Back to BasiX

**A new quarterly Fanzine dedicated to a simpler time of RPGs—
covering the Basic and Expert editions of Dungeons & Dragons.**

Edition Overlap? — *A Letter from the Fanzine Creator*

I knew at some point that a simple fanzine, created to celebrate a 30 year-old roleplaying system, would get under someone's skin. Could this fanzine bother someone in some way? Well, I recently had a discussion with an admin of a BECMI group about the B/X inclusion or exclusion within the BECMI universe. So, the obvious is this: B/X, edited by Moldvay and Cook is not the same as Mentzer's BECMI, but can we agree that they both were Gygaxian, mainly differing in their presentation styles and scope? I mean, they both started in the Basic and Expert levels of a non-AD&D system. Sure, the BECMI version expanded the system to allow for higher-level characters, war-gaming, planar travel, and godly actions, but both are rooted in the same core principles and system designs. So what's the problem then? Who takes issue with the comparison?

It seems that certain extremists of BECMI don't want anything to do with B/X material. Facebook and other forum groups dedicated to the BECMI version desperately try to keep the two groups from crossing over, maintaining that the systems are different. There's a fine line between preservationist and extremist and I found out firsthand how the latter feel about B/X.

I'm not going to waste too much space in this fanzine about the discussion or its ridiculousness. I will say however, that this little quarterly 'zine will celebrate **both** B/X and BECMI. We'll probably keep much of the material in the lower levels of the systems, where most of us tend to play. As for differences, I see nothing that prevents using references from both versions. If this upsets you, I apologize. We're going to overlap the editions for simplicity. *Thom Wilson*

— Issue #3 Details —

1st printing — 75 copies

Publishing News

In late 2015, I backed a Kickstarter project for a tremendously useful product for B/X game play; the **B/X Monster Reference Index** by Peter Regan of Squarehex.

If you haven't seen this product and you regularly play Basic or Expert, you're missing out on a great item for the table. The spiral-bound flipbook has over 500 Basic and Expert monsters listed, in alphabetical order, each displayed with their critical statistics for easy reference. The number of creatures in this book for B/X came not only from the Basic and Expert rulebooks, but from other compatible rule sets (e.g. 1E). Every wonder what the stats for an Ogrillon would be in B/X? Look no further! This index has them!

In addition to the flipbook, I also received several handy charts including to-hit tables, a damage-by-weapon list, and the experience-by-HD reference. Everything you need to run combat against countless foes!

You can purchase the PDF version of **B/X Monster Reference Index** on RPGNow.com (publisher: Gold Piece Publications) or a print copy directly from Squarehex's website (https://squarehex.myshopify.com).

Product Spotlight

Continuing in the spirit of TSR-produced B/X product spotlights — having already looked at the Moldvay and Mentzer versions of the Basic Rulebook — it makes sense to now look at the Expert rulebook, edited by David "Zeb" Cook with Steve Marsh.

First let me say, whoever decided to embed part of the Basic cover in the Expert cover was an absolute genius. I have

often wondered if it was Erol Otus himself, the illustrator of both covers. I will try to find out who made this call in one of the upcoming Artist spotlights (*note: a section to alternate with the Legendary Gamer Interview in upcoming issues*). This artwork may have been responsible for many spontaneous purchases of one or both boxed sets. Personally, the Basic cover art pulled me into the contents.

Alright, so let's get into the contents of the Expert rulebook. First, the book is set up in a nearly identical fashion to the Moldvay Basic rulebook. The ordering of chapters matches its predecessor, giving the reader an immediate cohesive feel to the work. However, the book pays attention to where the reader may have come from; if they played the Holmes edition before moving on to Expert, there are several notes in the first few pages that detail rule conversions and changes. I feel like this was great idea, clearly covering both Basic entry points into the next set of levels. Additionally, the first couple of pages highlight slight changes to Basic rules, noting that the Expert rules should take precedence.

This book adds more depth to wilderness travel, detailing how and what to do when the characters get lost. It also adds a sample wilderness map and encounter, expanding the range of characters' exploration. With this, also comes a Special Adventures section, covering waterborne travel and combat. TSR added AC, hit point, and movement ratings to various ship structures, making ocean travel and combat a real thing.

