. *WorldCraft* provides guidelines for world design, campaign set-up, and background with a large selection of adventures, characters and creatures.

Each book sells for \$5.95, but the complete set can be ordered for only \$15. *RoleCraft* and *SpellCraft* will be sent immediately and *WorldCraft*, which is still in production, will be sent as soon as it is available. This price is only available through the mail and the price for the complete boxed edition, to be released later this year, will be considerably higher. Order now and find out how fantastic role-playing can be.

New Adventure Modules

Looking for adventure? We offer a large selection of adventure modules which emphasize imaginative role-playing and original situations at a very reasonable price. All of our modules include statistics for use with several popular fantasy systems. We currently have more than 20 modules in print, suited to a variety of different playing levels.

Each module is only \$3, with postage, or you can get 4 for \$10. The newest are:

- Street Shadows** (1st-4th levels): innocent yokels discover how cruel a city can be.
- Dark Waters** (2nd-6th levels): a city adventure of murder and magic.
- Black Altars** (2nd-6th levels): religious intrigue and betrayal in the city of Ptolemais.
- Hit of Binasmia** (5th-8th levels): adventure among the rebels of eastern Ichnasa.
- Rivermasters of Arantia** (6th-9th levels): take a dangerous voyage up the River Kare.
- Raiders of the Desert** (1st-3rd levels): danger and treachery in the Dast-al-kibbar.
- Citadel of Zushnar** (6th-12th levels): discover the legacy of a demented king.
- Challenge of the Toymaker** (8th-16th levels): feel the vengeance of a mad archmage.

Send for a free catalog and detailed listing of other modules, games and aids, from:

RAGNAROK ENTERPRISES
1402 21st St. NW
Washington, DC 20036

MONDO COMBAT

CARL JONES

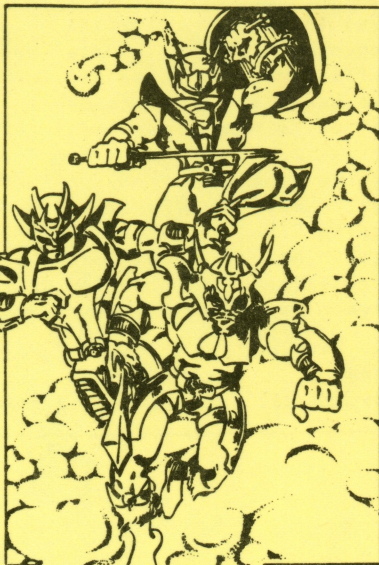
As we all know, Ysgarth is an orgasmically wonderful game system, especially in the new edition which is in the process of being released. But, guess what, there is a problem with combat in Ysgarth, something which anyone who plays in an extended campaign will soon be painfully aware of.

In Ysgarth, experience inevitably leads to the increase of a character's ability with various skills. If a character is predominantly oriented towards combat, this means that after some 35 adventures he will be fairly impressive, with something like 350 skill points to spend on combat skills. With skill benefits on a fairly standard weapon this means that he has the potential to have at least one combat statistic well over 100. Since the system was clearly designed to work best with characters who are about half this level of power, this implies some problems. For example, such a character will probably be able to hit a beginning character with every blow in almost any area of the body he chooses, while chances are that character will be powerless against him. Of course, experienced characters should be better than neophytes, but in long term Ysgarth campaigns this may become exaggerated. Skillful application of Activity Points can increase this disparity and with even higher power characters it becomes truly terrifying. I understand that in the original Ysgarth campaign where ancient characters have been converted and updated there are retired characters with combat stats in the thousands. Naturally, retiring such characters is a solution to this problem, but that need not be the only option.

