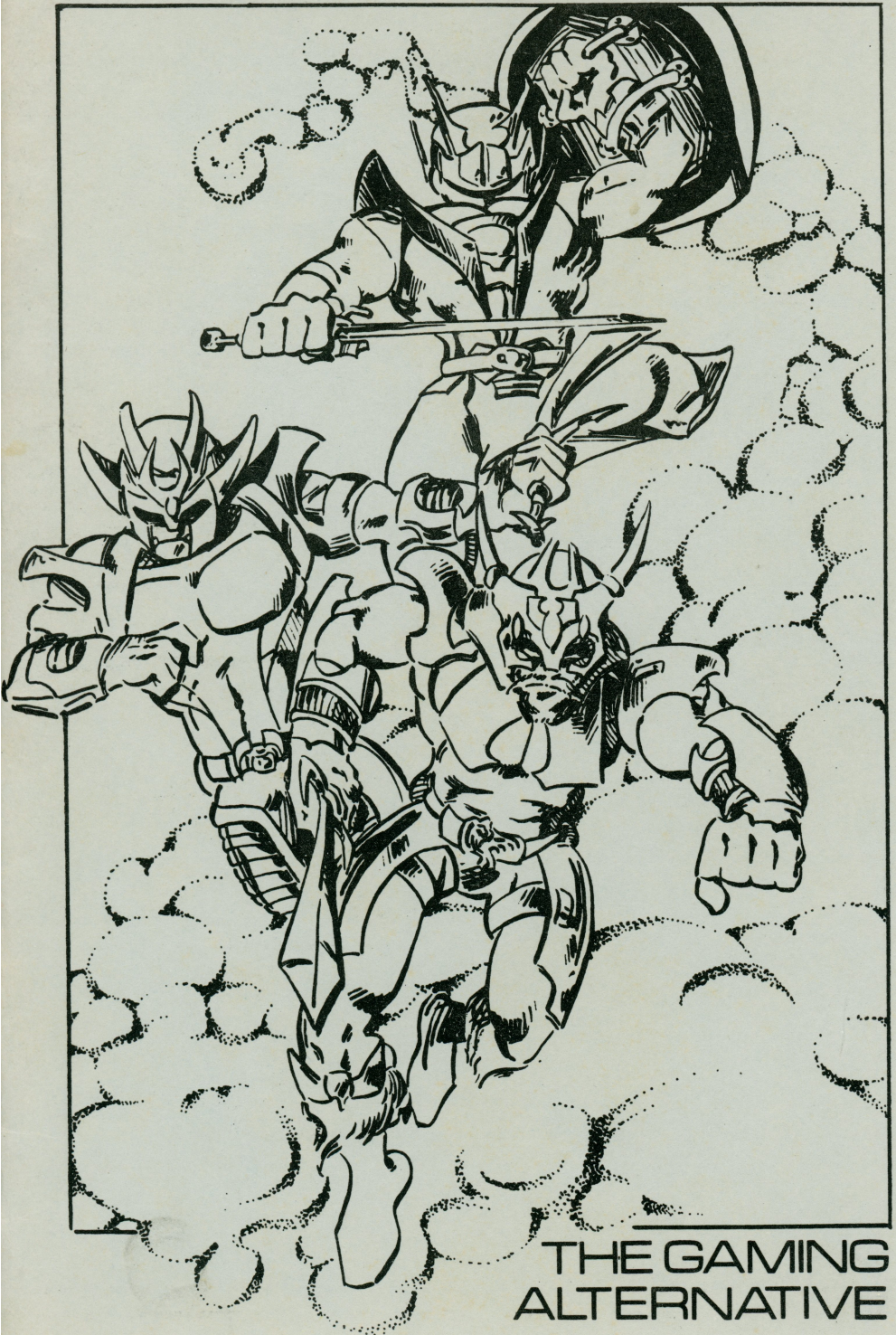


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THE GAMING
ALTERNATIVE

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CONJURINGS

Oh, the trials of editing this bizarre little magazine. It is frustrating sometimes to be working on a project like ABYSS which takes a great deal of time and effort, results in a pretty good product, and leads to little recognition or exposure and hardly attracts the breadth of readership I'd like to think our efforts justify. Admittedly, ABYSS is the largest and most circulated magazine of its type in the US, but that really isn't saying much when the munchkinoid hordes continue to read DRAGON and there is little we can do to tear them away.

I don't want to take up this space talking about discouragement and frustration, but I owe some sort of explanation to you readers who stick with ABYSS through good and bad times and don't always get everything which you deserve from the magazine. This issue is late. All issues are eternally fated to be late. That seems to be the way. This issue has larger type, but then it also seems to be a little thinner. This is a trade-off we decided was necessary so that we could have #40 out before the end of the year and thus produce a semi-respectable number of issues in this volume of the magazine.

It is easy to promise to do better in the future. Promises are far easier to make than to fulfill. I face a large number of responsibilities, and though I'm getting some admirable aid from various people, there are several major Ragnarok projects demanding attention, a dissertation and oral exams to complete for my PhD, and the eternal need to earn a living, something I can do with ABYSS and Ragnarok only in my dreams.

No, no, no...this orgy of depression is not leading up to an announcement that ABYSS is folding. No magazine which is about to celebrate its 40th issue should be allowed to fold, whatever the circumstances. All this is just to make you feel sorry for me so that you'll put up with the vagaries of our irregular schedule and stay with us as we continue to try to bring you the best in progressive gaming.

To that end, you'll find this issue devoted to all sorts of strange stuff. This is sort of a news and hardware issue of ABYSS. In this issue you'll find reviews of GENCON and ORIGINS from this summer, an editorial on GAMA growing out of events this summer, a special look at the comics scene, some of our usual features and a selection of short but interesting articles on various themes, plus an unusually long 'In the Speculum' section. I want to offer a special welcome to Ian Hense, our new contributing editor, and the editor of NIGHTDREAMS magazine, who offers two pieces of wisdom this issue. The composition of this issue is a little different from usual, with more news and reviews, but we hope that variety pleases you and that you'll tell us what you think of it. The next issue will follow a very different course.

As for next issue, it is still a bit of a mystery, but expect the return of Lew Bryson after a long hiatus and the return of Eric Olson after a whole single issue without his august presence. We also have some fiction lined up and possibly yet another article on mythology, unless we get a significant number of protest letters.

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ART THIS ISSUE

Peter Chen: Front Cover, 3, 17, 21, 22

DREAM AND NIGHTMARE

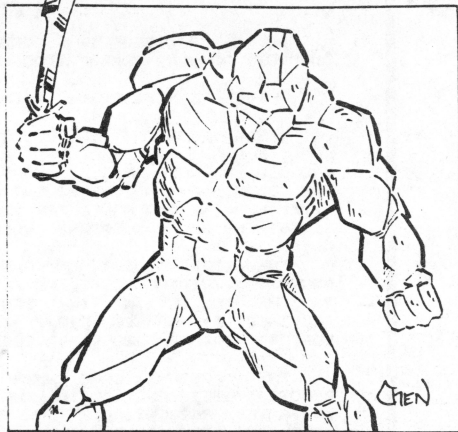
JOHN DAVIES

Conscientious gamemasters will do everything in their power to make their worlds as real as possible. Yet very few of them pay more than passing attention to the events and activities in their world for one third of every day. In most good campaigns the waking world is well detailed, but few give equal attention to the world of dream and nightmare in which characters travel for the eight hours that they are asleep. This is a great pity, for a well-developed dream world offers interesting possibilities for adventure and dreams can have a profound effect on the actions of characters in the real world. Puck says much about the nature of fantasy when he says "we are such stuff as dreams are made of." It is true that much of the most fantastic in literature takes place in the shadow realm between waking and sleeping where only dreams are real.

There are main two uses to which dreams can be put most effectively in a fantasy campaign. The first is for the GM to use dreams as a means of guiding a character, essentially using nightmare images to act as a conscience for that character. Dreams are the mirror of the soul, and the GM can use dreams to show a player flaws in the soul of a character. The second use is more direct, to make the dream a place where events happen and actions can be undertaken, essentially a second world which touches the minds of dreamers but has no direct contact with physical reality.

Characters often develop a disregard for the rights of others and fall into a pattern of committing crimes without realizing the significance of their actions to those who are effected. Nightmares are an excellent way to bring a player to awareness of the error of a character's ways and the internal tensions which that character may be experiencing. If crimes are recapped in terrifying dreams, if victims haunt the perpetrator in his sleep, he should become aware of his transgressions, and while it may not put an end to such activity it can make the player more aware of the consequences of his actions. Characters are as real in their world as we are in this one, and when one is involved in tension and conflict, fears and anxieties are expressed in the dreams which the subconscious serves up. By making use of these dreams the GM can give the player a more complete perspective on the motivations and fears of his character.

The adventuring potential of the dream world is a but more touchy. To start with, dreams are an ideal way for some spirits, entities and gods to contact mortals fairly subtly to pass on instructions and advice or to cause trouble or unease. While dreams are fine as a source of information and inspiration, an ambitious GM might want to add an interactive element to dreams, populating the dream world with beings



native to that world who seek to expand their power and influence in the real world through domination of the sleeping mind. Each person should have a dream self which travels out each night into the dream world as he sleeps. In that world he can have encounters, adventures and even die. If he should die in the dream world his body will be left without a soul at dawn, essentially dead as well. The dream world can be thought of as another plane, but it is one which anyone can enter with some ease, and the laws which govern in the dream world are different from those of the real world, often determined by subjective rather than objective standards.

I have made the most of the possibilities of the dream world in my campaign by creating several powerful beings who rule over different aspects of dreams and their world. Each of these lords rules over a particular sort of dream and is responsible for sending those dreams to the appropriate recipients. In addition, the dream world is populated by creatures which serve these dream lords and which may be encountered by characters who enter their world. It is possible to wander in your dreams, to enter into the realms of the dream lords and to find adventure there. With the addition of appropriate dream-related magic you can have more control over the course of dreams and be better prepared to deal with the perils of the dream world, or even take on one of the dream lords if you are ambitious. With a little inventiveness it is possible to run entire campaigns which take place in the dreams of the characters involved. This sort of approach raises dreams to the high level of significance which was assigned to them in primitive and medieval cultures.