A section introduces specialists and mercenaries to the game, adding additional flavor and roles for the GM to use in their campaign design. Ever wonder what it costs to retain an Alchemist or Sage on staff? Well, the Expert rulebook has that information, including their skills and other considerations. Pages X21 to X22 list all eight NPC types. One of the more useful hirable skills is the mercenary, found on page X22. Costs are broken down by class, race and equipment. Additionally, morale ratings are provided for mass combat rules.

Of course, my favorite section of the book is found on page X51: the "Saving vs. Abilities" optional rule. I can't tell you how many times I struggled to resolve character actions before I found this! (Note: this is also found in the Basic rulebook, but I didn't discover it until I read it in the Expert rules.) It is a wonderful ruling that instantly helped my game-mastering. This book was as perfect a second piece to the Basic rules as anything could have ever been.
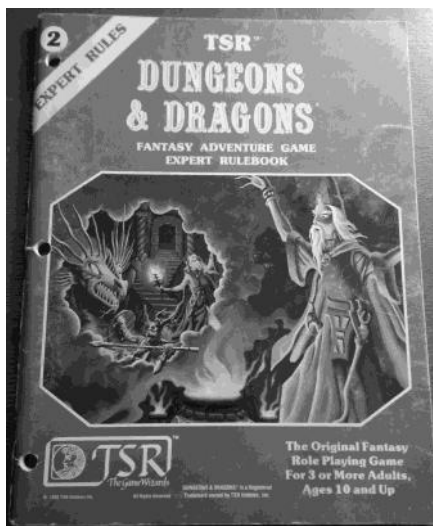
My beat-up copy of the Expert Rulebook!

If you're following along, you'll notice the theme of this issue—the Expert rules! Who other than David "Zeb" Cook could we interview for this issue?

[Thom] What was the first tabletop role-playing game you remember playing? Do you remember the first character you had in that game?

[Zeb] That's easy. Original D&D box set, no supplements. I started playing about 1974, so there weren't really any other options. I was in a game club in college, doing war games when I heard some of the members were playing this not-a-board-game thing. Wrangled a chance to play and was hooked. As for character, I went through a series of dwarves, all named Fred. Fred 9802 (or 3?) was the one I remember, named so because the 9,801 other Freds had all met quick and unpleasant deaths.

[T] Can you tell us a little about how and why you were hired at TSR, i.e. where you hired mainly as an editor or were you hired for a different role?

[Z] I was hired at TSR in the spring of '79. I'm not sure why they hired me, but I applied because at the time I was a teacher in the middle of nowhere in Nebraska and Dragon magazine ran an ad looking for designers. I didn't know what that involved but I liked games, fantasy, and science fiction, so with the encouragement of my wife, I applied. I had to create a sample adventure and answer a bunch of "designer test" ques-

tions -- things like "Identify a Bohemian earspoon" or "how would you resolve this rules conflict" sort of thing. Apparently, I did well enough to get the interview and finally the job. I was the 2nd designer they hired because they were creating a Design Department, something that was a very new and untested idea.

While officially a designer, early on we were all expected to do a bit of everything. I developed and edited the first box version of Awful Green Things, developed (i.e. tested and polished) other people's modules and games, reviewed Judge's Guild material for approval, and anything else that needed to be done. We had official editors (such as Steve Winter) but even they got called on for other tasks.

[T] How did you get asked to edit or get involved with the Expert Rulebook at TSR?

[Z] Luck and a bit of lobbying, I think. The decision was to make D&D its own line that would hopefully appeal to a more mass market. That meant, of course, getting the Basic rules updated in look and feel and then it meant expanding the range of the game to include more levels and overland stuff. The plan was to make this two progressive products, hence Basic and Expert Sets. So there was a lot of discussion and planning amongst all of us about this -- and then passing everything through Gary for his approval. The design staff wasn't very big at the

time (4 of us, I think) and there were other projects to do, so Tom Moldvay and I got the task in some part because we weren't scheduled for anything else. While we worked as a team to lay out the overall design changes we needed from the earlier editions, when it came time to write we broke it down with Tom writing the Basic set while I wrote the Expert.

