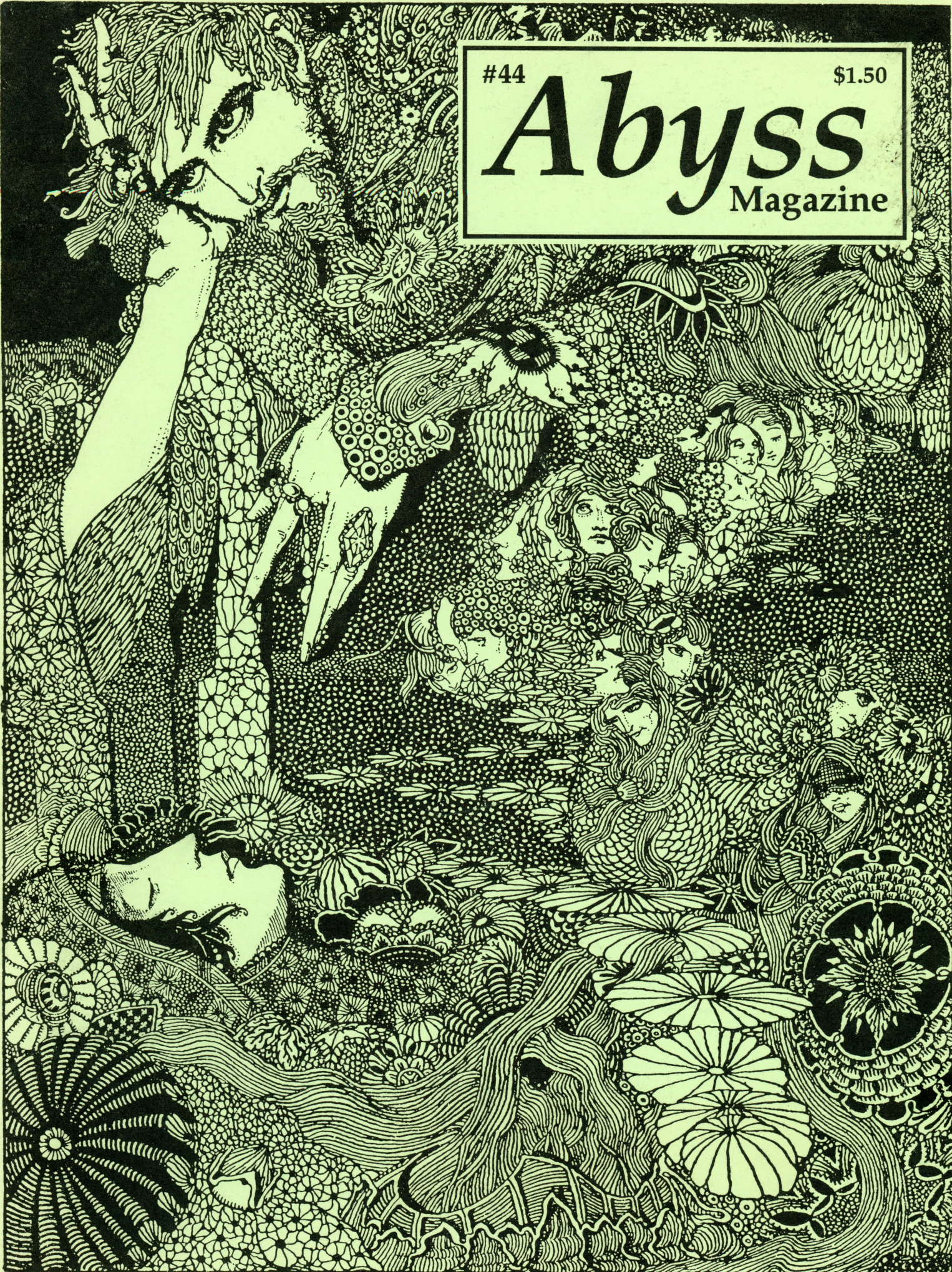


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We welcome submissions of any fantasy or gaming material. Payment is made at a variable rate up to 2 cents per word in credit or cash. Artwork is also needed, paid at a parallel rate. Send an SASE for writer/artist guidelines. We assume no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, but if you are lucky we'll at least return rejected work. It might be a good idea to query us first with your ideas. Nothing is returned without an SASE.

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Table of Contents

Conjurings.....	Dave Nalle	2
Humor in Gaming.....	Ian Hense	3
Milwaukee Mayhem.....	Dave Nalle	5
Echoes from the Abyss.....		6
Evensong.....	Alan Blount	9
In the Speculum.....		11
Races by Design.....	Carl Jones	14
SIGMA Ballot.....		16

Conjurings from the Abyss

Here we are again, not quite as late as last issue. You will notice that this *Abyss* is slightly shorter in pages than last issue, but nonetheless just as full of content, as a result of more efficient use of space and the miracle of desktop publishing.

One reason for the somewhat smaller size of this issue is that we are trying to get back on schedule, and if the issues are just a little shorter that can make a lot of difference in how often they appear, which will make our distributors, and presumably a lot of our subscribers, much happier.

As I write this, all of the material for #45 is already in hand, including an article from Spike Jones, a new feature from Ian Hense, an **Ysgarth** adventure, fiction from Jon Schuller, a special variant for **Psychos & Slashers**, reviews and more exciting stuff.

Some of us are calling this the special Ian Hense issue, because our newest contributing editor is coming on with a vengeance, with several reviews and the lead off article, but don't miss out on the other features, including a report on GenCon '89, an eerie short story by Alan Blount, some ideas on custom race design for **Ysgarth**, and one of our most interesting letter columns to date.

In the new decade, look for a blindingly accelerated schedule, with such offerings as another Mazyrik story from A. Sadel, an article on live-action role-playing, a special overview of **AD&D II**, a feature article on **Ars Magica** and the return of John Davies with a new series on mythology.

Before I sign off, I want to remind everyone to vote in the SIGMA Awards this year. Take a minute to send in your ballot before stamps go up to 30 cents and let your opinions about the best in gaming be heard. See the back cover of this issue for the ballot.

Dave Nalle

Humor in Gaming

Ian Hense

And then High Prince Maladrick, with his great and legendary sword, Falbifeester, sliced into the neck of the vicious Pernid, ridding his kingdom of an evil older than time itself.

If it wasn't for the names, you could never laugh at something like that.

I have been in many different campaigns with many different GMs and the one thing that strikes me more and more about gaming, and gamers in general, is their rather poor and unsubtle sense of humor. What seems to pass for humor in gaming nowadays are bad Monty Pythonesque turns or jokes that belong in the back pages of the *Dragon* for ten year olds to chortle at.

It is rare that I ever feel embarrassment for another person, but many times, when I am in a pickup game with strangers, I find myself cringing at what the GM considers humor. There is no planning behind the attempt to make us laugh, and it rarely works, being as subtle as a dagger up the strap.

Role-playing is a very individualized hobby, with many different methods for both GameMastering and playing the characters themselves. Since the modern version of the hobby is approaching fifteen years of age, many of the players are getting increasingly bored with stereotypical methods of role-playing. I have to assume this, as it is the only reasonable explanation for such things as the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* role-playing games. Oddly, it is almost always the case that games based on funny topics are not inherently funny, while games which are on serious, traditional topics are pretty easy to leaven with a few laughs.

Humor is the one universal in role-playing which can keep a campaign fresh and interesting. Humor in gaming, whether it comes from the game master, or a simple prank played on a player by another, keeps the action fun, and the game in perspective.

A game master with a good sense of humor, is a cherished find, and as soon as I find one, I will settle my role-playing roots (just kidding Dave.) All too often, a GM gets caught up in the inherent melodrama of fantasy, sci-fi and super-hero stories and forgets that the pleasure of role-playing is not his and his alone, but rather the entire group's. The GM is a strange beast anyway, wanting to be in the background, rather than out front and doing things, so to find one who has a genuine and subtle sense of humor is difficult. But there are many ways to infuse humor into a "serious" campaign.

One of the best ways is to read your group of players carefully. If you are playing with the same group of people over



a long period of time, the group seems to fall into a pattern of play. Generally, there are one or two players that seem to vie for the leadership of the party, and one player that becomes the clown. This is the one individual that instead of striving for power, strives to make the rest of the group shoot cola through their noses. He or she is always on the look-out for that opportunity to make the leader look a little silly, or a really pompous NPC eat a little dirt. This player is invaluable to a GM, and it is up to the game master to try and cultivate just such a character, to insure that there is always something going on, and the campaign never quite stagnates. Give subtle openings to this player, and sit back and laugh as he or she takes it away. Unfortunately, this player usually has a slightly less developed sense of survival than the others, and realistically gets pinched by the authorities or an angered NPC at times, but this is the risk of good role-playing humor.

Also, if you don't have a player who can take such leads and run with them, then you need to have your NPC's take up the slack. It helps if you actually "act" out your NPC responses, rather than just read them. Different voices and facial expressions help, but the ad libbing is what helps the most.