Everyone spends a third of their day asleep, and it is possible to make that sleep time more than just a period of unconsciousness by bringing the world of dream and nightmare to life to the benefit of the characters and your campaign. With some caution the gamemaster should be able to people his dreams with all manner of fantastic creatures born out of the fears of the characters in his world and make venturing into the dream realm a harrowing and enriching aspect of role-playing.

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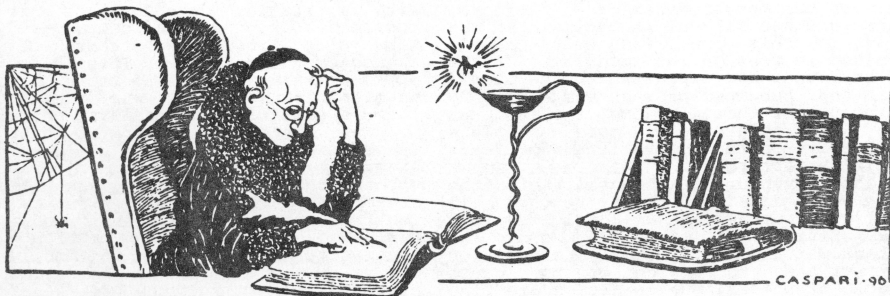
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THE CURE FOR AD&D'S ILLS

CARL JONES

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons is a marvelously detailed and popular game system, but some players may find elements awkward, restrictive and unnecessarily complicated. The truth is, as I've learned in several long-term campaigns, that AD&D can work as well or better with some simple adjustments which reduce complexity and add mechanical realism in areas which some gamers find lacking. Such system modifications are called 'variants', and used to be standard fare in DRAGON magazine, but recent editorial policy seems to have banned all but variant character classes. To answer this problem I have put together the simplest and best variants I know of into a single set of guidelines which can convert AD&D from an ungainly dodo to a beautiful hawk with little pain, while retaining the best elements and flavor of the standard game.

Two of the most important elements which AD&D lacks to make it competitive with more modern role-playing systems are a skill system and a realistic spell-casting system. There are also a number of worthwhile smaller adjustments which can be made to bring it up to date while keeping it essentially the same game.

In the area of character creation a point-allocation system is a good place to start. This sort of set-up allows the player to choose what his character's starting stats will be, within some limitations, rather than depending on a random die roll. Basically the player should have 60+2D6 points to distribute between his STR, CON, DEX, INT, WIS and CHA. To keep this somewhat balanced you might want to limit the number of stats of 18 or more, or require that at least 25 of the points go into the three physical stats and at least 25 into the other three stats, with the remainder distributed freely. In this system, if a player wants a stat to be higher than 18, he pays 2 for the first step over 18, 4 for the next, 8 for the next, 16 for the next, etc.

AD&D Hit Points tend to be a pretty random factor, but this is pretty easy to fix as well, while bringing starting characters and experienced characters a bit closer together. Keep the various die types the same by character class, but instead of rolling for HP, start out with the maximum for that die at first level. At second level you get Die-1. At third level you get Die-2. This pattern carries on until the modified die value is 1. From that point on the character gets 1HP per level. The CON bonus on Hit Die adds directly to the original value of the die before making these successive reductions.

A skill system is surprisingly easy to add to AD&D. Each character has a fund of Skill Points to spend on skills and he gains these with each level he advances. These Skill Points are equal to $(WIS+INT+Prime\ Requisite)/2$ to start, and he gains half that amount with each level he advances. Pretty much anything a person can do is considered to be a skill. If a character needs a skill, suggest it to the GM and if he approves it the character can learn it. This leaves things pretty open, but gives the GM lots of options. Skills break down into three types, In-Class Skills, Out-Class Skills and Non-Class Skills. The first group consists of those skills which the GM determines belong to the character class of the particular character you are playing. These cost 2SP to learn. Out-Class

Skills are those belonging specifically to some other character class. These cost 4SP to learn. Non-Class Skills are those belonging to no particular character class. These cost 3SP to learn regardless of who is learning them. You can use your SP to buy multiple skills or to buy additional levels of skill with particular skills, making you more proficient. A level of skill increases a percentage chance with that skill by a set amount. In the case of weapon skills each level of skill with a given weapon adds one to your chance to hit with that weapon and each level of skill with a defensive technique adds one to your effective Level against attacks. The rate of increase of your percentage with a skill depends on the appropriate characteristic, which should be assigned to that skill by the GM. With no levels in the skill your percentage chance is equal to the characteristic which applies. With the second level your additional percentage chance is equal to Characteristic-1. With the second skill level you add Characteristic-2. This reduction carries on until you reach a value of 1, which is then added for each additional level. Keep in mind that the GM can assign other functions to levels in special skills and that the GM may wish to increase the costs of certain more difficult skills appropriately. These percentages replace the characteristic class ability percentages and weapon proficiencies, allowing more flexibility to the characters. For example, Burdo the Thief has 18SP at first level. This would allow him to buy as many as 9 levels of Silent Movement (his favorite skill) at a cost of 2 each, because it is in his character class. With 9 levels and a DEX of 16, his percentage chance of moving silently would be $16+15+14+13+12+11+10+9+8=108\%$. It is okay to have percentages over 100%, because if the situation is particularly difficult the GM may want to reduce the percentage chance accordingly.

The other aspect of the system which needs particular attention is spell casting. A simple, reliable system can make all the magic using classes much more enjoyable to play and places some realistic limits on magic use, which can get seriously out of hand at higher levels. The best way to do this is to establish a Spell Point system, and contrary to traditional variants, you don't need to completely restructure the nature of magic use in AD&D in order to do this. The 'Vancian' model for magic will work quite well and can be interfaced with a good skill system. A character's Spell Points are equal to the total of the levels of all of the spells he could normally have on the standard charts. Thus, if he got 3 level 1 spells, 2 level 2 spells and 1 level 3 spell he would get $3 \times 1 + 2 \times 2 + 1 \times 3 = 10$ Spell Points. In learning spells he would have to devote a portion of his total SP to each spell learned, so if he learned a 3rd level spell that would knock 3 off his available SP. A character with 10SP could learn 10 1st level spells, 1 10th level spell or anything inbetween. Spells can be learned from books or from memory. A spell can be learned from memory exactly as if it were a skill within the group of skills for the character's class, costing 2 per Skill Level. At the start of each day a character has his full SP free to work with. At any time during that day he may use those SP with written or learned spells, but if he uses written spells he must familiarize himself with those spells before casting them, and he may not familiarize himself with more spells than whose levels add up to his total SP. If he has learned spells he can leave his SP unassigned until he needs them, but if he is working from a book, he will have to pre-assign SP to specific spells which are temporarily memorized. If a spell is learned there is no time delay when it is used. If a spell is written, it should take $\text{Spell Level} \times 5$ minutes to ready it, because it is not as familiar. The character's percentage with a spell, used as a skill, is the chance of successfully casting that spell from memory. When a spell is cast, the SP for that spell are subtracted from the total SP, and SP regenerate fully every night as the character sleeps. Regardless of

how a spell is learned, there is only a limited chance of success when casting it. This percentage chance is equal to $50 = ((\text{Character Level} - \text{Spell Level}) \times 5)\%$. If he makes this roll the spell works fine, but if the roll is failed something appropriately bizarre and horrible should happen at the discretion of the GM. Note that this percentage chance system allows characters to cast spells higher than their own level, and this is also possible with the Spell Point system, though doing so might be difficult and limiting. Also note that if the GM desires it, the skill system makes it possible for persons who are not mages to learn and cast spells as well, though in such cases the spells must be learned, not cast from a book and they would be treated as out-class skills with a cost of 4 per Skill Level.

These are some small and fairly simple modifications which can be applied to almost any good AD&D campaign. All of these modifications are mechanical in orientation and fairly easy to implement, but there are far more complicated and far-reaching changes which can be implemented in the area of world design to make your campaign more real and believable than the average AD&D world. Perhaps that will be the topic of another article. The potential of AD&D is virtually unlimited, so long as you are willing to give up some of the tradition and strike out on your own. Make use of these variants and perhaps they will open the way for you to develop others which are specifically suited to the type of campaign you want to run.

THE PLUG ZONE

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

Despite their unmeasurable popularity when first published there are some back-issues of ABYSS which we printed a few too many copies of. We're tired of these babes sitting around the office, so here's a special deal designed to get them gone and into your hands as quickly as possible.

For a limited time you can get copies of issues 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35 and 36 at greatly reduced prices. Your first three copies are only \$1.50 each. The next three are even cheaper at \$1.25 each. The next three are at a record low price of \$1.00 each and any copies after that are only \$.75 (that's right, 75 cents). This means you could get all 14 issues, a \$28 value, for a mere \$15, almost half off.

Each of these issues contains all sorts of interesting and innovative material from the frontiers of gaming, including game variants, fiction, reviews, background pieces, mythologies and adventures. Most material is generally suited to a wide variety of role-playing games. There are also specific items for AD&D, Call of Cthulhu, RuneQuest, Arduin, Champions and other popular game systems. ABYSS has a history of offering the best in gaming from a fresh perspective and now you can cash in on that tradition.

In addition, if you take advantage of this offer you can also order a subscription to ABYSS or renew an existing subscription at the special rate of \$7 for 6 issues or \$13 for 12 issues. ABYSS is still going strong and new subscriptions will start with #40, the first issue of 1987.

ON THE FRONTIER

RagnarOK is gaining momentum as it enters 1987 with three exciting winter releases which you can order now for delivery at the end of January.

Black Altars is the 7th adventure in the 'Ysgarth Adventure Series', part of the second series set in the city of Ptolemeias. It is designed for mid-level characters who become involved in religious infighting and intrigue. The design of the scenario is exceptionally intricate and allows for multiple courses and adventure options. Black Altars is in our new large-sized format and sells for only \$3.95. A subscription to the adventure series is \$10 for 4 adventures.