[T] *Were you part of the early playtests of the B/X Expert rules and if so, do you remember who you worked/played with, in those days?*

[Z] Oh yes, we were part of playtesting. At the time we didn't have any formal out-of-house testing, so it was done by us running games of our own. We also did a lot of "thought" testing, where we would describe a rule or situation to others and then beat it up with all the what-ifs and what-abouts we could think of. And, as I noted, everything had to go through others for review and comment, including Lawrence Schick and Gary.

[T] *Any memorable changes, additions, or events during your work on the Expert rulebook, e.g. rules removed, last minute changes, deadline snafus, etc.?*

[Z] In my fuzzy memory of today, of course everything went smoothly back then! I'm sure that wasn't the case though. The biggest thing I remember was that we had to meet the deadline. Space was another issue too -- there were only so many pages in the rules, so a lot of

extraneous systems went by the way. That helped to keep things simple and clear. I do remember that we spent a lot of time working out character creation, particularly the question of whether there should be races and classes or just classes. Ultimately we went with the dwarf/elf/half-elf as class and not race because we thought it kept the flow simpler for new players and reduced complications for other rules. At the same time a lot of the basic decisions were already defined by the earlier Holmes blue box of the game.

[T] *Lastly, what are you working on these days?*

[Z] These days I'm a senior content lead at Zenimax Online working on the Elder Scrolls Online game. Basically I'm responsible for various chunks of the game world, leading a team to create content. I lay out the big story of an area, define the places, what the general tone will be, etc. and then lead a of team of content designers, writers, and encounter designers who take those ideas and create the quest content for the game. There's a lot of meetings with world builders, fixture artists, animators, concept artists, audio guys, and, of course, producers. My job is to manage the process, make sure the content is good (or ideally great), and also give everyone the opportunity to flex their creative talent. Most recently I was the lead for the Morrowind expansion we released and before that the Orsinium DLC. Now I'm working on yet more that I can't say anything about. Such is the life of a game designer!

This issue of *Back to BasiX* brings you two new monsters for your encounters; the first is for Expert, the second for Basic.

Mastodon of Calamity

This large automaton is filled with and operated by 5 men or 8 smaller creatures (kobolds/goblins). It appears as a large elephant and nearly indiscernible from the real thing. It can spit a glob of poison 50' in a 10' diameter 3 times before needing reloading (takes one combat round). Anyone struck with the poison must save versus Dragon Breath or die. The poison's effect dissipates after one round. There is a 50% chance that the spitting mechanism becomes clogged after use, requiring 1d4 rounds to clear before reuse.

The Mastodon of Calamity will attack four times per combat round, preferring to engage melee characters with its tusks and tail while targeting ranged foes and spell casters with its spitting attack. *Sub. by Ian McGarty*

Weredog

A smaller race of lycanthropes, canine in origin, exist alongside the larger and more fearsome werewolves. Unbeknownst to many, the weredog is actually more common, and is often confused with their larger cousins. Weredogs take the form of any canine breed; a pack of weredogs can vary in size and shape.

Humans, elves, and dwarves gain a special resistance to the weredog lycanthropy strain and are rarely affected by the disease.

Armor Class:	3
Hit Dice:	9**
Move:	120' (40')
Attacks:	2 Tusks
	1 Spike Tail
	1 Spit
Damage: Tusks	2-8/2-8
Tail	1-10
Spit	Save or die

No. Appearing:	1
Save As:	Fighter: 9
Morale:	12
Treasure Type:	Nil
Alignment:	Neutral

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Halflings and gnomes are highly affected by this strain and often make up the majority of a pack of weredogs. Although often intermingled with werewolves, they are considered lesser breeds and treated as such.