The problem of this disparity of combat statistics can be solved fairly simply by bringing the stats of widely divergent foes closer together, while maintaining the relative proportions of their abilities. Since the Ysgarth combat scales are ideally suited to a range of no more than 50 points between opposing combat statistics, the key is to bring these stats into that range. Mechanically, there are several ways that this problem could be solved. The easiest is to establish some common divisor and then divide all combat statistics in that combat by it. One easy way to do this and keep things in proportion is to total up the Attack Ratings and Defense Ratings of both of the characters in the combat and divide this total by 100. This number is the Combat Divisor and is then used to reduce all Attack and Defense Ratings of both combatants. This will bring those ratings into a range where it will be possible to hit at least some of the time, however great the disparity. Keep in mind that this reduction should be applied to each character's functioning AR and DR with levels of skill taken into consideration, but not AP spent for actions other than a standard cost attack and defense. Thus, after the reduction is made, AP use can increase the modified AR or DR. This sort of adjustment makes combat a bit more equitable without any permanent penalty for either character. Keep in mind that in mixed combats where ARs and DRs range widely this may have to be adjusted and applied somewhat more loosely.

This is not the only difficulty in Ysgarth combat under the new system. Another sort of problem arises when Activity Point damage is taken into account in combat. Now, as is noted in the rules, AP damage should not be worried about in mass combat or in combat of limited significance, but when it comes to a duel between player characters or a major encounter, AP damage and how it effects you can make all the difference. The problem here is that AP damage can be so crippling in some cases that it gives an outrageous advantage to certain types of weapons and attack styles. Fortunately, this problem is easy to fix. It can be solved by taking into account a realistic factor which has been somewhat overlooked in the rules. Just as armor and shields absorb damage and AP damage, a person's body can absorb AP damage as well as normal damage, so that there should be a certain level of AP damage which a character can withstand without actually losing AP and suffering corresponding restrictions. This AP buffer can work best when based on the character's Size Class. The buffer should be equal to the SC times a rating for the type of weapon hitting the character, that being 3 for Club weapons, 2 for Edged weapons and 1 for Point weapons. Thus, a character with a 13 SC would absorb the first 39 points of AP damage from each blow from a Club weapon which hits him. This buffer reduction applies to each and every blow which the character takes. While this tends to work against the normal multipliers for AP damage, major blows can still overwhelm this buffer, which is static. The use of this system tends to eliminate those combats between powerful characters which consist of an exchange of mighty blows, followed by several rounds of recovery before another equally futile exchange.

I've found both of these modifications to the basic Ysgarth system to be quite useful in my campaign, making it possible to play low and high power characters together and making duelling combat situations run a bit better. The adjustments are easy enough to make and I hope that any campaign will benefit from them.



FREE LISTING FOR YOUR CLUB OR YOUR GAMING GROUP.

If you play role-games
other than TSR,
we offer a contact service.

Send the address and phone number
of your club, group representative,
and/or referee/GM to:

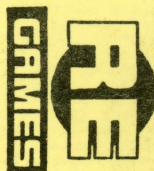
National Role-Playing Alliance
1079 Arkwright
St. Paul, MN 55101

RAGNAROK ENTERPRISES: NEW PRODUCT ORDER FORM

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	AVAIL	COST	NUMB
Abyss (6 issues)	Magazine	----	\$7.00	_____
London by Night	Victorian/Mystery/RPG Aid	----	\$6.95	_____
Challengers	Complete Superhero RPG	----	\$6.95	_____
Rivermasters	New large format adventure/AD&D-Ysg	----	\$3.95	_____
Chal of Toymaker	New large format adventure/AD&D-Ysg	----	\$3.95	_____
Dark Waters	New large format adventure/AD&D-Ysg	Jun	\$3.95	_____
Ysgarth Book I	Fantasy RPG/Characters & Combat	----	\$5.95	_____
Ysgarth Book II	Fantasy RPG/Magic & Religion	May	\$5.95	_____
Ysgarth Book III	World Design/Background/Adventures	Jul	\$5.95	_____
Ysgarth Set	Get books as available, save bucks	----	\$15.00	_____
Siege & Fortress	Complete RPG aid on medieval warfare	Jun	\$4.95	_____
Uttgart Worldbook	Complete RPG background & adventures	Aug	\$4.95	_____

Your Name _____
 Street _____ Apt# _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____

TOTAL ORDER _____
 RAGNAROK ENTERPRISES
 1402 21st St. NW
 Washington, DC 20036



RAGNAROK ENTERPRISES
 3212 Red River #109
 Austin, TX 78705