SpellCraft is the long-awaited second book of the new edition of Ysgarth. It features over 500 new skills and spells plus complete rules for the most realistic and believable magic system ever designed, a system which will convince you that magic could be real. SpellCraft is \$5.95 by itself or can be ordered with RoleCraft and the soon to be completed WorldCraft for \$15.

Kamp Killjoy is the series of card/strategy games, a sequel to Suburban Slasher. It features 96 cards, including Killers, Victims and weapons peculiar to the sylvan setting of movies like 'Friday the 13th'. Kamp Killjoy is \$6.95, or you can get a combines set with Suburban Slasher for \$11.95.

All of these prices include postage. Orders will be shipped by the most efficient means available. For more information send an SASE for a free catalog of all of our products plus an order form.



IN THE SPECULUM

IMAZINE
 Stone & Williams: 74 Grosvenor Rd.,
 Coventry, CV1 3FZ, ENGLAND
 APP:6 CON:4 VAL:6 PER:8 OVE:6

I recently picked up copies of this British fanzine at a recent convention. I have no idea how they got there and they are not the most recent issues, but I suspect that IMAZINE is still around and it is certainly worth checking out. The most recent issue I have is #13. It has 36 half-size pages and is done by fairly cheap xerox, but with interesting art and the occasional inspired presentation, though on the whole the look is sort of jumbled. The editors are D. L. Stone and M. John Williams and you can probably get a copy by sending \$2 or so to the address above, or you might query first to find out more.

IMAZINE has many of the characteristics of British games fanzines, with a smattering of traits which seem to be borrowed from the SF/Fantasy fan tradition. What becomes clear quickly on reading IMAZINE is that this is a serious effort. Not that it is universally serious in tone, but in the tradition of DRAGONLORDS it takes gaming seriously and approaches it from a mature perspective. This issue opens up with a rather acidic editorial attacking WHITE DWARF, the gaming industry and the former editor. Previous issues feature even more vicious editorials, including one which refers to someone as "a barfi-brained little turd with abs much tact as a buffalo's fart." IMAZINE doesn't mince words, and much of the content is opinion on the state of gaming, generally from a pretty radical perspective. The editors seem to be pursuing some sort of 'New Wave' of role-playing, striking out against the slump of conventionality in modern role-playing, which I find a rather attractive premise. Most of the material in this issue is of the expected type, including several letters sections, an interview and some reviews. Almost everything is written by the editors and a distinctive flavor comes through in all

of it, though this issue was clearly done in the midst of a change of orientation and editorship. I enjoyed an abusive but interesting piece on 'Mythological Landscapes', though that title has very little to do with the article. I also found myself agreeing quite a bit with an article called 'Wah!' in which one of the editors explains why he no longer plays superhero games. What it comes down to is that IMAZINE is an interesting and idiosyncratic fanzine. The style and attitude are stimulating, but it would work a lot better if their railing at the establishment was validated by the presence of something useful or some attempt to solve the problems which are pointed out so well. (Dave Nalle)

...the...
 This Issue: *Imazine*
 Mythological Landscapes *Assassin*
 Steve Jackson
 Interview
 Colour Section



TROLLS

of the Misty Mountains

#8103

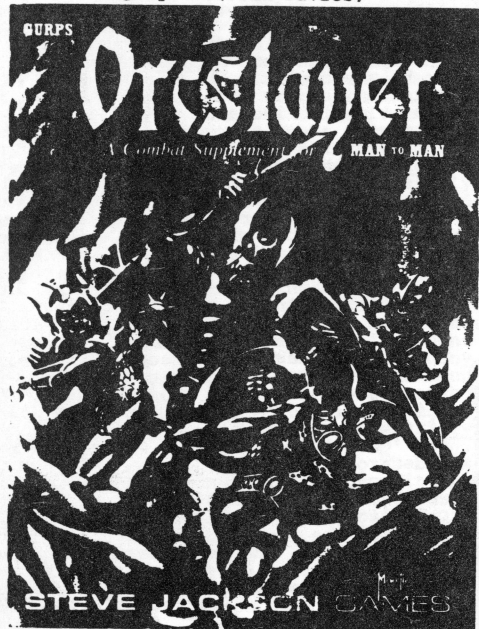
BASED UPON THE ADVENTURES OF THE LORDS OF THE RINGS™ and THE HOBBIT™ by J.R.R. TOLKIEN. Story and artwork by John & Mike Cresswell. Produced and distributed by IRON CROWN ENTERPRISES, INC.

TROLLS OF THE MISTY MOUNTAINS
 by John & Mike Cresswell
 from Iron Crown Enterprises

This is a new adventure module for Middle Earth Role-Playing. It is presented in standard module format with 32 full-sized pages, a color cover, clear print and the maps of the high quality traditional to ICE.

Trolls of the Misty Mountains is actually three adventures, all sharing a common theme and similar settings. These three scenarios are well designed but surprisingly unsophisticated, and the whole package seems aimed at younger readers. The basic organization of the adventures is good, with a core situation and some variable, designed encounters. However, all three adventures are very reward-oriented, sort of seek and find type situations, characteristic of material designed for younger players. The adventures are also rather brief and

would probably run in about 3 or 4 hours each, making the whole package a fairly slight addition to a campaign. These complaints aside, the adventures are well crafted, and while they may not present any mental challenges or great original themes, they are playable and moderately interesting. I wouldn't rush out and buy this module, but I would not have any real complaints if someone else ran it for me to play in. (John Davies)



ORCSLAYER
by Warren Spector and Steve Jackson
from Steve Jackson Games

This item is billed as 'A Combat Supplement for Man to Man, but that's a bit misleading. Admittedly, this scenario focuses on combat in different situations, but it is not so much a supplement for Man to Man, since the rules modifications are slight, as it is an adventure module for Man to Man and GURPS.

Orcslayer is 28 full-size pages plus pullout characters and maps. There is a nice color cover and the text is clear and well organized with marginal notations in addition to the basic text.

Mechanically Orcslayer offers very little new material, just enough to adjust Man to Man to the specific role-playing setting. From this brief introduction it moves directly into the scenario, which is composed of a number of sub-scenarios which can be played independently or combined into a campaign. All told there are nine scenarios, some of them more single situations than everything else, and it is pretty clear that the package would work best as an extended campaign adventure. The situations are pretty much standard fantasy fare, but they are well put together and while the general events are left fairly open-ended, the specific combat situations contain a great deal of detailed tactical information. The whole presentation is well balanced, allowing the GM a lot of freedom, while giving him useful supporting detail.

The marketing of Orcslayer strikes me as rather strange, since it is essentially a module for GURPS, but was released before GURPS was and for use with Man to Man. Of course the reason for Man to Man to exist is also a mystery, as it is virtually identical with the basic combat system of GURPS and the two were released so close to each other that they Man to Man was obsolete before it had a chance to go anywhere. Enigmatic though its origins are, Orcslayer is a good, playable adventure and should be useful to anyone who plays GURPS or Man to Man. (Dave Nalle)

SUPER AGENTS

by Aaron Allston
from Hero Games/Iron Crown Enterprises

This campaign supplement for Danger International and Champions is designed to detail the background and mechanics of a campaign oriented towards 'Super-Agents', teams of operatives who are somewhere between commandos and superheros. The book is 104 full-size pages of easy to read, well-organized text with a full color cover and a limited number of fairly functional internal illustrations.

Super Agents starts out with special rules for character creation, based around UNTIL, the organization which they use as a general example. Since characters are essentially normal humans some adjustments in rules need to be made and there are some special and modified skills added. There are also special disadvantages for this particular setting type. A far too brief section looks at the general role of special equipment, though this is dealt with in more detail in the combat section. Combat modifications are presented along with a lengthy set of lists for weapons and special function gadgets. There is a nice section on setting up a campaign for this sort of character, with some ideas for keeping it interesting, something many GMs might find somewhat difficult. Some different campaign styles are also



discussed and the Sourcebook section goes on to explore the UNTIL campaign more closely. This section is a particularly useful as a resource for the kind of world-background which can be developed and is instructive even if you don't plan to make direct use of it. Other groups are also looked at in this same background, including allied and enemy organizations. A basic scenario, 'Delta Star Delta', is provided. It is a very straightforward root out the alien spies scenario, but involves investigation as well as brute force. The book rounds out with some brief, rough ideas for other adventure scenarios.

Super Agents is a good introduction to this sort of campaign setting and should be of great assistance in giving another genre to Hero System players. My only real problem with it is that, good though the material is, the orientation is awfully straightlaced. UNTIL's world is one of strict blacks and whites, where evil is foul and dedicated agents resolutely stamp it out in a rather authoritarian environment. This set-up will work, but there could be a lot more to this sort of campaign, more depth, more tension, more shades of grey. (Dave Nalle)

of which give Spell Law some of the magical features which stand out in other successful games. The next section expands Character Law, adding the inevitable new character specializations, new racial types and going into detail on character background for the world. The emphasis on Character Law carries on in the next section, which looks in detail at equipment, including some very specialized aspects like alchemy, enchantment and poison. The following section gives a 'condensed' combat alternative, which does not solve all of the problems of Rolemaster's unwieldy combat mechanics, but gives some good alternatives for some situations. At the same time it also adds some details and intricate additions which might not be necessary in every campaign. To go with Claw Law this is followed up by a brief selection of new creatures which are not particularly distinguished and are given dismayingly cursory treatment. The next section looks at city design, with a sort of demographic breakdown of character types by population which is potentially useful, though perhaps a bit unrealistic with distressingly huge percentages of certain magic using types in given areas. There is also an interesting section on childbirth and birth defects which would be useful in an extended campaigns. The final section is sort of a catch-all for things which didn't fit into other parts of the book, including a detailed look at the 'Qabbals', a sort of combined rune and tarot system.