Sadly, it is true that many of life's most humorous moments occur at the cost of discomfort for others. Read your player's carefully and look for a particularly paranoid character. If you can play on this paranoia, you can usually give the rest of the party a good laugh.

Look for the person who postures a lot and starts to threaten another character with his powerful fighter as soon as they start to hand a note to the GM. You can really milk such a player for some serious laughs by inflicting his character with embarrassing situations that appear to be the fault of someone else in the party. It is especially helpful if the other players get into the taunting. A good example of this came up in a campaign I play in weekly. A particularly powerful saurian fighter in our campaign was being run by a player that is very power hungry and very paranoid. Due to an inadvertently fumbled magical spell, the head of this powerful saurian was turned into that of a chipmunk. He subsequently got the cursed head changed back. Definitely not subtle, but from this time forward, you can provoke a reaction from the player and the

character by merely putting your fingers up to your mouth and making chipmunk noises.

There are lots of ways you can have fun with a paranoid player, while treating him to aversion therapy as well. Have that player roll percentile dice for no reason as they ride down the road.

"Jim, roll a d100."

"Why?"

"Just roll."

"Okay. 36."

"Okay." Then make a meaningless note on a piece of paper behind your screen.

Or, for another example.

Jim has just passed through an archway, ahead of the rest of the party, on the look out for some personal loot. Have him roll the dice, even though the archway is perfectly harmless. "Write DoD on your character sheet for me."

"Why?" asks Jim.

"I'll tell you later."

This may discomfit Jim at the time, but the other players will be smiling as he ponders the meaning of DoD. Door of Death? Dead one Day?

Humor does not have to be at the expense of a single player, however. Humorous situations can be built into the campaign, allowing the players themselves to create the humorous situations. This works very well with parties of supposedly powerful players who suddenly find themselves powerless. Though it might be a sad statement on mankind, exploiting weaknesses has always been humorous to us. As an example, a supposedly powerful and successful thief easily made it into a home and burglarized the upper floors. On the way out, through the kitchen, he is caught unawares by the cook. No problem, thinks the thief, as he rolls out his dagger to silence the woman. Unfortunately, the cook was so large, that dagger blows only succeeded in enraging her. She proceeded to beat the thief senseless with her ladle.

Similar situations can be designed for powerful fighters (who have to actually use their puny minds to get out of situations rather than their swords), or mages who run up against physical hardships they would otherwise never encounter. The unexpected is always humorous, if played for maximum comic effect by the GM.

In a fantasy campaign, magic allows you many opportunities for humor. When an NPC would normally just blast a character with a fireball or somesuch, he can use Polymorph Other or similar spell to embarrass AND incapacitate the player. I hark back to the scene in the movie *Time Bandits*, when John Warner, the Supremely Evil Being changes Og into a giant pig rather than blasting him. This is much funnier than sprayed dwarf on the castle walls.

When trying to add humor to a campaign, it is very important to remember that the funniest things are also those that seem to sneak up on you. A good prat fall or human head changed into a chipmunk head is good for a belly laugh, but the kind of humor that leaves your players with a smile three hours after you have stopped playing is well thought out and slipped in quietly. This makes the already tedious job of the game master even more difficult, but in the long run, it is well worth it.

A campaign that starts out with the highest of intentions can deteriorate into mundanity, if it tries to stay at such a high

level. I cannot speak for most players, (as even weighing in at 240 lbs., I don't make up a majority of most players,) but I can only save the world once or twice a year, before I get really tired of it. As a GameMaster, it is important to keep perspective about your players and their campaigns. If you are going for a very high-entropy campaign, you may find it difficult later to keep coming up with ideas that might interest your battle weary and satiated players. If this ever does come about, start an adventure as you normally would, but have it stymied at every turn by some annoying mundanity. Try not to affect everyone in the party by it, but just one or two characters at a time, so the others can appreciate the humor behind a group of world conquerors being stopped by a simple lack of funds, or badly shod horses, or a really nasty case of the crabs.

Remember that while some familiar situations may always evoke a laugh, too much repetition can become tedious. My aforementioned bit about using Monty Python pieces in the campaign can get very tiresome, especially when the GM thinks he has more talent for humor than he actually does (a common flaw in GMs who use Monty Python material). It is best to allow the situations themselves become the focus of the humor, rather than any acting ability of the GM (though if his/hers players don't mind, then go right ahead.)

It is far easier to inject humor into a campaign if you first do some outside research. The best and most enduring fantasy fiction balances drama and action with humor, for a creative contrast which intensifies the laughs and the thrills. Read some good humorists and see some movies that use humor in the same context as you are campaigning in. Some recommended reading and movies are below. And remember that as you pass a group of people sitting around a table, you are far more likely to want to join in and play if you hear them laughing.

Books:

P.J. O'Rourke (anything you can get ahold of. He is a master of the barbed jibe)

Woody Allen, *Without Feathers*, *Getting Even*, *Side Effects*
L. Sprague deCamp and Fletcher Pratt, *The Compleat*

Enchanter

Robert Asprin's *Myth Adventures* series

Craig Shaw Gardner, *A Malady of Magicks* (and the others in the series)

The *Groo* comic book (though this is pretty broad humor)

Any Ron Goulart book (they're all interchangeable)

Jack Vance, *The Dying Earth*, *Rhialto the Marvelous* (good source for humorously pompous NPC's)

Robert Heinlein, *Glory Road*

George M. Fraser, the *Flashman* Series, and *The Pyrates*

Glen Cook, *Old Tin Sorrows*, *Sweet Silver Blues*, *Bitter Gold Hearts*

Movies:

Jabberwocky

Time Bandits

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

The Life of Brian

Ice Pirates (again, a little broad)

Start the Revolution Without Me

The Raven (Nicholson, Lorre and Price)

Star Trek the Motion Picture (Well, it was a big joke, right?)

Three and Four Musketeers (with Oliver Reed)

Milwaukee Mayhem

Dave Nalle

In the last few years my personal devotion to attending Origins seems to have faded away to some degree in favor of attending GenCon. This year that is going to change with the increased convenience of Origins in Atlanta, but for this past summer all I have to tell you about is another GenCon, much like other GenCons.

I drove up to Milwaukee with Ian Hense, taking about 22 hours straight through for the trip. That alone was a mind bending experience.

We arrived on Wednesday evening, made the rounds of Target and K-Mart to pick up a few items we needed, got our badges and schedules and did some initial set-up of the Ragnarok booth, which was in a surprisingly good location, a stone's throw from TSR, across from Chaosium, Steve Jackson Games and Tri-Tac (which we discovered was NOT out of business as we had feared).

We set up our new corrugated-plastic display back-drop, which was surprisingly effective, draped our table and did all those neat things which make the booth look like it might actually last out a weekend of bemused gamers leaning and drooling on it.

On Thursday the mayhem began, with gamers pouring through the dealer area and snapping up event tickets so fast that we didn't get to play in much at all ourselves, though Ian tried bravely to scrape up events and ended up playing in a few more than I did...though one major failure we both noticed was the total lack of any really good board games. In fact, although Avalon Hill had a dealer booth, the only Avalon Hill games being run were **Rail Baron** and lots and lots of **Civilization**. The lack of **Kingmaker**, **1830** and even **Diplomacy** was rather surprising. It seems that the way GenCon is run, all the Game Masters are independent contractors, and if no one writes in and wants to run a game no effort is made to see that it is run, and even Avalon Hill was shocked at this lack. Tom Shaw commented that they were rather disappointed, and perhaps this means that next year they will try to encourage some Avalon Hill gamers to make the effort to referee some of their most popular games. I know that if I have the time I will definitely give serious thought to running **1830** or **Kingmaker**. The effort involved in refereeing a board game at a convention is minimal and not only does GenCon pass on part of the ticket price, but you get the satisfaction of providing a valuable service to the convention.

Ragnarok had several interesting new products to sell, including **Dark Continents**, our new colonial period adventure supplement for **To Challenge Tomorrow**, **EsperAgents**, our new psychic spies role-playing game, **Psychotic Settings** and **Bago' Bits** for **Psychos and Slashers**, and of course, the inevitable pointless stand-up cardboard character figures called **Stand Up Guys** which were so popular we ended up giving them away as part of a promotion and with any decent sized purchase (if you make an order don't be surprised to see some in the mail when you get it). Our best sellers were **EsperAgents** and **Psychos and Slashers** related stuff, as one might have expected, though we sold quite a few more **Abyss** back issues than usual. A lot of regular Ragnarok customers stopped by and we made contact with some new writers and artists as well. Particularly promising were several distributors representatives who came by the booth and picked up samples and promised orders in the fall. Of course, one of them was spotted later talking to himself in the hallways, so the value of these contacts still needs to be evaluated.