Armor Class:	7
Hit Dice:	1+1*
Move:	60' (20')
Attacks:	1 Bite
Damage:	1-4 + spec

No. Appearing:	2-8
Save As:	Fighter: 1
Morale:	10
Treasure Type:	Nil
Alignment:	Neutral

The Magic Shop

Many treasures can be found in adventures beyond the lists within the Basic and Expert rulebooks. Here are two unique items for your players to find. *Submitted by Ian McGarty*

Map of Moht Nai

This thick vellum map displays a 50-mile area where the holder is currently located. Once per week the player may activate the map to cast a spell with the effects of *commune* although this spell may only be used to ask questions regarding the location of a place, object, or person. The marked spots will appear on the map if the player is within 50 miles of them. They will remain for one week.
Value: 60,000 GP

Buckle of Barnabus Berdow

This plain-looking brass buckle has very little ornamentation to differentiate it from non-magical varieties. However, on the back side, a series of runes are scratched into the metal. This buckle was once the property of a thief who notoriously could not be contained when captured, and he was captured often. After his last and final incarceration, all that was found in his cell after his escape were his clothes. The guards stated seeing a naked man wearing a belt sprinting away from the prison.

This buckle can cast gaseous form on the character once per day. All his or her equipment, except the buckle and attached belt, fall to the ground leaving the character naked. The character cannot attack, has an AC of -2, and cannot be hit by non-magical weapons.
Value: 15,000 GP

Spellbound

Most spells in B/X are straightforward, with short, easy descriptions and clear results. However, a few spells are tricky, especially those at higher levels. In this issue, we'll take a look at the 2nd level Magic User (and Elf) spells, *ESP* and *Phantasmal Force*.

First, let's review *Phantasmal Force*. What is this spell, and what does it do? The rulebook says that the caster "creates or changes appearances within the area of the spell effect." So, what exactly can be changed?

Since the spell is based on the illusion of something new or changed, then anything within the area of effect can be altered in some way. The rulebook references creating a monster or using *Phantasmal Force* in an attack, but there's so much more that can be done with this spell. Casters can create imaginary pits or doorways in walls, or they could produce fake treasures or false henchmen to fool foes. The effects of the spell do not have to cause damage in combat, but could deter enemies from even engaging the group in the first place! This spell begins the caster's foray

into illusionary spell casting. We know that AD&D introduced the Illusionist subclass; its roots are in the simple illusion spells that began in B/X!

A sticking point between DM and player was often found in what the character had seen or not seen; the rulebook states that the opponent gains a bonus to saving throws with *Phantasmal Force* illusions created by the caster if the thing he or she creates is unknown to them. This makes sense… some of the time. Obviously, D&D is played in a fantasy world and no one person or creature can know every detail about every thing in it. So, maybe goblins are blue in color. Who can say that they don't exist that way? I say, let the saving throw battle be between caster and target Intelligence scores! Perhaps the caster can create one heck of an illusion, regardless of facts.

Instead of battling out the illusion successes through facts, let's reward players for ingenuity and creativity!

Where *Phantasmal Force* puts the challenge on the player to describe their character's spell, *ESP* makes the DM's job a bit more difficult. The spell "allows the caster to 'hear' thoughts" in a direction within range. Assuming there are only a few targets or even none, the DM's job isn't too challenging. What are those creature doing right now? Are they awake or sleeping? Is there a conversation or fight between creatures? This is different than resolving an encounter when characters burst in a room to face its inhabitants.

The DM has to come up with potential situations before they occur, with creatures in various locations. What if there are more than a few, like a dozen or more? Each creature, except the undead, has independent thoughts and trying to provide snippets of mental processes to the caster become nightmarish.

The rulebook says that the caster may take an extra turn to focus on one creature in a single direction, to gain a clearer understanding of the thoughts he or she was "hearing". Sometimes, I (as the DM) will only allow for a single creature's thoughts to make their way through the jumbled mess of words the caster may "hear". This simplifies my job and gives the character useful information. Often, I use this spell's effect to steer a group in the direction I want them to go in. I know, this is railroading, but you DMs out there know what I mean. Getting your group going in the right direction is helpful for everyone involved.

Both ESP and Phantasmal Force are challenging spells, but with a little bit of creativity on both sides of the table, they can be extremely useful.