Because of its omnibus nature, there are some unevenness in the Rolemaster Companion, but some sections really enhance the system, particularly the magic section, and the others are yours to take or leave depending on whether or not they appeal to you. This is the sort of aid that every good, growing system needs, and I hope that ICE goes on to produce more such companions. (John Davies)

HIGHROAD

by Various Authors
from The Companions

This is the fourth in the 'Places of Mystery' series. It is the first of this series that I've laid eyes on, but hopefully not the last. It is an anthology of adventure scenarios all centered on the theme of encounters on the road. Highroad is a single 32 page book, full-sized, with a color cover. The maps and diagrams are functional but not terribly exciting. The text is clear, small letter-quality computer print mixed with computer type-setting.

There are ten adventures in Highroad. They are essentially settings and details for extended encounters to be fitted into role-playing campaigns. There are no stats provided, just descriptions of settings and events, which makes Highroad truly compatible with any role-playing system. Each of the encounters is about two pages long, with maps and pretty dense text. Descriptions are well-organized, presented from several perspectives and degrees of examination. Many of the situations are fairly standard, but it is nice to see them laid out in such a detailed format. There is a tollbridge, a river crossing, a burial ground, a sacred grove, a mountain pass and many of the other situations one expects on the road to adventure. There seems to have been strong editorial guidance so that although all of the encounters are by different authors they match up well in detail and style of



ROLEMASTER COMPANION

by R. Mark Colborn et al
from Iron Crown Enterprises

This is a real supplement in the grand tradition. It is an omnibus volume which expands the mechanics and world of Rolemaster in many directions. It is a single book, 96 pages, with small print and a smattering of illustrations plus a rather nice color cover. A lot of people seem to have worked on it, essentially writing articles as if for a magazine, which might lead one to suspect that future such companions are a possibility.

The first two sections expand on some of the aspects of Spell Law, adding spells, some magical background and some interesting magical variants. There are some really interesting ideas here, many

unfamiliar and hard to come to terms with at first, but once you get a grasp of it, it makes a really interesting campaign world, though its interest may not last forever, as with so many strictly topical games. The art, from a member of the original campaign, is a real plus, and you get a great feel for the flora and fauna of the world from his unusual, alien style and the descriptions which accompany most of the illos, many of which depict historical scenes from the world.

The authors are working to improve some of the mechanics, like the rather limited skill list, and seem to be genuinely committed to making a high quality game. If you want to see a great and convincing campaign world go and get Jorune, even if you don't plan to play it. It is a valuable resource and I think it is a potentially inspirational example of world design for any campaign which has aspirations to be more than just a hack and slash clone of traditional settings. (Dave Nalle)

PHOENIX

COMMAND



PHOENIX COMMAND

by Barry Nakazono
from Leading Edge Games

Its hard to tell where to begin talking about a game whose back cover reads: "Place the muzzle of a large calibre pistol between your character's eyes. Squeeze the trigger. Continue squeezing the trigger until he falls unconscious...Now, using Phoenix Command place the same pistol in the same place. Squeeze the trigger. You now have a choice: you can either roll up a new character or rush the body to a very sophisticated medical facility and discover the joys of role-playing a vegetable." At once, I can say 'Oh boy' and look forward to a realistic game system. At the same time I can take this attitude together with the illustration on the front cover and look forward to the joys of role-playing a high-tech Rambo. Few back cover blurbs really give a feel for a book or a game, but here we have one which is accidentally honest.

Nowhere in this blurb do they talk of personality, skills or role-playing. It is all weapons, accurate wound simulation, initiative and body armor, and for once the blurb is more than adequate in describing what is inside the box.

Phoenix Command is a really well put together package, boxed with excellent graphics and some nice four color art. The box contains the basic rules for combat and character creation in a spiral bound booklet which is really impressively laid out and designed, plus a lengthy supplement on modern small arms and what they can do. The first book is designed as a modular system to insert into any modern or near-future game system to replace mechanics which are, as the blurb pointed out so attractively, quite often unrealistic. The second book is extensive and detailed, and has all the information you would ever need to role-play Johnny Rambo.

As might be expected, character creation is very simple, with four stats on the traditional 3D6 scale, rolled, not designed. The role of skills is left very open, because this is not purely a role-playing system, and they suggest a 1 to 20 level scale for play, and indicate that the actual level should be found by the method preferred for whatever game system you are plugging Phoenix Command into. Encumbrance and movement speed, which are important to this sort of system, are determined, as are a number of other secondary combat-related characteristics. Weapons have a number of statistics, and characters are given some special appropriate stats, like Knockout Value for resisting pain, and Skill Accuracy Level. There are a very large number of statistics for each weapon, which is why they need an entire separate book to describe the weapons, as they cross-index the ammunition type by the range to determine damage, and there are some dozen pertinent stats to be considered. Various forms of armor are covered in some detail, and information on generating non-playing characters. The mechanics of combat are covered in the second major section, and they are heavily dependent on movement, tactical displays and the addition and adjustments of a great number of statistics, with standard features included like adjustments to accuracy for aim time and located damage. While the combat system is a bit slow at first, it can be gotten used to, and it is realistic, though there are an awful lot of conditional factors to be taken into consideration much of the time. The section on healing and medical aid comes next, and is well detailed and pretty realistic. In the fourth section some basic scenarios are covered, and the last section gives optional rules, which are essentially more conditional modifiers to the combat system, and which I would certainly use or ignore depending on how much I wanted to get bogged down in play. Finally there are 8 pages of charts for combat abstracted and expanded from the earlier sections. All are presented clearly, but they make clear show how over-developed this system tends to be. Many of these charts are presented again in the form of loose reference sheets in the box.

The second book of in the package is called 'Modern Military Small Arms', and that is all it is, 36 pages of weapons, nicely presented, with illustrations and all the stats needed for play in the Phoenix Command system. If you are

running a modern-period game, this would definitely be a useful resource, and with the amount of information provided a good GM could convert this to almost any game and mechanics.

As the back-cover blurb makes clear, Phoenix Command is about as realistic a modern combat system as I have seen. Every aspect of combat and related activity is covered in detail, and the mechanics are detailed and completely convincing. In fact, given their complexity, they are relatively playable. To this extent it fulfills its role as a modular mechanics package, and could easily be plugged into a game like Twilight 2000 or Recon. The question which plagues me is whether or not all this detail is really necessary. Mechanics on this scale make a game realistic, but they also tend to dominate the game, and it would have been perfectly possible to design simpler, cleaner mechanics which might have had less detail, but would still have been just as deadly and just as realistic. Realism in the result and effect of combat does not require realism in every minute detail, and a simpler system would be much more playable. As modular mechanics this should certainly appeal to those who want to make their modern RPGs believable, and to complete the package, Leading Edge has available several background aids for a science fiction setting on the world of Rhand, which is essentially a launching point for invasion and warfare at a technological level roughly equivalent to that of the modern world.

Phoenix Command is a well developed, realistic, detailed system presented and packaged rather nicely. It does what it sets out to do, but despite all this, I can only recommend it for those who place accuracy above adventure and realism above role-playing, for its pursuit of realism goes beyond the limits of practicality and its level of detail could overwhelm more subtle aspects of a campaign. (Dave Nalle)

THE PALLADIUM RPG
BOOK II: THE OLD ONES
by Kevin Siembieda
from Palladium Books

The Old Ones is a resource for use with The Palladium Role-Playing Game, the fantasy system published some years ago by the company which produces all those useful sourcebooks on weapons, armor and castles. This is a thick book of over 200 full-sized pages with a fairly attractive color cover. While it is advertised as the second book of the role-playing system, it is not actually necessary for the play of the game, and its value is not exclusively to those who play with that system, as it is very much a background oriented aid.

More than anything else, this lengthy work is an examination of the Kingdom of Timiro, a rather traditional fantasy setting which is fleshed out fairly well, but in the tradition of the original supplements to AD&D, there is an omnibus aspect to the work, with sections on two new character classes, the Monk and Illusionists, as well. The two character classes perpetuate the design problems of the original system, with their almost direct imitation of AD&D ideas and mechanics. The background section of the book is pretty well done, with fairly detailed information on eight cities and dozens of towns and forts, with useful maps and some very specific details for reference, making every setting

potentially ready for play with little required from the GM. There are also random encounter tables broken down by terrain type, descriptions of several non-urban locations of interest which would form good special encounters or elements of adventures, plus half a dozen well detailed adventures.

This is a large, detailed and clearly presented aid. Its biggest attractions are its completeness and the quality of the art, maps and descriptions. It will probably be of greatest value to players of AD&D and other fairly traditional fantasy systems which use a Tolkeinesque setting, because although it is designed for Palladium's own system, it can easily be considered totally AD&D compatible and since it is almost all background it can be easily adapted to other systems with a similar orientation. The only complaint to make about the aid is that despite all its detail and the attractiveness of the presentation, it really isn't very original or imaginative. The encounter tables are indicative of the mindset which governs here. The emphasis is more or less on a passive world. Everything is mapped out and detailed, there to be interacted with and encounters have no meaning outside of a die-roll. The creatures are the traditional types found in AD&D and many other games. The adventure situations are predictable. The adventures have dungeon-type settings and even the cities seem almost like dungeons, with their set encounters, treasures and traps. The Old Ones who held some promise, are given less attention than they might deserve and end up just being the mega-monsters for the end of the adventure series. The Old Ones has both good and bad aspects, and its value will depend on the needs of the individual gamer. If you are an AD&D player or in the traditional ruts, this might be just what you need, a well-developed source of background and adventures with the same flavor as TSR's material, but a noticeably higher level of thought and imagination. Because it is so well suited to this large audience, the body of more experienced gamers out there won't find too much they can do with The Old Ones. The situations will be tediously familiar and an experienced GM will realize that everything that is here he could have probably done himself, perhaps not as attractively, but with greater effectiveness, more originality and tailored to the needs of his system and campaign. (Jon Schuller)

TOON: SILLY STUFF
by Varney, Miller, Chase and Spector
from Steve Jackson Games

What we have here is a supplement to Steve Jackson Games first and most unusual role-playing system Toon. In most ways this is just what I like to see in a supplement. It has a variety of types of material in a compact package designed to add detail to the original game and overcome some of the mechanical limitations of the system. Silly Stuff is a 40 page full-sized booklet with a color cover and sort of zany art. The text is clearly presented and the general tone is light, in keeping with the cartoon theme of the game. Given the sort of supplement which this is, there is no reason not to expect a series of similar supplements to Toon which follow the same lines.