We did a couple of pointless promotions and contests, tried to gimmick things up a bit, put up lots of posters and generally took a fairly light attitude to running the booth. My favorite promotion was



putting up posters taken from the (still) unreleased **WorldCraft** volume of **Ysgarth**, featuring a fairly eye-catching picture which is only explained in a single line of an out of print supplement and in more detail in **WorldCraft**, and a riddle written in Kymric script, which could be decoded by someone who had **Abyss #28**, but only if they also knew the Kymric language, which no one who hasn't read the unpublished 'Language and Linguistics' section of **WorldCraft** could do. What this silly promotion achieved was to confuse a lot of people and cause them to come by the booth for an explanation, and then (theoretically), they were meat for our carnivorous sales techniques.

Overall sales were passable, heavily dominated by first-time buyers, and particularly strong on Thursday and Sunday, defying traditional patterns. At this point I can also conclude that the follow-up sales were unusually good, probably the result of improved catalogs, flyers and order sheets which premiered this year.

We were awed throughout the convention by the hypesmanship of Chaosium and FASA. While FASA went the high-tech route with its **Shadowrun** pins and **BattleTech** combat simulators, we came into a lot more contact with Chaosium and its 'Wheel of Fate', Shoggoth slime-pit grab bag and other, stranger methods of attracting attention. Despite all this, some of their new stuff looked pretty good, including the new **Great Old Ones** supplement.

We had some nice interaction with other dealers, including chatting with Amy Leker of Skyrealms (but never hooking up with them for a much anticipated **Jorune** session with Andrew Leker) and Richard Tchotka of Tri-Tac. I even took time to apologize to the folks at Lion Rampant for my review of their much-maligned **Ars Magica**, and I picked up some of their new stuff so I could do a reevaluation.

One of the best aspects of the convention was that I think I picked up more review copies of stuff than ever before, especially from Chaosium, R. Talsorian Games, GDW and a bunch of newer companies. If anyone is interested in doing reviews for **Abyss** they should contact me. There seemed to be a lot of new releases and more small companies than I have seen in a couple of years, so perhaps the future of gaming is looking a little brighter.

The one regular event I got to play in was a very loosely run AD&D game, which was a lot of fun, with no mechanics employed and a lot of intrigue and political manipulation. The players in our group were good, and while the GM was a more than a tad twisted, the overall result was three hours of pretty good role-playing. Ian played in a number of other events, but I think that his last GenCon review was too traumatic for him, so we may never hear what he thought of them.

While in Milwaukee we also got to pursue our other passion, and play a round of Disc Golf at Deer Park, which was a pretty good course, though the mosquitos were huge.

On Sunday we wrapped things up, exhausted as usual, and embarked on the long drive back to the land of the longhorn, another GenCon under our belts. Maybe we'll see you there in 1990?

Echoes...

From the Abyss

Dear David,

*Abyss #43 arrived today—I'm glad to see that my letter was published, and that you took the time to comment on it. Freedom of the press is good, as long as we don't abuse it. I did not suggest that you stuff the ballot box for the Origins Awards by becoming members of the AAGAD, but to ensure that your games get on the ballot. Living in California, I cannot find any Ragnarok products out here, which means the gamers will not be able to enjoy the quality of your work, like *Siege & Fortress*, which I thought was well done, and said so in my review in SpaceGamer.*

Speaking of SpaceGamer, it got a raw deal when DTI bought it back in 1985. As one of the editors and writers, I know we did the best we could, but when you are a RPG product published by a company of wargamers, you tend to get pushed to the back of the printing schedule. However, not everyone involved with DTI is a slime, but to avoid legal problems, the guilty shall remain nameless. To bring your readers up to date, DTI merged with World Wide Wargames in 1988, and I became editor of SpaceGamer. I got out 3 issues (#83-85), although 3W held each one up due to lack of money, and then printed them on newsprint, and all but refused to pay the writers. My constant protests lead to my being replaced as editor. It seems that SpaceGamer, like most of the small print-run RPG magazines, will be on a 'whenever-we-have-the-money-schedule. However, you are correct about Gateways (Fluff!) and White Wolf (Writing good reviews to get ads).

You spoke of the Dragon (Circulation: 115,000) and White Dwarf (Circulation: 80,000) of being nothing more than pure house organs for their companies. You're right! But have you talked to the people who work for these magazines? They simply publish what their market wants, and the gamers are happy with it, and so are the retailers who sell the magazines. If the gamers weren't happy, neither magazine would have the circulation that it currently enjoys.

However, you do not use sales numbers as a mark of success, as you stated in your reply to my letter in issue #42. Well, what do you use as a mark of success?

Let's look at Palladium Books again. They are about to sell their one millionth RPG product within the next month. I don't know about you, but most people find this to be most impressive, as it shows that they are turning out a quality line of products.

I have one gripe with the GenCon/Origins review. As a convention manager, I, along with several others, take exception to the comment "It was poorly run, megalithic and far too much for the con organizers to handle, but what con isn't". Just because I didn't like some aspects of the show, he shouldn't put all conventions in the same boat.

Lastly, I bring up 2nd Edition AD&D. As one of the playtesters, I didn't like the removal of some of the 'pagan' material, but they feel it was required in order to give this hobby a better image, since the general public has only seen the one-sided media attacks on role-playing games. By the way, since we're on the subject, hard core AD&D players have not been alienated by the boatload by the new rules, as was suggested in the 'Whisperings' column.

Jeff Albanese
DTI/3W
Long Beach, CA

bit, but the real problem is that good games from small companies get no notice at all, because while one or two AAGAD members may have seen the games, they haven't gotten the widespread distribution yet. The result is that nominations tend to represent the advertising budget of a game and the number of review copies which were sent out, rather than the quality of the design or the playability of the game. This leaves small companies having to hope that they can get reviews in magazines at the right time to get some attention, or just sending out copies of their eligible games to potential voters to try to attract attention, a very chancy prospect at best.

As you pointed out, most gamers are happy sheep, willing to be lead around by their nose by magazines like *Dragon*. Their willingness, even eagerness to be victimized doesn't make it right.

You mention Palladium and their millionth sale. That's pretty impressive, especially considering what an inferior product they generally produce, and it speaks largely to the gullibility of the gaming consumer. What I judge success by is whether or not a designer or a company produce a good, playable, imaginative game. Palladium has never had this as their goal. The goal of Palladium is to make money, with poorly designed games supported by popular licenses and massive advertising. Their production values are impressive, but this will never make a game like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* any better for the minds or role-playing experiences of players than *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cereal is for their diet. Palladium is a wonderful example of what is wrong with gaming. They started out as a small company and as they pursued the almighty buck, they sacrificed whatever principles they once had. Sales are not a sign of the quality of the product, they are a sign of the marketing and packaging. What is inside most Palladium games does not compare favorably with what is outside, but the gaming consumer doesn't learn that until after he has been chalked up as another step towards their millionth sale.

As for conventions, I've attended a lot of them, and tend to agree with Ian. I know he's been to a number of Origins and GenCons as well as many local conventions. My experience bears out what he said. With some exceptions, convention managements invariably overreach their ability to perform what they promise. That's only natural, but the result is that sometimes events start late, get lost, referees don't show up, and things just go awry. I've run about a dozen conventions and the job is an ongoing battle against entropy. When Origins was being held regularly by the same people in the same place, they had experience and precedents to work from, now that it is moving around, a new group of inexperienced (at least with a convention of this size) people get to run it every year. That assures a certain amount of chaos. I haven't been to an Origins since the last one at Widener College which was really run well. Detroit and Dallas were unmitigated disasters, and clearly Milwaukee also had its problems.

I don't know about the AD&D players where you are, but around here there are two groups (or boatloads). One group likes the changes, and the other is offended and refuses to have anything to do with the new edition. I've seen two strange results. A lot of AD&D players have just switched to other games, deciding that if they are going to follow the route of AD&D II they might as well go all the way to a real skill-based game. Another interesting trend (and this may be what made you think AD&D II went over well) is that non AD&D players seem to be voicing more acceptance and respect for the new edition, because it has made some concessions to more modern trends in RPG design. Of course, this by no means suggests that they would consider playing AD&D II. Of course AD&D II will sell well. It will attract the portion of the market already mentally enslaved by TSR and its high production values will attract new players. This is not necessarily a good thing, because the unnecessary complexity and sloppy design of the game (the product of committee-style designing) has been proven to eventually alienate players if they don't expand their horizons to more coherently designed game systems.—DNJ

Dear Dave,

*You asked for it you got it. I am a female gamer, and *Ars Magica* player. I really have to question whether you read the game, or just skimmed it so that you could fill blank space in Abyss with an equally vacuous review. If you want to know why there aren't more women in your gaming groups, it is because we are playing *Ars Magica* (that 'throw back' and 'dismal failure' as reviewed in #43). You say, "I'm a man, so by nature I can only guess what women want in a role-playing campaign." Obviously by your views on *Ars Magica*, you guessed wrongly. Even though your review of the *First Edition* came out after the release of the game's *Second Edition*, I still decided to take the opportunity to correct your misinterpretations.*

It seems that you came into the review with your head full of

[Regarding the AAGAD. Stuffing the ballot box appears to be standard practice, regardless of how they structure the awards. The companies which have a large number of employees and encourage nominating campaigns tend to be disproportionately represented, at least a little

ideas of what the system would be, and when the authors digressed from your perfect path of thought, you refused to follow them. If I may, I will address particulars.