Next time, we'll take a look at a few spells that can often seem too powerful for their level. Do you have a spell you'd like to discuss? Let me know!
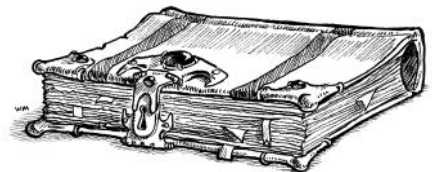
Each issue of *Back to BasiX* will have at least one simple dungeon crawl for you to add to your B/X campaigns. The first of two adventures this issue is "**Calamity Comes to Town**".

Calamity Comes to Town

by Thom Wilson. An adventure for 3-5 characters of 4th to 5th level.

Background: After stealing a unique automaton from a group of sleeping gnomes, a band of pesky kobolds has used the device to threaten local villages into paying a tribute to avoid violence. Settlements that have ignored the threats have been reduced to ruin. With each village, the kobolds have become greedier and increasingly murderous. Their latest target happens to be the village where the characters are currently staying.

Detailed Background: Early one morning, the gatekeeper alerts the town officials to trouble at the entrance. A giant, mechanical mastodon has arrived, and with it, a demand of 1000 gp. If the town refuses to pay within 24 hours, the massive creature will destroy the entire village and slay its residents. The town will find it difficult to gather that much money in such a short period of time. They will likely turn to the characters for help. Knowing that the mastodon has been through the region, collecting dozens of ransom payments from wealthier hamlets, the characters should realize that there is treasure to be gained by destroying the mechanical device.

Five kobolds control the automaton, each with a specific set of controls; leg movement, head direction (sight and tusk attacks), tail, poison spitting attack and the creature's "voice". Each kobold coordinates their controls to move the creature in combat.

Mastodon of Calamity: (AC 3, HD 9**, hp 50, #AT 4, D 2-8/2-8/1-10/Save vs. Poison, Save F9, ML12) See page 6.

If the automaton reaches single-digit hit points the magic animating the unit will fail, disabling the device. If their machine ceases to function, the kobolds will exit the device through a hatch in its underbelly, and flee on foot. Any kobold caught while attempting to flee will gladly trade information about their lair if freed. All ransom payments are held by the clan chieftain, residing in a small cave system nearby.

Five Kobolds: (AC 7, HD ½, HP: 3 each, #AT 1 - dagger, D 1-4, Save Normal Man, ML 6 or 10 within automaton)

If the automaton is reduced to zero or less hit points, it will explode dealing 4d6 damage to all within 50'. If the unit is captured or abandoned, the characters may be able to operate it after "recharging" the device by placing a magical item within its engine, a small compartment under the head of the device. Each magical item will recharge the automaton for 7 days; the magical item will be drained of its power, reducing it to a normal item.

Kobold Caves

The kobold footpath can be easily spotted along a main trail between villages. Dozens of broken tree limbs and trampled shrubs clearly show where a large creature has moved between the trail and the wilderness beyond. Large footprints lead directly to the foothills of a mountain range, and to the kobold lair within.

Lair Entrance

Behind a boulder and small shrubs, a lone kobold guard watches the approach to the cave. He will immediately rush inside to warn of attackers.

Kobold: (AC 7, HD ½, HP: 2, #AT 1 - dagger, D 1-4, Save Normal Man, ML 6)

Main Chamber

A dozen kobolds use this large room as their temporary home while away from their clan. They are a part of a war party organized by the kobold chieftain to raid the area with the automaton.
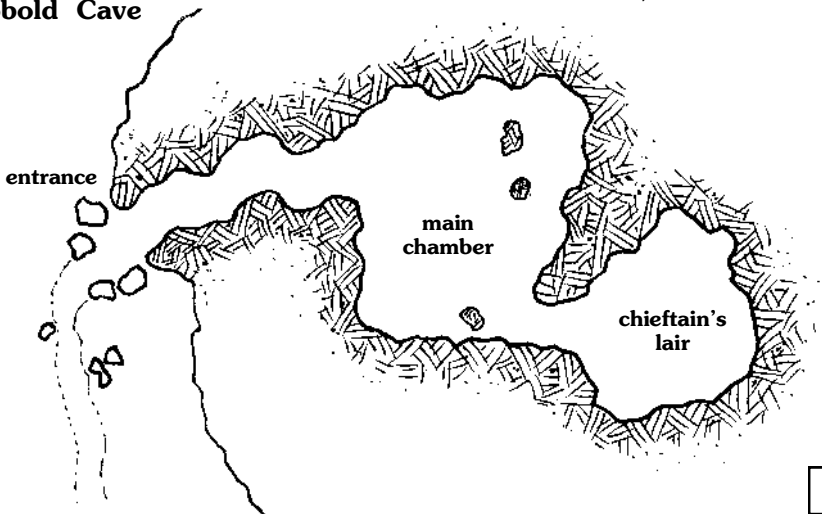
Twelve Kobolds: (AC 7, HD ½, HP: 2 each, #AT 1 - dagger, D 1-4, Save Normal Man, ML 6)