Sections featured in Silly Stuff include 'Places to Go', which details some potential settings for cartoon adventures, including my favorites,

presentation.

Highroad is nothing particularly profound and it is not a complete adventure by any means, but for my money it is far more useful than packaged modules, because each of the encounters is intelligent, if not incredibly exciting, and perfectly designed to be easily fitted into any kind of a game or campaign. (Mark Teller)

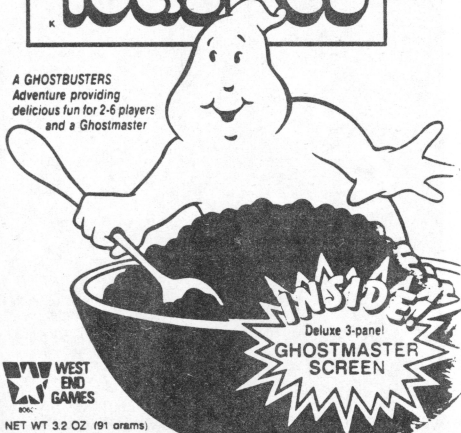
all felt forced to me and I found myself shuddering more often than laughing.

This is an adventure scenario for the kiddies, but even children like drama and conflict and this sort of pandering doesn't do credit to the potential of the theme of the game, though it is about what should be expected given the flaws of Ghostbusters itself. With a little work a good GM could make use of some of the good ideas found here, but chances are that a good GM could develop something more interesting and more sophisticated on his own. Sometimes Ghost Toasties is cute. Sometimes it is interesting. Generally it is predictable and childish. I can't really recommend it. (Jon Schuller)

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GHOST TOASTIES

by Scott Haring
from West End Games

It seems that Scott Haring and some of the other fellows at Steve Jackson Games wanted to design some Toon scenarios, but West End Games got to them first. Unfortunately, what is silly and amusing in Toon tends to become trite and offensive when coupled to a game which is more marketing than mechanics and oriented towards a juvenile audience, though I suppose that honest exploitation is better than the subversion and seduction practiced by TSR.

Ghost Toasties is 24 pages of full-sized text with small print and fairly good illustrations. There is a wraparound GM screen with an abstract of the system rules and a cover for the package which looks convincingly like a typical merchandising-inspired breakfast cereal package.

The scenario is really six separate mini-adventures in which the characters deal with individual phenomena generated by a common source. Naturally, in the last adventure they confront the source and presumably defeat it. Added to this is a fold-out of some very silly puzzles, suited to a 10 year old audience, which one must solve to return from the alien dimension where the arch-foe is faced. The situations presented in the scenario are simple, subduing and removing ghosts and other beasties. There is a rock-'em-sock-'em feel to it all, but this is belied by the GM sections of the adventures which make it clear that there really is no challenge here and the characters are always fated to succeed. There are some amusing moments, but it

FANTASY HERO

by Steve Peterson
from Hero Games

Champions is an enormously popular game, probably second only to AD&D in appeal. This means that there is a certain guaranteed market for a fantasy game from the same publishers and based on the same principle as Champions. There is a reason why Champions is so popular. It is a fairly intelligent and flexible game with, though it does have mechanical problems. However, Hero Games latest offering, Fantasy Hero is in a field where there are many more games, many of them more progressive and more playable than Champions, and it doesn't really step much beyond the limitations of the parent system to be as innovative a fantasy game as Champions was as a superhero game.

Fantasy Hero comes complete in a single book, perfect bound, in 8.5x11 format, with glossy covers and a total of about 160 pages. The text is clear and readable, charts are clearly set apart, and the art is scarce, perhaps because it is fairly amateurish, with a few exceptions by Dennis Loubet.

Fantasy Hero follows the basic mechanical model of Champions, though it has been refined a bit and adapted to the setting. Most players will be familiar with Champions, and those who aren't should be, so we'll gloss over some of the more similar areas. Character creation is by point distribution to characteristics which have multipliers and divisors to determine the cost of each stat. Some stats are based on other characteristics by fairly simple formulae. This is a flexible system, putting control in the hands of the players, but it is also somewhat awkward, arbitrary and unbalanced. Characteristics can be both lowered and raised. As with Champions powers, success with skills is based on a roll of 3D6 within a value based primarily on characteristics, but increasably by buying added levels of skill. As might be expected, there is no consistency between how skill work, and some are limited to one level, while others have special formulae for application. This makes things rather more complex than they need to be and it takes a while to adjust to the system. There is a nice large selection of skills and the explanations are fairly clear. Magic is somewhat more complex, but there is some guiding logic too it, and spells are based off of a single Magic Skill, with the spells learned essentially as additional skills with Characteristic Points, save that it is possible to combine costs and modify effects and powers to create new spells. This makes the limited selection of general spells

much more useful than it seems at first. This is really a pretty neat idea, and if the system for modifying spells were a bit less complex, it might be more playable. The flexibility of the system is its great plus, but it is very important that the GM keep a close watch on the spells the players create, because they have the potential to be produce unexpected results. The only problem here, once you understand the system is that, like the characteristic system, it is all rather arbitrary. The money and equipment section is followed by very clearly defined rules for disadvantages, following the Champions model, but much more fully explained.

The single largest part of the rules is the section on combat, and as might be expected from Champions, this is the weakest part of the system. Combat consists of a collection of adds and subtractions to a 3D6 attack roll, in which the difference between weapons and the skill of different characters tends to be obscured. There are lots of modifications for situation and maneuvers. One real disappointment is that the Action Point system is oversimplified almost to the point of meaningless abstraction. Another potential problem is the use of stun damage, which works well in Champions, but can tend to be a bit unrealistic and encumbering for a fast moving fantasy campaign. Despite all this, the combat system works fairly well, though it is not particularly realistic and the six-sided die get annoying fairly quickly.

There is a good bit of interesting and useful material for setting up the campaign background and running adventures, and there is the inevitable selection of magic items and monsters, all described in some detail. Some insecurity with the spell system is shown in a collection of already figured spells which is also provided towards the end of the book. Also of interest is a system which is provided for converting characters and monsters from other systems, specifically RuneQuest and Middle Earth, though I suspect that players from either of these fairly advanced systems will have little desire to convert to Fantasy Hero except for an occasional game. Finally there is a section of adventures provided. An inn and a solo scenario are given as examples and then there is a complete, well detailed adventure as well, though it is all fairly standard fantasy fare.

Despite all of these mechanical gripes and nit picks, Fantasy Hero is basically a pretty playable system. It is intelligently designed, flexible and easy to learn. There are few major mechanical problems, though some aspects can be annoying. It has almost all the good points of Champions, streamlined and cleaned up, with a few innovations, like the spell system, but nothing really radical. Perhaps the greatest overall weakness is in the flavor of the game, which seems to be rather bland. It aims very much at a generic fantasy setting, and although there is not a lot of detail on this background, you get a feeling that it is nothing very special. This can be great if you want to fit it to a campaign or idea you already have, but doesn't give you much to work with if you are starting from scratch. I would have no problem with it from this angle, but other GMs I know might. It comes down to this: Fantasy Hero is within spitting distance of the top three fantasy RPGs,

and your choice between them will probably be based almost entirely on your taste in game systems. If you like Champions and aren't totally satisfied with your current fantasy system, give Fantasy Hero a try, it may be the system for you. If you don't like Champions, there are several other systems available which have the same good qualities as Fantasy Hero, but may be better suited to your playing style. (M. J. Ventane)



SKYREALMS OF JORUNE
by Andrew Leker
from Skyrealms Publishing

One of the most interesting things for me at GENCON this year was a chance to participate in a demo of Skyrealms of Jorune with one of their regular GMs. It was a fun session which gave a real feel for the game, and though the scenario itself was not all that original, the elements of background which it brought out were fascinating.

Skyrealms of Jorune is a relatively new RPing system which brings us adventure in a world somewhere between SF and Fantasy and recreates a long-term campaign which is really quite interesting. The publishers have sunk considerable capital into the current edition, and hope to make it a big success. The mechanics are nothing too new, but they are fairly playable, with a skill-based system and fairly simple combat, though it may appear deceptively complex at first. Magic, or the use of Dyshas is interesting, if somewhat limited (not necessarily a bad thing). On the whole, mechanically it is an adequate but not outstanding game, with potential for improvement and strong indications that it will be kept up to date and improve in time.

The real prize in JORUNE is the world background, which is exceptionally well detailed and very original, with its blend of SF and Fantasy and the human and inhuman. The background is complex and

'Outer Space' and 'The Old West'. These settings will be intimately familiar to those who have viewed a few cartoons, and the descriptions are kept amusing and non-technical. Along the same lines there is a section of 'People to See', detailing important background characters which might be useful in game episodes. This section includes both detailed descriptions with stats as well as more general descriptions of groups like Ghosts and Martians. There is a section of 'Things to Do', which is essentially a collection of adventure ideas of somewhat variable quality plus a random adventure generation system for the one game where such a system seems strangely appropriate. The book wraps up with a very brief section of random charts and tables for such things as races, the contents of bottles, random teleportation and the like. All of this is extremely random, but then that is appropriate, and if you don't like the randomness, reading the charts can give you some pretty spiffy ideas for things to do on adventures.