You stated that the idea of a player having more than one character (magus and companion) would "guarantee" that no character would get fully developed, and that the player/character distinction would be "permanently" muddled. Hmm...the way Dustin Hoffman was the same in Tootsie and Rainman? I would say that the task of character development lies with the player, and since the player's two characters would not adventure together (p. 4 *Ars Magica*) there is plenty of space for each to develop into fully fleshed out characters. So far I have never confused my stuttering, snaggle-toothed, sharp-eyed Corporemagus with my quick-tempered, simple minded, Faerie-blood archer. Nor have my troupe mates ever confused me with either of them.

"*Ars Magica* makes the individual secondary to the group and role-playing less significant than goal achievement." Wrong-o. By suggesting that an individual may be secondary to the group, diversity in role-playing is encouraged. A Grog, for instance, acknowledges that his life is less important than the completion of a mission. Like a loyal soldier, he is willing to lay down his life in the line of duty. This opens new vistas of role-playing possibilities, beyond the egoism that plagues other games and the world at large. Perhaps some would find such a character conceptually difficult. But then, isn't there value in role-playing for opening the mind, not just acting out adolescent fantasies.

Also, you neglected to mention that the Personality Traits Table lists, but does not limit one to 32 traits. The authors invite you to make up your own personality traits, traits that you especially long to play out in your character. It also says that this is only an indicator of tendencies that your character has. A character with a tendency towards cowardliness may want to be brave in the face of personal danger, and a brave/cowardly role provides a basis for role-playing this internal conflict. It is by no means a system to tell the player what the character feels.

As for "Troop (sic)-style play": I have found that troupe-style play brings much more diversity and excitement into the campaign, garnering the ideas of many players and encouraging their active involvement. I do not feel that good role-playing has been "virtually impossible" for me with this system. By allowing me to have more than one character, I have been able to play in a campaign where I can play a fighter, archer, even a wood cutter, without being squashed by the powerful lead character (in this case Magi). I can devote time to giving the wood cutter skill and personality, all the while knowing that in future adventures I too will have the chance to explore the hidden nature of vis (magical power) with my wizard.

And here we finally get back to the issue of me being a female role-player. I am sick of playing games which limit the type of character I can play. I've found that the frustrated young men that make up many gaming groups have more trouble distinguishing player/character differentiation than I have. Because I play a short-sighted, illiterate bush witch, doesn't mean that I am short-sighted, illiterate or a witch! I became sick of being offered the position of the campaign's 'killer bimbo'. I think it is wrong to assume the dominance of "historically based subservient roles." Women have wielded tremendous influence and importance, even outside the bedroom and kitchen. Their contributions have just gone unacknowledged most of the time.

I am interested in playing out the intrigues of being a court wizard, of exploring the implications of demons in the faerie forest, of adventuring to find and coerce into service an apprentice, of enchanting and bonding a familiar (correct me if this sounds like 'dungeon delving'). I can't say that I have ever fought "parties of non-player characters from different modules" in an "arena" of any sort, nor does the prospect appeal to me. Perhaps it is coincidence that there are three other women in my *Ars Magica* group, perhaps the stuff of wizards is a "feminine" environment (are you serious?!); perhaps with women in role-playing the industry will be full of more "dismal failures" like the success of *Ars Magica*.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Nicole Linders
Northfield, MN

I'm very glad you wrote. As I have said before, I don't judge success by sales or by any criteria other than the effectiveness and playability of a game. *Ars Magica* deserves some credit. It is far better than many other games on the market. But, if anything, that singles it out for criticism where there are flaws, because the designers certainly could have gone further and done better. If it were a truly bad game, it could just be written off. To preface my responses to the rest of your letter, I do want to say that we have a new review (possibly two) of *Ars Magica* scheduled for next issue, based on the second edition, though I give no guarantee that it will be a rave.

I wasn't aware that you were the spokesperson for all women everywhere. I also wasn't aware that women are all playing *Ars Magica*. Your view is skewed by the group you play with. Does it mean anything that I haven't met any female *Ars Magica* players here in Austin? Or that I know of groups playing other games which are almost entirely female? Does having an 80% female AD&D group make AD&D the game for women role-players? I think you play your own gender short by making the assumption that they don't have widely varied interests as gamers, or that they are all attracted by the same things you like.

You are right that I came to *Ars Magica* with some preconceptions. Having met and played with the designers I assumed that it would be an interesting and innovative game. I came to *Ars Magica* expecting the best, and perhaps my reaction was a product of my disappointment. The other preconception I approached it with was a set of assumptions developed over 16 years of gaming of where gaming is going today and the tendencies in game concept and design which are leading the market. Every reviewer does this. Every one of us has an idea of what a good game is. That's the standard by which we judge the products we review.

Your descriptions of your characters show much of what is wrong with *Ars Magica*. The fact that you think you can sum your characters up with a few catch-words from a personality table is fascinating. It shows that *Ars Magica* has succeeded in creating the illusion of role-playing while circumventing the meat of the originality which should be the heart of it. Look at your Dustin Hoffman analogy. The fact that Hoffman plays two different roles does not mean that those characters should not be distinct and totally different individuals, and he certainly doesn't play two roles at the same time. I endorse the idea of multiple characters for variety, but not the idea of playing more than one character at the same time or sharing characters between players. In the same paragraph where you point out that the rules suggest not playing a Magus and a Companion at the same time, they endorse playing Groggs at the same time as another character, or even sharing the play of Groggs, which goes directly against the concept of character development and individualism for characters. If you are going to have them in a RPG in the function they fulfill, Groggs should be people too.

Saying that playing a Grog who is subservient to the 'mission' is good role-playing makes two excellent points. First, that the role of the Grog is as strictly limited as that of any character class in AD&D — where does your denial of character classes stand when you can refer to the three types of characters in the system by a single name each? Second, it also points out the 'mission' oriented nature of the game, the reliance on the theme of quests and adventures instead of more realistic types of structure for play, a clear throwback to the primitive roots of role-playing. The point is that you don't say "Fred the Grog acknowledges that his life is less important than the completion of the mission," but that it is a characteristic of all Groggs, indicating a severe mechanical limitation on the class which will certainly interfere with individualism in role-playing.

As for subservience to a group or a goal or a game system being good for role-playing, you are merely trying to make excuses for a system which you enjoy despite its shortcomings. Being told how to play your character and what you can do and what you can't do by the game system can be challenging for a couple of sessions, but ultimately that kind of denial of imagination and originality can only work against good role-playing.

As for the women in role-playing aspect, don't judge all groups out there by your experience. I agree that there are many good female role-players, but there are also many good male role-players, even if you have not encountered them. Don't let your experiences lead you to unjustified chauvinism.

All this aside, *Ars Magica* may very well have a special appeal to women. I haven't seen enough groups or heard from enough people to make a sound judgement on the topic. Maybe all this furor will lead to something. — DNJ

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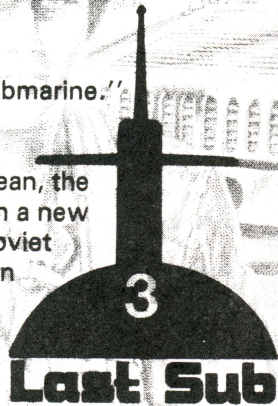
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Evensong

Alan Blount

When Marette died I came home from the mines to the house we had built when she and I were young and the rocky fields held the promise of great things.

As I topped the hill and left the shadow of the Abbey of Celair, I could see our cottage, somewhat worse for the years, where my abandoned wife waited still in her grave and where I would find Lirela, the daughter I had loved from afar and held to me with my silver instead of with my arms.

Lirela waited in an old cane chair by the door. She saw me and she knew me, though I'd never been a father to her in anything but ties of flesh and finance. She would have run to strike me, not embrace me, but her body would not put an action to the hatred in her eyes.

I saw that she was lovely as her mother, light and lissome, but her face was drawn and wasted with exhaustion and a fear I could not name.

We exchanged no words of greeting. She followed me haltingly into the house, staring as I reacquainted myself with surroundings which have become unfamiliar with the years.

She watched me all through the afternoon, never speaking. At sunset Lirela came to me as I sat by her mother's grave, reading a fable to her as I had when we were young and she couldn't sleep for hunger and despair. She had made a stew of salt pork and lentils and we shared it in silence to the sound of evensong from the abbey. It seemed she had accepted my presence, if not forgiven me, and I was content with that.