Chieftain's Lair

Chieftain Thrik-nik-bap has set up a small throne room in the temporary lair of the kobold war party. He has brought his two favorite ward-dogs with him, who never leave his side. When Thrik-nik-bap is not meeting with his kobold warriors, he's recounting the gold coins and other tributes from a dozen or more villages. He wears modified chainmail armor and uses a **shortsword +1** with two hands.

Thrik-nik-bap: (AC 5, HD 1, HP: 6, #AT 1 – magical short sword, D 1-6+2, Save F1, ML 9 or 11 with war-dogs nearby)

Two War-dogs, "Yip" and "Yap": (AC 7, HD 1+1, HP: 5 each, #AT 1 - bite, D 1-6, Save F1, ML 10)

Six chests hold a total of **5500 gp** and six potions (**2 Healing, 2 Levitation, 1 ESP, 1 Gaseous Form**).

Kobold Cave

Night Dogs

by Thom Wilson. An adventure for 3-5 characters of 2nd to 4th level.

Background: Dozens of livestock have been slaughtered in the recent weeks, and all clues lead to a pack of small, wild dogs… except these dogs seem to walk on hind legs! While the tracks leading to the farm's pens and barns indicate four-legged creatures, the tracks nearest the remains of slain cattle show larger pawprints in pairs. How are dogs walking about on their hind legs?

Detailed Background: Settlements in the region are seeing an increase in attacks, losing chickens, goats, pigs, and cows to what appears to be a roaming pack of vicious dogs. The farmers are half-right; the offending creatures are weredogs. Similar to werewolves, the weredog maintains a normal appearance by day but is unable to control their canine instincts at night. The rare strain of the lycanthropic disease affects smaller humanoids such as halflings and gnomes.

A group of traveling halfling gypsies are behind the attacks. Although they mean no intentional harm, the halfling jugglers and merchants are urged to transform into weredogs each night by their leader, Gorsef Jokal, a werewolf. Each attack on livestock only stokes their need to feed; it won't be long before the weredogs begin attacking human settlers.

Local officials and settlers will seek help for the recent attacks on livestock. Characters are offered a bounty of 500 gp to determine the cause of the attacks. There are many theories among the villagers, most of which are wildly untrue and border on hysterical nonsense.

Characters are encouraged to examine the latest attack at a farm on the outskirts of town. Intelligent adventurers will discover two important bits of information; the tracks around the slaughtered livestock are dog-like, and they look to come from a forest nearby. It should be obvious that the characters should check the wooded area for the culprits.

Wooded Trail

The tracks soon turn into a simple trail that looks to be used for wagon and cart travel. Following the trail soon leads to a clearing where four gypsy wagons encircle a fire pit. Small humanoid figures are busy around the camp, preparing meals, playing instruments, singing and dancing.

Gypsy Camp

Gorsef Jokal and his band of halfling jugglers are wrapping up their camp soon, preparing to move on to the next targeted village. The leader of the band fears getting caught and knows his weredogs aren't ready yet for a full fight with seasoned guards or hunters.

Gorsef's next reaction depends on how the characters approach; if they act threateningly, he will change into a werewolf and attack. If they look harmless, he

will stay in human form and try to dismiss the group as soon as possible.

Gorsef, werewolf: (AC 5, HD 4*, HP: 17, #AT 1 bite, D 2-8, Save F4, ML 8)

In human form, Gorsef has an AC 9. He never fights in human form—he always changes into a werewolf when battling enemies.