I'll heartily recommend Silly Stuff to Toon players, though from my experience the game has not developed the following which it deserves. This is one aid which is totally useless for any other system unless you want to make fun of your Champions campaign, but you might just want to look at it for a few laughs. If you don't have any need for Silly Stuff, go out and buy a copy of Toon, then buy a copy of Silly Stuff. There is no reason why good role-playing can't be silly and Steve Jackson Games is doing their best to show us just how silly it can be. (Jon Schuller)

MUSKETEERS

by R. Vance Buck
from Task Force Games

Task Force has managed to repeat what I thought was a never-to-be-duplicated blunder with the design of Heroes of Olympus, and taken a potentially intriguing role-playing game and turned it into a mediocre one-shot boardgame. Musketeers comes boxed with a single-sheet map of a palace, a collection of counters for the musketeers

and their opposition plus a 24 page rule booklet.

In this game you take the role of one of the literary characters of Dumas' stories and play out several scenarios of adventure and intrigue on the maps provided. Statistics are provided for all of the Musketeers and for their major opponents and neutral parties. The mechanics are fairly playable and the scenarios are true to the feel of Dumas' work. Nonetheless, this is one of the most unsatisfying games I've ever played. You take the roles of characters of great personality and style and are forced to play them in extremely constraining circumstances with a very limited number of scenarios so that the game may as well be thrown away after a few hours of play. This seems like an awful waste of effort on the part of the designers, and while play is fast and pretty enjoyable, the frustration you'll feel at the unrealized potential of the game detracts considerably from any enjoyment.

Admittedly there are already a couple of very good swashbuckling RPGs, but neither of them is the last word in the field, and the basic mechanics of Musketeers hover on the brink of being a good, simple role-playing game. All the authors needed to do was to add a few pages on designing original characters and scenarios and perhaps a section on background and setting and they would have had a product whose buyers would have felt much more satisfied because of the potential for continued play in more flexible conditions. Task Force made a similar error with their white elephant Heroes of Olympus which attempted to be a RPG while limiting itself to play as a boardgame. Here they haven't even made a try at encouraging role-playing beyond the natural elements embodied in the rich topic and have missed an opportunity to turn what ended up as a throwaway mini-game into a fast, fun tactical role-playing system. Solely as a boardgame Musketeers is playable, but on this sort of individual level the focus on characters and the theme of the game demand more detail and flexibility. (Dave Nalle)

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DOES GAMA WORK?

IAN HENSE

Let's get right into this editorial and talk about something that hits all gamers were they live. The gaming industry and who's in charge.

It was my (good, bad, ill?) fortune to attend Origins 86 this year in Los Angeles, California, city of the million dollar tan. It was a good convention at a good hotel and aside from the fact that I couldn't play any of the games, went jolly well. I met some interesting people, saw some amazingly pitiful games and got drunk. It was a worthwhile weekend. But amidst the debauchery and mayhem, there was something that disturbed me. It had to do with a meeting I attended.

I went and sat in on a GAMA meeting, the purpose of which was to decide the location of Origins '88. It was a pretty dopey little congregation of game manufacturers, filled with self-importance and pomp and circumstance (read that with the appropriate dramatic pause). They hemmed and hawed, heard presentations, and just generally acted like a corporate body of some consequence. The site was awarded to TSR and the scenic and beautiful Wisconsin, to combine with GenCon that year, because no one else had any better place for it (except back in LA, ralpharama!). This would have kept Origins on a coast (east or west) four years running (or was Dallas deathcon somewhere in there?). Anyway, they completed this momentous task, and then later voted on officers for this august organization. It was tense, exciting, and ultimately pretty silly.

Now what is GAMA? How many of you gamers have heard of it? How many of you buy a game because it has a GAMA logo on it? Do you know what GAMA does?

I didn't know until this Origins, when I heard some of the mighty duties of this fine upstanding organization. I was told that its function was to promote quality game production and organize the various game manufacturers into a solid force for good in gaming. Gosh, this sounded great! Wow! Neat!

Then I asked just what does GAMA do? What are its "powers"? Well, the answer kind of shocked me. GAMA has awesome responsibilities. It determines who is allowed to sell things at Origins. It has a committee that decides the location of Origins. It accepts \$50 dues (recently raised to around \$250 I hear) from different manufacturers. And it is basically a hollow empty organization that serves to give a few politically inclined game-makers an avenue to express their political aspirations.

Now you may ask who am I to say such things about a big important organization like GAMA? Well, I am nobody in particular. I am a fantasy gamer of some 9 years and have played strategy games for 12. I had never even heard of GAMA until I attended Origins '82 and a somewhat tipsy game-maker told me what an important organization it was. But I have yet to see of any real benefit come from the organization. What has it done for the industry in general? I would say it has been more of a hindrance than a help. Avalon Hill, in its hot pursuit of the gaming dollar, has done more benevolent work than this organization.

What I have seen of GAMA's great work is a small organization of people who like to gather together each year and puff themselves up to see how large their feathers are. They then compare them amidst the cacophonous oohs and aahs. It has its little political squabbles, like any other legislative group, such as the many letters among the members debating the fitness of one of the candidates for president. It has its vote stuffing, proxying and buying like any other voting body. Its powers are mainly negative, like most "legislative" bodies, saying who can and cannot sell things at Origins and other GAMA related events. The only real function it serves that I can see, aside from a way to gather the game-makers together socially, is as an ego booster to a bunch of people who seem to need it. The only good I can see it doing is deciding where Origins is going to be, and that is usually decided by convention (no pun intended) rather than fitness of any area for the Con.

So if any of you out there who receive this wonderful little tome can tell me just what the purpose is behind the toy congress of GAMA, please write me and do. I am curious. If there was any redeeming quality behind this organization, it slipped by my feeble senses and I am sure there is someone

out there that can enlighten me. 'Cause as it stands, I personally would like to see the locations of Origins decided by a poll of gamers and let anyone sell their games there that can afford the table costs. But then why should anyone listen to me?.

COMIC BOOKS STYLE & INNOVATION

IAN HENSE

In America, one of the prime movers and shakers, influences and fond memories of youth is the Comic book. Superman, Batman, the Flash and Spider-man, are all characters we grew up with. I can remember buying my comics at the 7-11 and then riding my Huffy Whizzer down to the park and finding a nice tree to lean against while reading about Captain America and the Super Nazis. When I was sick, home from school, and my dad left for work, he always poked his head in my room and asked if there was anything he could bring me home. I would give him the melodramatic groan and say, in a faint voice, "Well, I would like something to read. Maybe a comic book." He would return with a veritable avalanche of Richie Rich and Captain Marvel, Green Lantern and The Fantastic Four. They were fun, exciting and more important, great to trade.

Comic Books today are a big business. I am sure they were just as big a business when I was young, but I never thought of them as such. Now that I am older, and have to go to a specialty store to buy my comics (because the best ones are only available through direct distribution) I realize there is an industry behind those three colored pieces of pulp paper.

The comic industry is in the midst of a fight for the market that is out there. Comics don't appeal to everyone, and those they do appeal to are getting more tight with their comic dollar. There is too much competing with the comic for the entertainment dollar of America's youth. And the market for comics is no longer just the youth of America. I am 21 and an avid reader and most of the buyers at the specialty shops in our area are over 18. And comics are now a valuable commodity to be bought, sold, collected and hoarded. With the changes in the buying public, the call for more interesting stories, better art and the constant competition for the ever shrinking market out there, comic companies are getting tough.

There has always been the "Big Two" in comics. DC and Marvel comics have been the leaders in the industry since the 60's. During the 40's and 50's there were many companies because the demand for action and adventure comics was so big that it could support a vast number of companies. But there was a slump in the late 50's and early 60's that caused many companies to fold, and even more companies to combine and sell their titles to other companies. It was during this time that Marvel comics rose on the scene with their "new breed" of comic. With "The Fantastic Four" and "The Amazing Spider Man" Marvel introduced comics with out the old tired plots of hero, villain and fight. They put some emphasis on the character and his life behind the mask, something that was novel in the industry. And the industry grew, and Marvel grew to rival DC in its share of the market.

Now that the industry is competing ever more for the entertainment dollar, along with video recorders, records, movies and video games, the reader is becoming more eclectic in his tastes. He is requiring better art and story line and is getting tired of the man in the tights story lines. And there has arisen a wealth of new companies to fill this need, the "Independants" they are called. And with these independants comes a swelling in the number of comic titles available to the reader the likes of which hasn't been seen since the influx of War titles in the 40's.

Marvel and DC are both trying to capture their lion's share of the market by introducing more new titles in the last two years then they had previously done in a decade. And the titles are becoming more interesting, more adult and better reading (with a few major exceptions).

Now people in the industry talk of the "Big Two and a Half" as an independent company, First Comics, has been taking a large amount of the business away from the Big Two. First comics began with a few titles that were well drawn, looked good, and were especially well written. The novelty of actually owning your work, instead of having the company own it appealed to some of the more innovative writers and artists who went to work for First. After Capitol Comics, another independent folded, First bought its titles and the writers and artists went to work for First, bringing with them such good titles as "Nexus" and "The Badger". First built a very solid base with a fine line of comics that had very involved and interesting plot lines and were rarely the one shot, villain versus hero stories too prevalent in the Marvel and DC books in the 70's.

And this combination of good presentation and writing brought many readers to the First line. Howard Chaykin's "American Flagg" was thought to be the best title out in 1984 by many in the industry, and "Grimjack" and "Nexus" built a huge following. With the success of First, many others realized that it was possible to get some of the market away from the Big Two. At the same time, the Big Two, realized this. So they attempted to increase the quality of their banner lines and to introduce many new titles. Some thought this was an attempt by the big companies to push the independants off the shelves. The

industry is still very dominated by these two monoliths and a store must carry their title if they wish for business. But the titles were generally good. DC, with its **Crisis on Infinite Earths** has made a very good try at cleaning up their cluttered universe that stretches back to **Action Comics #1** and before, with the introduction of Superman. By recruiting such great talents as John Byrne (who had previously done most of his work for Marvel) and Frank Miller (also mostly from Marvel) they are beginning an epic revamping that may just turn them into the industry leader once again.