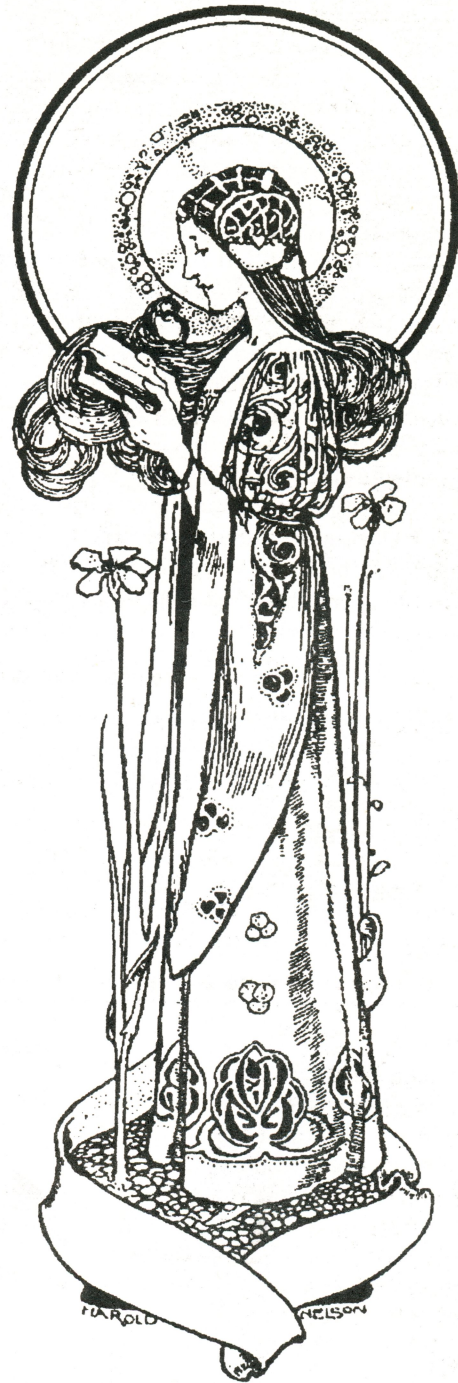
In the next days my fat purse was thinned a little with fancies for the house and gifts from the village to try to buy Lirela's favor.

We passed the days in silence, until one morning as the monks sang matins, Lirela finally spoke, in a voice that creaked and sputtered, crying "Damn and curse their canting," looking at the abbey with a hate greater even than she had for me.

After that I heard her voice more often, though she still words were spare and her voice was hoarse. With time her heart seemed to soften. In bits and broken pieces I learned about her mother and of the wasting illness which had stolen the life from her.

More and more she reminded me of Marette, in the spread of her hair on a pillow, in the touch of her hand on the doorframe, though she was silent about the house unlike her mother who lightened shores with song. As we grew more familiar, she seemed to weaken, her strength waning with her hatred. I lay the changes off to the surroundings and to morbidity at the death of her mother.

I resolved that for her health and for my fortunes we would return to Mouleme where I could return to work and provide better for Lirela's support in a healthier atmosphere. She seemed to accept my plan with resignation, though as the days passed it seemed that the longer I delayed the less likely it was that she would be able to travel at all.



She took to spending her days in bed and I took to the kitchen to provide the rough but hardy meals I had learned to live on at the mines.

One morning when I woke at dawn, I found Lirela already awake and at work in the kitchen. I took that as a healthy sign, until I saw that she was peeling wax spillings from the candles of the night before with a surprising determination. She formed the wax into earplugs, which I took, at first, as a sign of madness, that her wasting fever had finally entered her mind.

When I asked her what she needed earplugs for she only made a whispered moan and put the plugs in her ears, to make her hearing match her voice which seemed to have faded completely. She lay down, curled up on her bed, the sheets drawn over her head, as if hiding, as the sweet voices of the from the Abbey on the hill began to sing evensong.

The next morning at the sound of matins I walked down to the village. I traded our house and land for two mules, a horse and enough silver to fill my depleted purse for the trip back to Mouleme. The price was lower than I had hoped for, but I was eager to be on the road and wasted little time in the elaborate bargaining rituals which I might have taken pleasure in on another day.

That afternoon when I returned, the house stood still and silent. I feared Lirela had left me, but she was there, in bed, asleep. When I tried to rouse her to tell her we would leave the next morning, she lay as if dead, still breathing raggedly, but her eyes stayed shut and her flesh was cool to the touch.

I had seen this sort of stupor before, when a pickman on my crew had been crushed in a rock-fall and lay insensible for two days before he died.

Covering Lirela to keep her warm, I rushed from the house and ran up the rocky slope to the abbey, hoping to find a monk physician or, fearing the worst, a priest to give the last rights.

The gates of the abbey were closed, and though I pounded on them until my hands were bruised, they remained barred. Then I heard the sweet strains of evensong beginning and realized that the monks must all be in the chantry and could not hear my calls.

I had to get their attention and assistance, so I climbed over the gate, dropping down into the dusty courtyard below. I ran through empty cloisters and tried a dozen doors which led to untenanted cells before I found a staircase up which the singing seemed to come.

My boots beat an echoed counterpoint to the singing as I rushed down the stairs. I burst into a large, light room, whose windows looked out over the valley and our cottage where

Lirela waited.

The monks stood six ranks deep, singing in six dozen voices, high and low, all at the direction of the Chorister whose hands marked out the cadences of evensong.

I hesitated to break into their vocal devotion, but desperation drove me on. I ran to the monk nearest the door and grabbed his arm for attention. I turned his slight form towards me and the cowl of his habit fell back.

I expected to see a shocked but friendly face on a round and tonsured head, but to my cringing horror, the face I saw was that of my Murette, as young and fair as when we danced at our wedding.

I cried her name, but her eyes remained fixed on the hands of the chorister, her mouth still open in song.

In fear and rage, I struck her as I had the day I left. The blow spun her around and she fell into two of brethren and the three fell to the hard stone floor.

When she hit the floor her song was cut short in a sigh and though her eyes displayed no motion, her head broke from her neck, the brittle flesh cracked and crumbling like a porcelain doll. From the hollow of her throat there breathed a foul, infernal wind, trying to sing, but finding no mouth to shape it into sound.

The song continued undisturbed by the loss of one voice in the multitude. I fled, pursued only by that mockery of holy choirs.

I found myself back at our cottage as the last strains of song echoed in my ears. I rushed inside and grabbed Lirela up from her bed, carrying her outside into the sun.

I clutched her close as I stood in the yard in the shadow of the abbey. She was light as a gourd. Her eyes stared vacantly. But, by the Lord, she sang!



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In the Speculum

Batman Sourcebook by Michael Stackpole from Mayfair Games

There are very few characters in Comic Books with more written about them than Batman. Having been around since almost the inception of comic books, the character has been analyzed, dissected and put back together more times than you can count. There is an overwhelming heap of background material for use in a superhero campaign related to the Caped Crusader. The only task is sorting out the real from the "well, yes we wrote it that way but that was in a parallel universe." Mike Stackpole tries to sift through the morass with the **Batman Sourcebook**, for **DC Heroes**.

Mr. Stackpole has been a prolific writer of gaming source material going back to **Tunnels and Trolls** and even Judges Guild. All of his material has usually been competently put forth and organized. The **Batman Sourcebook** is no exception. Starting with the character of Batman himself, his origin, secret identity and strange double life, Stackpole uses quotes from the many different comic books the character has appeared in to back up his insights into the character.

The book itself is very well written and gives you some good information on Batman, his enemies, and the whole mythos surrounding the character from *Detective Comics* and his own self-titled book. The maps and diagrams of the Batcave, the batmobile and the details of the more prominent villains that Batman has encountered over the years are well thought out and would be useful for the GM that wants to run a **DC Heroes** campaign based in Gotham City. Though all of the information here is readily available in the many comic books and anthologies out there (including the DC encyclopedia that they put out), it is much easier to simply buy this sourcebook than to purchase the comics.

My only question about the game aid comes with the concept of **DC Heroes**, rather than the work itself. With such a detailed and original character and history already thoughtfully laid out for the player and the GM, where does the roleplaying come into it. Is the player supposed to play Batman? If so, then I find it difficult to see the interest of the challenge. If, however, the idea is to use the world of the Caped Crusader as a background for your own heroes and characters, then the **Batman Sourcebook** is worth the price of admission. (Ian Hense)

Phoenix Command: Special Weapons & Wild West Weapons from Leading Edge

Special Weapons is 32 pages, with black and white illustrations, plus several charts and tables. **Wild West Weapons** is 16 pages, also with charts and tables. Leading Edge designed these primarily as data supplements for their **Phoenix Command** system of rules for tactical warfare and roleplaying, but they could be adapted to other uses.

Both books follow the format of providing the rules first, then the data charts for each weapon in turn. The tables needed are scattered throughout the pages of rules, along with examples, line drawings and humorous sidebars. There were no glaring typos and the print was easy to read. The

examples were easy enough to follow, but the rules themselves were a bit laborious and tend to bog down in play, sacrificing simplicity for realism. The scattered organization of the tables was a problem, making them hard to keep track of at times. As is the case with many other Leading Edge products, the rules in these two books, suffer from numerous abbreviations, cross-referencing, and also drawn out resolution of the procedures. This is great for realism and duplicates events accurately, but is very cumbersome for roleplaying games that de-emphasize combat and small unit tactics.