If the halflings see Gorsef change into his were-form, they will be compelled to do the same. The ten small figures will turn into terriers, dachshunds, and poodles, and attack the characters. They will try to circle around a character, using pack tactics to take them down.

Ten weredogs: (AC 7, HD 1+1*, HP: 4 each, #AT 1 bite, D 1-4, Save F1, ML 10)

If more than half the weredogs fall or Gorsef is captured or killed, the remaining weredogs will change back to halfling form, surrendering. They will plead that they were forced to serve Gorsef and would rather have their disease removed than to continue to live with it.

The traveling gypsies are rather poor, living off the meager tips for juggling and odd jobs. Gorsef has **17 sp** and **3 gp** hidden in his trailer under his cot. A small chest holding **4 Potions of Healing** can be found under the Gorsef's trailer.

Crimson Abbey of the Broken God — Part 3

In Part 2 of the Crimson Abbey of the Broken God, Bindor the dwarf, Whystal the thief and Ensa the Magic User entered the hallway beyond the secret door (*Issue #1—Ed.*). After lighting old sconces and entering the dusty hallway, they found a mysterious door at a corner in the tunnel. Bindor the dwarf opened the door to find six skeletal remains on stone slabs, and the group entered the room. Each skeleton wears a strange headpiece with an uncut ruby set at its center.

As you can see from the comic on the last page, the group gets into combat with the skeletons after Bindor removes one of the headpieces from a skeletal monk. This causes the other five to rise up and attack the group! In the last panel, our fearless trio flees the room, avoiding the wrath of the animated creatures.

Poor Ensa takes a painful strike from one of the skeletons, reducing her hit points by 1 (dropping her to a remaining one hit point). She's also used her only Magic Missile spell as she flees the room.

In the last issue, we referenced the mysterious headpiece and ruby; far below the abbey, a large ruby has an evil being trapped within it. From this place, the evil creature controls all who wear headpieces or handle any of the rubies found throughout the abbey. Eventually, the story will reach this area, revealing more about the sentient ruby and the evil being.

The RPG portion of this story continues next issue, allowing the comic to catch up with the adventure details from issue #2.

Coming Soon: DerbyMouse Games, for hand-crafted character and monster miniatures. Made from simple materials, either pre-painted or unpainted! Check out the back cover for sample minis!
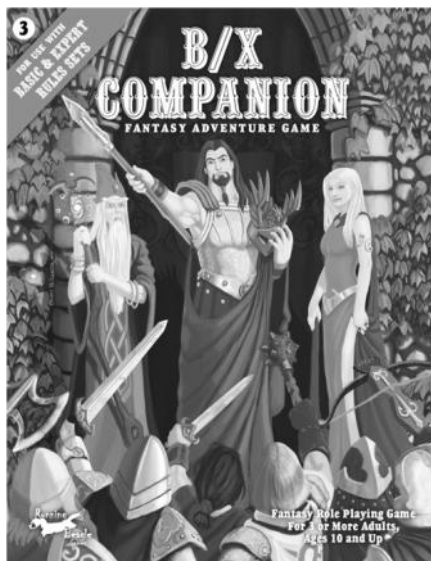
Wanted: Any condition copies of B2 Keep on the Borderlands, and Moldvay Basic and Expert Rulebooks. throwi@gmail.com

Back Issues of *Back to BasiX*: Contact Thom Wilson at ThrowiGames to request back issues: thom@throwigames.com

Special thanks to Matt Ray for the use of his wonderful cover illustration, Isa de Mendonca Silva for her logo work, and Travis Hanson for continuing to draw my Dungeon Delvers story!

Additionally, a very special thanks to our interviewee, David "Zeb" Cook for taking time to answer questions!

Back to BasiX

B/X Fanzine

Mastodon of Calamity!
Found inside!

Artwork by Je Shields © Used with permission

This issue!
Product Spotlight
Publishing News
Two Dungeon Crawls
New B/X Monsters
New Magical Items
Spell Casting Article
Comic Strip
Interview

New in Next issue:
Artist Spotlight

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Issue #3