Marvel, under the rather lethargic leadership of Stan Lee, and the dangerous editor and chiefship of Jim Shooter has been digging itself into a hole bigger than the one the Coca Cola dug with its New Coke. Shooter began the catastrophe with his **Secret Wars** series, both I and II, that sought to "shake" up the Marvel Universe in hopes that something good might realign and instead just annoyed its readers and caused a drop in the quality of its main books with constant **Secret Wars II** crossovers. And then Marvel decided to introduce its **New Universe** titles, books that supposedly take place right here on Earth, in a world like yours and mine. The real effect of these books cannot be felt, as they are only recently out, but it does cause there to be less shelf space in the stores for the independents. The titles for the New Universe have been singularly bad in their premiere issues, with only one or two half way decent titles that justify buying the next issue.

With the proliferation of independent companies, the Big Two are scrambling for ways to retain their shrinking part of the market. DC's method seems to be working and the quality of their books is increasing. Marvel on the other hand is sinking slowly, drowning in a wealth of titles that are drawn too similar, have old tired plots, and writing that annoys rather than entertains. There are a few exceptions which are noted below.

As for the actual titles, there are many good ones out there. From First comics you have **Nexus**, drawn by the incredible team of Baron and Rude. The art is good in **Nexus** and takes particularly well to the medium of Baxter paper, a better quality paper than usual comic book pulp. Though the cost is \$1.50, 15 times the old comic prices of the 50's, it is well worth it. The story, about a man named Horatio Hellpop who gains incredible powers that he is forced to use as the Universe' Executioner, is always well done and consistent.

Another first title, **American Flag** was one of the best comics I had ever read while it was being written and drawn by Howard Chaykin. Unfortunately Chaykin left the book, but it still looks to be a great comic. It is about a future earth in which the government of the US has moved to Mars and is slowly selling off bits of the old country. Reuben Flagg, the main character, is a ranger (the local equivalent of Cop) in Chicago and tries to deal out justice as he sees it. A very good comic and certainly nothing like the old one shot issues of Spider-man that we were treated to in the 70's.

Other First titles, including **Grimjack**, **The Badger**, **Warp**, and **John Sable** have introduced unique and well written story lines along with good art. These are comics that you know have had deep thought and soul put into them.

Another of the independent companies has come out with inexpensive titles that are well written with good art. **Eclipse** comics, with a line of comics longer than any other independent label is quickly rising in the market. Even after a flood at their home office, they still are putting out great titles like **Miracleman** (by Alan Moore), **Airboy**, **Mr. Monster**, **Scout**, and reprints of old hard to find comics, outlawed because of the comics code authority. **Eclipse**, if it continues, will also become a leader in the comic industry.

DC has had a renaissance of late with many new and interesting titles such as **Blue Devil** and **The Watchmen** and the re-vamping of its universe to eliminate the many double earths and alternate universe that kept tripping up writers when they dealt with a character. Their best title currently and probably the most controversial is **Dark Knight** which is written and drawn by Frank Miller, one of the demi-gods of the comic world. There is usually nothing better than a good comic drawn and written by one person, as he is uniquely qualified to know what his characters need to express in their movement and speech. There are many such good writer/artists out there and they never lack for work. John Byrne, Frank Miller, Howard Chaykin, Walt Simonson, they are all great in their method of connecting picture to story. **Dark Knight**, is Miller's telling of the tale of Batman in years to come. It is dark and scary and riveting, like most of Miller's work and a masterpiece of design and story.

Another great title from DC is **The Watchmen**, with the superior writing talents of Alan Moore. This is by far one of the better comics on the market today, and is an example of a new title from DC that isn't just tripe used to shove the independents off of the shelves.

Marvel seems to be the underdog in this comparison of titles. They have many good titles which have gone down hill, the main reason is the constant changing of artist and writer that goes on in the Marvel arena. A book is bound to falter if there is no constant guiding hand behind it. When the writer and artist change from issue to issue, you lose consistency and usually quality. But where Marvel puts one person on a book and he stays there, this is where they shine. The work Walt Simonson did on **Thor** totally turned around a dying series, and turned it into a magnificent ongoing story of the old Norse Gods in an era where they were no longer worshipped. Frank Miller's work on **Daredevil** is positively inspired. Chris Claremont, by far the steadiest of the Marvel writers has stayed with his books, the **Xmen** and **New Mutants** for a long time and this consistency has constantly made these titles among Marvel's best sellers and by far the best reading. The **New Universe** titles have the look of juvenile

tripe about them. The ideas are rarely new and the art is very stock and plain. With the exception of DP7 and Star Brand (written oddly enough by the destructor, Jim Shooter), the titles have been royally bad and will probably survive only as long as the company will support them, because it doesn't look like the quality of the books will be enough. I would like to see the two above titles survive for some issues because, of all the new titles, they are the only ones that show any originality in their art and ideas. Many of the others are just trying to cash in on ideas already done in independent books, or even trying to use concepts done in popular movies.

With the comic companies scrambling for their share of the comic buyer's dollar, there is a trend of improvement in the books. The companies actually listen to their readers and sense what they want. It is unfortunate that occasionally they sense wrong. But the industry survives and improves and the comics always become more valuable, in both their collectability and their general quality of entertainment. Marvel would probably be a whole lot better off if they shot Jim Shooter though.

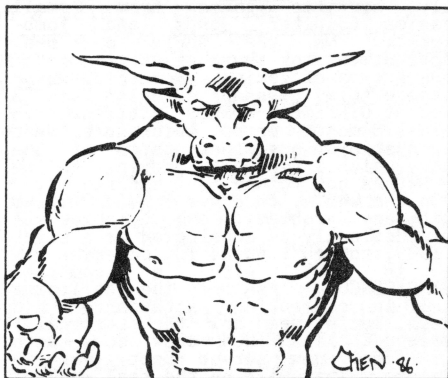
SUMMER CONVENTIONS IN REVIEW DAVE NALLE

Well, LA ORIGINS happened. I was there. On the whole a good experience and one of the more interesting ORIGINS I've been to. Probably the best ORIGINS held outside of the Baltimore area, or anywhere at all in the last few years. The gamers seemed pleased with the events, and even the dealers were reasonably happy with the turnout.

I think the biggest plusses going for LA ORIGINS were the DTI people who were outrageously helpful, if not universally competent (some of them did not know where or even who Alan Emrich, their leader, was), and the site choice, with the benefits of a huge city and airport convenience.

The con started out good for us, with some free publicity in the form of a personal attack on me in DTI's newsletter (how unprofessional can these guys get?). Sales of our games went well, especially on Friday, and it was our second most money-making convention since 1982. I wish we could have run some seminars, but the convention just wasn't set up for it in terms of space or preparation and we got in too late anyway. As I more or less expected, we also failed to win the two awards for which we were nominated, though Wabbit Wampage won 'best fantasy boardgame' over the far more deserving Riddle of the Ring, and VIP of GAMING won in the 'best amateur magazine' category, one from which it should have been disqualified, either by the AAGAD or voluntarily by DTI's sense of reality and fair play, since it is edited and marketed as a professional magazine.

On the bad side, ORIGINS had some of the problems I predicted in previous discussion in ABYSS. A single-fee convention does indeed face problems with



high attendance. For the most part these were controlled, but there were a couple of major inconveniences. Because gamers could not sign up and get tickets for events in advance, except through pre-registration, there ended up being huge lines for the open spots in popular games, and since sign-ups didn't start until 1.5 hours before the event, it meant that some people could end up standing in line for an hour and a half intervals all day long without actually getting into any events. Of course, this could have been controlled by limiting the number of events per badge, or by letting people pick up event tickets much further in advance, closing up events, so that gamers could find something else to do, instead of standing in line just to be disappointed and sent off to stand in another line. This policy hurt no one

except the gamers, though it may also have kept them out of the dealer room. I saw plenty of people wandering through the dealer area, but one incident remains with me, when one of our regular customers with whom I have corresponded stopped by the booth, harried and out of breath, glanced around, shook my hand, and said "good to see you...got to go stand in line for another event. I'll try to come back by Sunday afternoon." He did make it by on Sunday, just before the dealer room closed, and in a fairly hasty discussion he explained that he had been closed out of all the events he had tried to pre-register for more than a month in advance, and after standing in line for more than a dozen events (all desirable role-playing), he had actually played in only two, neither of them his first choices, though he still enjoyed the convention as a whole. My own experiences paralleled this, as every time I went to the sign-up area to see what was available, they were offering Nothing but poker for something called "braggers rights", not my goal in gaming at an ORIGINS.

I discovered another minor flaw when I talked to long term ORIGINS types who were somewhat offended that many badges read STRATEGICON instead of ORIGINS, an error which we agreed was in rather bad taste.

One thing which struck me about ORIGINS this year was that it seemed like there were far fewer new dealers at the convention and also fewer new products. There was nothing there I had not at least heard of before, and almost nothing there which was really new to me, with the exception of Jorune and a couple of really horrible games from small companies (Jupiter Jumps and Tomb-seekers). On the whole a real disappointment for those of us interested in the growth of gaming. Something which was there to my pleasant surprise was 3 issues of DIFFERENT WORLDS published in the last 8 months or so, which never made it to Austin or any other parts of the country which I frequent, proving to me that DW has not folded as I had feared.

On the whole, this was a good ORIGINS despite any problems, and I think LA should definitely be considered as a sight for 1989, though I think TSR deserves its shot in 1988 with a combined ORIGINS/GENCON. As for the declining spiral in convention attendance and success, let's see how the terminally experienced ATLANTICON crew does with their fancy new set-up next year in Baltimore. That will be the real mark of decline or resurgence.

GENCON was a whole different kettle of fish, but it had its strong and weak points, all of which deserve fair examination. This was the first time I'd been to the megacon in Milwaukee, and it was gave me some new perspectives and ideas.