There is some very useful information here, with the **Special Weapons** book adding several interesting pieces of hardware. The rules presented were accurate and put a lot of detail into play. The **Wild West** book gives rules for fast-draw, "fanning" a revolver, and firing from horseback. The weapons included all the classic firearms of the Civil War period and the height of the west in the years after the war as well as representative examples of firearms throughout the 19th century, when the firearm as we know it developed. The **Special Weapons** book gives rules for claymore mines, miniguns, bows, and weapons of stealth (garrotes, silencers, etc.). Fire and incendiary devices are also covered in detail. A nice touch to the book is a section on weapons used by rioters and protestors and the riot control gear used to keep them in check.

These books, like other Leading Edge data supplements, do a very good job of adding to the **Phoenix Command** system. In fact, for avid players, the **Special Weapons** book would be a must, if only to get the rules for fire and for claymore mines. These people would already be familiar with the methods of abbreviations and organization. Very high realism and accuracy mark these books. However, for the roleplayer, look somewhere else. The game system is slow and cumbersome, and potential gunslingers would be severely disappointed in how hard it is to actually hit somebody with a snap shot from the hip after a fast draw. In my mind, anyone attempting to play this would be playing it for the romanticism and style of the hollywood western. They would be unhappy to find how often they are going to miss each other in those face-offs. But, for serious gamers into realism, I have yet to find a more accurate set of mechanics. (John Phelps)

The Great Old Ones from Chaosium

This is a 180 page collection of six adventures for **Call of Cthulhu**, all dealing with the Great Old Ones and fighting their power on earth. It is beautifully produced, soft-bound book with an awesome color cover and excellent interior illustrations by Tom Sullivan. In addition to the six adventure there is also a sizeable section of miscellaneous useful stuff, including blank character sheets in German, Japanese, Spanish, French and English (although the text is only in English), calendars for the period and a variety of removable handouts and clues.

The adventures themselves are each about 25 pages long, and are considerably more detailed and extensive than in previous **Call of Cthulhu** anthologies, though at times it seems like the authors are trying to fill space by going into detail

which could easily be filled in by a GM or imaginative players. 'The Spawn' is very much in the tradition of Derleth or Howard, dealing with labor troubles at a copper mine in the west and also with the emergence of the spawn of Yig. One problem in this adventure is that the author assumes that everyone knows what I.W.W. stands for, and doesn't bother to explain this acronym for Industrial Workers of the World until the fourth page of the adventure, in a boxed background section, admittedly a fault which might lie with the editors of the volume. 'The Spawn' is a good adventure, with a nice mix of both mundane and supernatural perils, and could easily be fit into most campaigns. 'Still Waters' is a fairly well executed, but very traditional adventure, in which investigators are called to travel to an old estate in New Orleans to pick up an ancient artefact, and have a run in with a murderous Cthulhuite cult. 'Tell Me, Have You Seen the Yellow Sign' is a sequel of sorts to 'Still Waters', set in the same area so that it can logically be part of an ongoing campaign, but thematically very different, combining elements of Robert Chambers' **King in Yellow** with traditional Cthulhuic elements and Hastur's interminable attempts to manifest on earth. It features good use of sub-plots and distracting events like Mardi Gras. 'One in Darkness' is surprisingly reminiscent of an episode of 'The Night Stalker'. It concerns a demonic avatar of Nyarlathotep who is living in the sewers of Boston, mysterious murders and a criminal gang. The supernatural elements are refreshingly understated and it is just the right length for one-shot play. 'The Pale God' is based on Ramsey Campbell's variations on the mythos, but should not be too familiar since Campbell's work remains pretty obscure for most readers. One of the highlights of this adventure is that the foe is the Great Old One Eihort and his Brood, which are a nice change from the usual unstoppable Cthulhu creatures, but still formidable in their numbers. 'Bad Moon Rising' is an interesting mixed-genre piece, crossing over into Science Fiction, dealing with a gate left behind by the Great Old Ones which leads from England to the moon. The explanation of the British Navy's handling of a moon mission with 1920s technology is excellent, though things get a bit too wild with the addition of a Cthulhu time machine at the end. This is the most extensive and unusual adventure in the collection, and well worth running over several sessions.

All of the adventures in **The Great Old Ones** are of relatively high quality. 'The Spawn' and 'Bad Moon Rising' are the best in the collection, but with the others as filler this would make a pretty good mini-campaign, though it might be better to ignore the half-hearted efforts made by the editors to string the adventures together and just use them individually as part of a home-grown campaign, because there are certainly a lot of players who may not be ready for an adventure as bizarre as 'Bad Moon Rising'. (Dave Nalle)

GURPS Cliffhangers by Brian J. Underhill from Steve Jackson Games

This is yet another in the endless stream of **GURPS** settings for every occasion, this time taking on the adventuring worlds of pulp heroes. **GURPS Cliffhangers** is 100 pages, softbound, with a color cover, in a magazine-like format. Unlike some of the other **GURPS** volumes, both the interior and cover art is pretty awful, but the text is clear and readable, with their standard side-bar system for notes and trivial information.

Unlike some **GURPS** backgrounds, **Cliffhangers** sticks mostly to background, with only a little in the way of mechanics. The background is solid, basic, and about what you would expect,

with history, technology, politics and organizations covered fairly thoroughly. The approach to adventuring is nice, with ten likely settings described, with specific background plus adventure ideas provided for each one, including a little section on that essential location, Antarctica. The one technical section is on 'Gadeteering', with rules for creation of Gizmos and Gadgets, and some examples. The system for their creation is pretty stripped down, and could be more interesting and comprehensive, but a good GM could flesh it out.

The notes on adventure design are pretty extensive, including an explanation of the importance of the rather difficult to play capture situation so essential to pulp adventure, and also an examination of the role of the *deus ex machina* as a plot device for an adventure. The section on campaign design is also pretty good, and there is a very traditional pulp adventure called 'Black Diamond', plus a pretty good annotated bibliography.

The ground which is covered in **GURPS Cliffhangers** has been gone over before in a number of other games, but this is a good, compact and pretty thorough presentation of the topic. One of the best things about **GURPS Cliffhangers** is the way that useful ideas for campaigns and adventures are sprinkled throughout the text, so that there is an example presented for how to use almost every idea which is brought up, which makes it an excellent resource. While this approach to the pulp genre may not have the character of some of the earlier efforts in the genre, for the stuff you need to stimulate your imagination in order to run a campaign, it is tops. (Dave Nalle)

Monsters of Myth and Legend II by Laurel Nicholson and John Keefe from Mayfair Games

When I was asked to review **Monsters of Myth and Legend II**, I was apprehensive. Anything with a "II" after it is bound to be the rejects from the original, much like Hollywood sequels. I must say I wasn't surprised. I started by turning to the table of contents to see what lay ahead of me. The five different mythos that Mayfair had decided to cover in this volume had to be five of the most useless mythos for a fantasy campaign. African, Central American, Japanese, Middle Eastern and **ESKIMO**?!?!? Sure some of these could be useful somewhere, someday. But for ten dollars, I could go to the library and do my own research and get much more information than what is provided here. I may be maligning Mayfair unjustly, as I have not seen the first **Monsters of Myths and Legend**, but their coverage of even these rare and hardly used mythos' is woefully inadequate. In listing the deities for the South American mythology, they only list two. Two? Only two of the Aztec and Incan deities are important enough to list? Even **Legends and Lore** had the decency to list ten or so.

At first I thought they might of made the book as a supplement to **Deities and Demigods** (or **Legends and Lore**). But they also list several of the deities that are already in the **AD&D** books, such as Gilgamesh and Ishtar.

As for the monster descriptions and deity descriptions, they are fairly indepth, but I found it difficult to care. The effort and work required to work something like a Ingililik into my campaign would just not be worth it.

For anyone that wishes to do a campaign set in any of these mythos or areas, it would be far easier, more detailed and cheaper to just go to the city library and check out a few good books on the subject. You would get a more comprehensive picture and could make up the stats for yourself.

But if there are those of you out there that

have no imagination, are tired of using the wealth of information you already get with your **AD&D** books and are looking for something out of the ordinary to have your players campaign in, this just might be your bag. But please don't buy it for the production quality, as the art sucks, the paper is cheap, and three colors in the interior doesn't fix that. But hey, for you Boris fans, they must have paid him some bucks for the cover. But don't get your hopes up kiddies. No tits. (Ian Hense)

Monsters of Myth and Legend II by Laurel Nicholson and John Keefe from Mayfair Games

I realize that we already have one review of this game aid in this issue, but coming from my background as a mythologer, I felt a definite need to say more about the cesspool that is **Monsters of Myth and Legend II**. Ian has already covered the technical aspects. I wanted to look at the problems in the text.

At the beginning of the section on 'African Mythology' they offer an unintentional disclaimer: "The many gods of Africa vary according to specific regions...however, there are common elements...which are prevalent throughout the continent." They then proceed to horribly mix together mythos and creatures from a number of distinct and very different African cultures, with no effort whatsoever to identify what part of Africa they are from, or which ones are related to each other mythologically. There are other technical errors, like describing Esu as a 3 foot tall man with horns, rather than as a normal-looking man with an immense phallus, and they describe his pranks as 'minor', a strange description for a deity known as the Avenger of the Gods. In many cases descriptions seem to be virtually made up from whole cloth. The description of Shango is bowdlerized, having him ride off into heaven, rather than going mad, killing his whole family and committing suicide before entering heaven. Instead of having three wives, he suddenly has two sisters and a wife. The whole mythos is incomplete. Why take four Yoruba gods out of dozens and mix them in with Bantu and Masai creatures? This is (perhaps unintentionally) a grossly bigoted misrepresentation of Africa, outrageous oversimplification of an entire continent of myths and beliefs with the meat ripped out of it and none of the essential elements of the interplay of cultures and societies. The authors pander gruesomely to the **AD&D** audience, assigning **AD&D** languages and spells to African creatures at random, robbing them of their individuality.

This trend continues. With thousand of years of Native American history and legend, with dozens of peoples to choose from, why take one god each from the Aztec and Maya religions, ignoring hordes of others, and paying no attention to other rich cultures like those of the Inca and Iroquois people?

Perhaps the worst area is the 'Mideast Mythology' section. In the introduction they claim to have drawn from the myths of the Summerians and the Persians. Apparently they have no idea who these people are, since almost all of the gods and creatures discussed are from the myths of other population groups. Which I suppose is just as well, since the Phoenicians certainly wouldn't want to acknowledge this horribly bastardized version of Baal. Suddenly the six-aspect god of nature has become a wargod, and instead of having one of his aspects be Tsaphon, that is now the name of his castle. Apparently Addad's Bull has run away from him, because they give stats for the bull, but not for Addad. Ishtar seems to have lost contact with the dawn and sunset, has lost her chariot and

bow, and seems to have somehow become a water goddess. To top things off, Pazuzu, who almost everyone should be familiar with by now, has gone from being a single Summerian plague demon to being a whole race of flying lion things. The only nice thing here is the inclusion of Scorpion Men, which were a glaring omission in **Legends and Lore**.

This is what it is. If something is worth doing, it is worth doing right. Mythology for role-playing games is definitely something worth doing, but a flashy Boris cover does not make this horrible insult to our intelligence an adequate substitute for decent scholarship and respect for the reader. A lot of the market for these **AD&D** companion aids is the younger gamers, and it seems like a real crime to pass this tripe off on them as mythology, barefacedly lying to them about some of the most fascinating elements of our cultural past. Anyone who knows anything about mythology who buys **Monsters of Myth and Legend II** will be insulted, and even the typical **AD&D** player doesn't deserve to be robbed and deceived. (Dave Nalle)

Reve de Dragon (Dream of the Dragon) by Denis Gerfaud

from Nouvelles Editions Fantastiques

This is a rare treat, a chance to review a role-playing game developed and published in Europe. **Reve de Dragon** is the first RPG I've seen which was produced for a non-English speaking audience, and although it was published in 1985, the quality of the production suggests that it is probably still available, at least in France. The usefulness of a game written in French for the unilingual American audience is questionable, but there are probably some out there who would like to hear where role-playing is going in the Old World.

Reve de Dragon is published in two 80 page 8 1/2 by 11 1/2 books, the first is titled *The Adventure*, and covers character creation and the basic mechanics. The second is *The Dream*, and deals with magic and fantasy world background. Both books have fairly attractive two color covers, and they are packaged together in a full-color, illustrated folder which doubles as a GMs screen with charts and tables on the inside. For the amount in the package, the price is extremely high, at around \$40, but that seems to be typical of games published in Europe.

In the first book a lot of time is given to explaining the nature of role-playing, the technical aspects, and all of the things which players unfamiliar with the genre would need to know, including dice and how to simulate them if you can't get hold of the right kind. There are sixteen basic characteristics, more than I've seen in any other system, rolled on 1D10+5. Most of the standard stats are included. Some of the stranger additions include stats for the five basic senses, for Eloquence, and most interestingly, for Dream (Reve), which is essentially a magical talent statistic, which is emphasized heavily in the mechanics. In addition, there are four secondary characteristics determined from the sixteen basic stats, including a basic combat attack stat, two stats for missile combat (one for accuracy and one for range) and an evasion/defense value. There is a skill system which has overtones of a class system. Skills are grouped, and the costs of skills vary between the groups. You start with 2800 Experience points to spend on skills. Mages must allocate a portion of those to magical skills and spells. Depending on the cost of a skill, you spend experience points and gain bonuses based on how much you have spent on a given skill. The selection of skills is fairly good, especially for combat, though some social type skills are also included. Costs are highest for

the more specialized magical and technical skills, and lowest for social type skills. The biggest weakness of the skill system is that skills can only be advanced around a dozen steps, depending on the difficulty of the skill, rather than a more open-ended system. In addition to all this, tables are provided for determining bonuses for damage and the like, and also for rolling for physical traits and description and for various aspects of background, including astrological sign. One very odd aspect of the system is that once you have determined your bonus with a skill, you then run that through a table to determine a percentage chance of success. A system for actions in a round is provided, based mostly on common sense, and there are extensive rules for things like movement, encumbrance, morals (a single axis rolled alignment system) and stress. Experience is also covered, awarded for the use of skills, and capable of being spent on skills and characteristics. One of the most interesting aspects of the game is the introduction of astrology and dreams into the system. There is a large section on the effects which the stars and other bodies have on a character's luck, with bonuses accorded on good days and penalties on inauspicious days. The dream element is linked closely to the magic system and is covered in the second book.

Combat is also covered in the first book. The system is very detailed and fairly realistic, using a modifier system, and taking into account a lot of factors like reach and a variety of combat tactics. Combat results are basically determined through a pure critical hit type system which wears down a character's Life Points, resulting in loss of ability and ultimately death. Hit location and aimed blows are not covered, and there is a very cursory separate system for martial arts. Healing is also covered very briefly, including rest and fatigue and also non-magical healing. There is a special section on medicine based on pretty well developed medical skills, and also on purchased healing in the form of potions. There is also a section on purchasing weapons and equipment.

The Adventure is rounded out with material for the Game Master, including information on the design of some fairly inventive traps and poisons and also a short section of information on creatures, all of them created with the same statistics, though on different ranges, as human characters, and almost all of the creatures original to the game world, with the exception of some very pedestrian undead. On the whole, the first book of *Reve de Dragon* is interesting. It is a relatively advanced game, in the tradition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but with a workable, though somewhat limited,

skill system and not too much added complexity. There is a certain lack of organization and ordering to the material, but the explanations are all fairly clear. There are an awful lot of modifiers to be considered in combat, and boiling all the strategies covered down to two die rolls with all the modifiers added in seems pretty restrictive, but if you don't let all the encumbrance and movement rules drive you batty, it plays pretty smoothly.

The second book is where *Reve de Dragon* shines. Like *Ars Magica*, it is a game which emphasizes magic and the supernatural very heavily, though it does it considerably more creatively. If you chop through the florid writing (the literary style is very French), you discover that "The world is the dream of dragons. We are all dreams of the dragons." This is their justification for magic. The world of play is the dream world of magical creatures, and though the philosophy gets a bit thick, the basic point is that magic and the supernatural are the product of those who can slip between dream and reality and take control of part of the dream. The greatest of those who can do this are four dream lords or masters, Oniros, Hypnos, Narcos and Thanatos, the equivalent of gods in the dream world. The styles of magic break down into the four areas controlled by these lords, as does the geography of the dream world. A rather poor map is provided, with random tables for magic and encounters, along with some good description. After the background of magic, and its origins are covered, special rules are provided for researching and learning spells. There are different ways to learn, from instruction, to reading, to gross experimentation. Ability to learn is based on the Dream and Intellect stats, a roll, the method of study and the time spent studying, plus the experience points spent on the particular spell or effect. As is the case with other skills, proficiency is limited to 14 steps.

A good selection of spells is provided, and spells are very different between the four groups, with Oniros specializing in enchantment type magic, Hypnos specializing in nature and illusion, Narcos specializing in Ritualistic type magic and Thanatos specializing in summoning and spirit magic. What is most interesting is that in addition to specializing by area, there are also different ways of doing magic, including rituals, devices, invocations and all sorts of applications, and each group has specialized items and tools which they can create. Casting magic is much simpler than learning it, based on a percentile roll just like other skills with a limited table for spell fumbles. The ideas in the magic system are the highlight of *Reve de Dragon*, and possess a certain vision and character which other fantasy systems could benefit

from emulating.