First, in many ways it was a rip-off, both for the gamers and those involved in running events or selling games. Nothing was free, no services or facilities, registration would run you about \$35 for the weekend, and hotels and such were very expensive. There were a few bargains to be found. A one day ticket to the dealer room was only \$3, and a couple of enterprising companies had rented hotel rooms in which to do free demos, some of which were very

interesting. For the dealers the rapine was even more profound, with booths not having tables provided and things like chairs, drapes and tablecloths costing extra. A very happy company called Badger Exposition tried to rent us chairs for \$17.50, so we just went to Target and bought more comfortable chairs for \$4. They wanted to drape our table for \$33 so we went to a fabric store and draped it in the color and fabric we wanted for \$4. In addition, the cost of the tables had been raised rather high compared to other cons.

Perhaps all of these expenses are what lead to what I saw as the biggest problem of the convention, the lack of variety and selection in the dealer room. Basically, only the largest game companies and distributors chose to come, the rest being represented by distributors or local stores. As a result, the dealer room was not all that interesting and there were a limited number of new releases to be seen. On the whole, ORIGINS had a much better offering. We did make some money at GENCON, more than at ORIGINS, but this was because of distributor orders more than anything else, not because of the huge horde of gamers TSR claims come to the cons. If I were to make an estimate, I'd say that attendance was slightly higher than ORIGINS, maybe around 4 or 5 thou, but not the 8 to 10 claimed by some of the promoters. If that many were there, they were not in the dealer area, and were involved in something other than the scheduled events which were numerous, but not sufficient to accommodate more an attendance in excess of 5 thousand gamers.

The high points of the convention were some of the events, and everyone who participated seemed pleased. I only went to demos, but many of them were great, well worth my time, especially a fairly informal demonstration of Jorune. Another high point was Milwaukee, which may smell like a brewery, but is an interesting and colorful city with great food and lots of places to go and lto do. Definitely a better location in many respects than the part of LA where ORIGINS was held, which I understand was on the border of Watts, one of the nations more famous depressed urban areas.

On the whole I had fun, but I was somewhat disappointed that GENCON was not really the huge, comprehensive convention which it is promoted as, though it did please me to discover that ORIGINS really is the national gaming convention despite TSR's claims otherwise and GENCON is just a really huge local convention, impressive though it tries to be.

The real terror comes in '88. What will happen when TSR combines ORIGINS and GENCON for a megacon in Milwaukee, something to look forward to with hope and some apprehension.

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ECHOES FROM THE ABYSS



Dear ABYSS,

In issue #37, Dave Nalle wrote some very interesting riddles for the 'Castle of the Void' adventure. However, I have not found the answers to those riddles anywhere in the module! In short, what the hell are the answers!?! I'm notmad, just a little (okay, a lot) puzzled.

Quin McConnell
Hermiston, OR

[Mea culpa...yep, we omitted the answers to the riddles, something which we used to our advantage in a rather successful contest at GENCON this year. No one in the contest got all three riddles right, so I imagine a number of readers, like Quin, are rather bewildered. The answers to the riddles are (in order): Horn, Waves and Meade. Hope that satisfies the mystified--DN]

Dear ABYSS,

I want to respond to your unfair and biased review of THE SORCERER'S SCROLLS (TSS) fanzine in issue #38. I'll grant you that the format, layout and printing of TSS are not as good as they could be, but that is not my objection to your review.

I must certainly clarify the main objection you made to TSS, which was that it dealt mostly with Tunnels and Trolls. True, TSS mainly deals with T&T, but it should be pointed out that that's all we get in terms of submissions: we welcome submissions on other games. Like SORCERERS APPRENTICE, we are criticized when we don't have enough T&T material. Like SORCERERS APPRENTICE we will continue to print what we receive; if all we get is T&T material, then that will be what we print. However, starting with issue 17, we will be including stats for D&D, TTT and possibly RQ in the solos we include in TSS.

Finally, I would like to defend TSS and one of its 'pointless' articles, as David Nalle put it. I see no reason why some T&T Solos which are old and which Mr. Nalle called 'ancient' shouldn't be talked about. Only a few of the T&T Solos are older than Dave Hargrave's Arduin books which were recommended in the very same issue of ABYSS. Likewise, some of these 'ancient' Solos are enjoying full print runs in England, and will soon be in Japan, as the new line of Corgi Solo Books (something Mr. Nalle

would have known if he had read Mike Stackpole's article a little closer!). Judging from TSS's young and foreign readership, these types of articles are a benefit to this specific group of people: these people do not have to be T&Ters per se, but anyone interested in Solo gaming. By telling the readers what we, as experienced Solo players, think are the best T&T Solos, we are doing them a service by leading them to the best that Tunnels and Trolls has to offer. The very fact that these books are enjoying the fullest print runs in their histories proves that Tunnels and Trolls is, in fact, capable of a renaissance!

Kevin Crossman
Co-Editor,
THE SORCERER'S SCROLLS
Palo Alto, CA

[Reviews tend to state the opinion of the author, and our reviewers tailor their reviews to the readership of ABYSS while trying to present balanced analysis. The fact that TSS deals with T&T mainly by default does not alter the fact that such a focus limits its value for many of our readers. I'm pleased to see that TSS is broadening its coverage, and more recent issues which have come in do seem to be more comprehensive. ABYSS readers are not interested in whether or not TSS serves its readers. They want to know if they should become TSS readers. As for whether T&T solos or Arduin are more ancient, the point of that comment was that those items are not currently available in most areas of the US and nothing is really being done to support the system with new material, while Arduin is struggling hard to stay current and provide new material. As to the impending T&T renaissance, charming though the thought is, it seems very unlikely unless an effort is made to completely revise and update the rules and release a new version which comes closer to serving the needs of today's more sophisticated role-playing audience. T&T is a relic, albeit an interesting one, and I can't take talk of its renaissance too seriously when the very company that published it is doing nothing to support it in the US, though a dwindling but devoted following still clings to it--DN]

Dear Dave,

You blew it! With the increased print size, ABYSS is no longer larger than the DRAGON. You have to do something! ABYSS is also losing space to advertising, two pages in #38. All total #38 was probably half the size of #30. Bring back small print, use full-sized format, add pages, something, please!

Even so, I thought #38 was a very good issue. 'Practical Magic' was a great article which I found very useful. 'Two from the Grave' was just too short. 'A Viper's Kiss' was a good enough article for those who still play AD&D. I didn't even bother to finish reading 'Non-Humans of Ysgarth', as it was quite useless for anyone who doesn't play Ysgarth. I wish you would print more generally oriented articles, as I play mostly Rolemaster. 'The Fifth Musician' was a fine story, but I'd rather see a gaming article. My favorite part of the magazine is the apparently unpopular 'In the Speculum'. I am also glad to see you reviewing some more mainstream products more often. I know I am in the minority on this, but I don't think you should cut reviews to shorten this section. Instead you should shorten the large reviews.

I think that ABYSS should do a survey of its readers. You should ask some general info and then ask for a list of role-playing games owned and a rating for each. Readers could find out what good games they are missing out on and your advertisers could get some useful information on the interests of your readers.

Scott Christensen
Greendale, WI

[Good to see a different opinion on the print size. For the time being you seem to be in the minority, but with the combination of ads and larger print, we are losing a little ground. I'll see what I can do. A larger format may be a possibility in the not too distant future. We're also going to try to keep a strict limit on the length of reviews for future issues, though enthusiasm may be hard to control at times. A reader survey is a good idea, and we've done them in the past, though not recently. Look for one in an upcoming issue. The last one we did was useful and informative. Thanks for the suggestions--DN]

Dear Dave,

Good thing you people send out more than one reminder once a guy's subscription shrivels up and dies. Otherwise, some individuals might, you know, forget to renew and wonder why they haven't seen ABYSS for about four months. Someday I'm going to try to round out my collection by picking up all the issues I've missed by not resubscribing right away. Will you gents be in the money then!

I'm probably an issue or two behind (or maybe not, considering to whom I speak. Sorry, Dave. You hear more than enough of that, right?) but last I knew we were talking larger print. Well, for the sake of the poor mortals not equipped

with the optic grandeur of a Lovecraftian Deep One--DO IT!!! The glossy cover featured a while back didn't hurt any either. It helped ABYSS look more like a small magazine and less like a religious pamphlet.

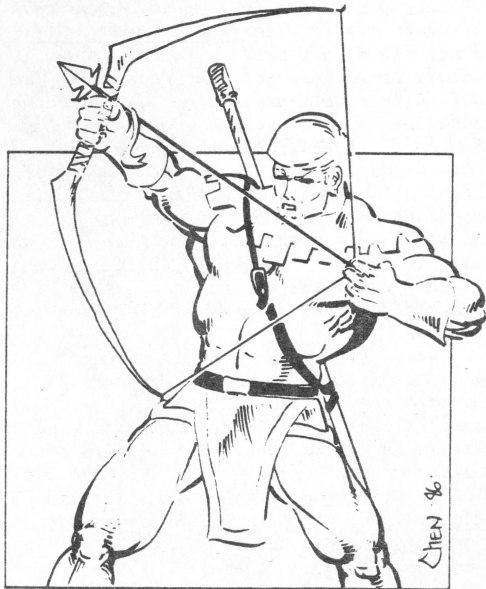
As far as the important stuff goes, I love it, love it! LOVE IT! Keep up the good work on those articles! When I first encountered ABYSS I had several hundred dollars sunk into AD&D and was getting so bored with it that I was about to sell everything for a very measly sum. Now I have a hybrid system which is actually fun to play and halfway realistic.

Soon I shall have a current issue in hand and then I'll comment you black-n-blue. I promise.

Long live realism!

Mystically yours,
Bezantarious, dweller of Bis
the eighth and darkest ring
via Jeff Layton,
the Homo Sapiens
who dabbled just too far

[Nice to see such an enthusiastic resubscription letter. We are trying to get issues out closer to ontime, but the schedule seems to have a natural inclination to quarterly rather than bi-monthly issues, hard though we fight to keep things in line. I hope that all our readers get as positive a result from reading ABYSS as the one which Jeff seems to have been blessed with, and if this were an ideal world, we could spread that kind of understanding of the alternatives in role-playing to a much wider audience--DN]



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