At the end of the second book there is a short (probably too short) adventure and a four page character sheet which includes a lot of space for equipment and information.

Reve de Dragon is a fascinating game. While a lot of the mechanics don't appeal to me, it is certainly as playable as many other games on the market, and it has certain basic ingredients like a decent skill system. What does appeal to me is the basic background idea and the detail and variety which has gone into developing the magic system. Magic seems like it might be too powerful for real game balance, but it can also be a lot of fun, and there are many possibilities. I would actually have liked to see more world background, more on societies and organizations and important individuals from the background world, something which the background material that was included in the game made me yearn for.

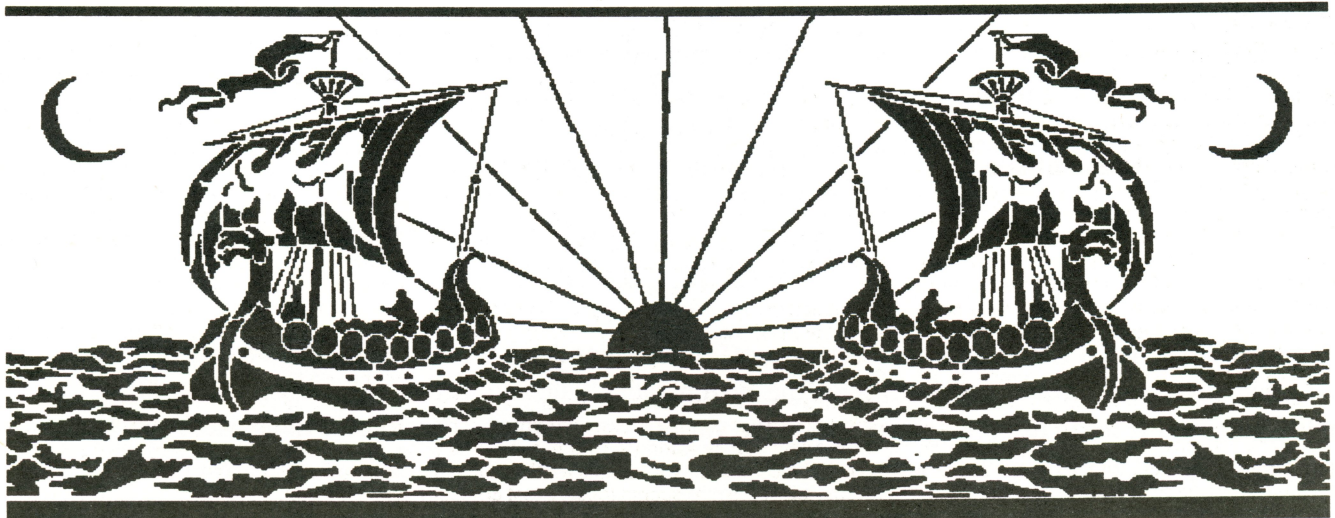
If you can find it, and if you read French, check out *Reve de Dragon*. Perhaps some enterprising company will translate it into English someday, though if that is done, some added organization and some work on updating the mechanics would also be a good idea. (Dave Nalle)

A Game

by A. Game Designer
from Some Publishing Company

This has to be one of the most miserable excuses for a gaming aid that it has been my sorry pleasure to review. I cannot believe that such a product would ever be produced, let alone that anyone with half a brain would ever think of buying it. With its incomprehensible and insipid mechanics, and its lame attempts at pandering to the unicorn and dragon crowd, it brings itself into the utter depths of gaming depravity and lust for a buck. Hidden behind a slick cover and an amazing collection of sexually suggestive art that only arrested adolescents could enjoy, the makers try and convince you that you might have some use for their product, when in reality, you will more than likely buy it because it looks so nice, open it up and realize that you have been ripped off for over twenty bucks. Then you'll throw it into the pile of other useless garbage that you have been conned into buying in the past and it will sit there for decades while you take up a less mercenary hobby like golf, or selling used cars.

This game aid is all that is wrong with gaming today, and I condemn it and its makers to a purgatory of their own making! (Ian Hense)



Races by Design

Carl Jones

Ysgarth is an interminably flexible game. One area of flexibility is the skill and skill benefit system which potentially allows GameMasters to design their own races within clearly defined, logical and consistent parameters. This can be done fairly simply with a system of Quality Points for designing skill benefits and other racial characteristics and by balancing off advantages against disadvantages.

For the purposes of this system there are five groups of skills in which a race can have benefits. These are Combat Skills, Magic Skills, Thieving & Movement Skills, Craft Skills and Magical Spells. Combat Skills include all Skills numbered in the 3000s. Magic Skills include all those numbered in the 2000s. Thieving Skills include movement and survival skills found in the 1000s, open to a certain degree of interpretation. Craft Skills are all other skills in the 1000s and 4000s. Magical Spells are, of course, spells of all sorts found in SpellCraft.

Each Skill Benefit costs a certain set number of QP, depending on which group it falls in. Each race must have at least 4 pairs of Skill Benefits and may have no more than 6 pairs of Skill Benefits. Pairs must be within 1 QP in cost of each other. Multiple SBs with the same skill can go up to -3, but that would cost three times the base QP cost, and SBs may not reduce skill costs below half or two whichever is greater. If a SB is given for a range of skills instead of a single skill the QP cost is increased by 50%, rounded up. The QP costs by group are: Combat-3, Thieving-2, Spells-4, Craft-1, Magic-3.

Size Class Modifier can also be adjusted. Each increase or decrease of 5 on the SCM from a normal of 70 costs 2 QP. Humans are limited to plus or minus 15, but there is no limit for non-humans.

Characteristic limits can also be adjusted. For non-humans increases are limited to no more than 15 total points of increased limits in any one grouping (these groupings are different from the normal characteristic groupings) and no more than 30 overall. For humans the limits are 5 in any group and 10 overall. The three groups are: 1-STR, CON, JUD, INT; 2-WIL, DEX, AGI, SOC; 3-CHA, APP, TAL, ZEA. In addition, all increases must be balanced by lowered maximums in that same group. Thus, if the STR limit was raised from the norm of 24 to 36 a parallel reduction would be needed in JUD, CON or INT.

Most of the traditional Ysgarth races conform reasonably closely to this system, though not all are exact fits, and whether you use the system exactly is up to you. After all, nature and society are not always as balanced as these rules are. One of the nicest applications of this system is in creating sub-races and cultures within standard groups, for example, the Cyveni Hill Tribes, a Kymric sub-group is given below, as are the Mnerrar, another non-human race of intelligent felines.

The Cyveni

- 2 Bow or Hunting
- 1 Wilderness Survival or Fishing
- 1 Bowery or Tanning
- 1 Broadsword or Round Shield
- 10 SCM

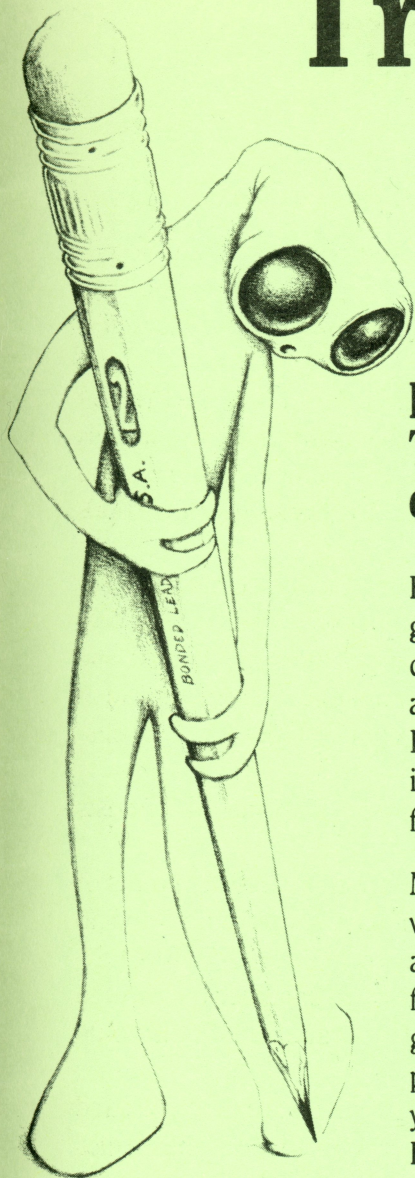
The Mnerrar

- 1 Component or Contagion
- 1 Dagger or Crossbow
- 2 Cat Fall or Tumbling
- 1 Hunting or Silent Movement
- 25 SCM
- DEX 30, AGI 32, WIL 10, CON 28, STR 26, JUD 18, APP 30, TAL 30
- ZEA 18, CHA 18

This uses exactly 24 QP. If you have one or two QP left over don't worry too much about them.

Human society is varied, far more than the dozen races listed in **RoleCraft** or even the larger number in **WorldCraft**, and you can use this system to add the variety you want or to customize the basic **Ysgarth** mechanics to any outre type of world which appeals to you.

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