GOOD NEWS, GOOD NEWS, GOOD NEWS. Well, good news for me anyway. To mark the year in which I intend to publish the Water Margin, a nice company has decided to release *The Water Margin* on video (see the letters column for one or two more details). Nice timing, folks!

Also sort of good news is the purchase at this end of a nice little printer that prints 600dpi but makes it look like 1200dpi.

I've also finally got a regular game going here, with a bunch of good, enthusiastic players. Perversely, the game in question is not *Outlaws*, but *Empire of the Petal Throne*. We might switch some time in the future, though, especially as all my players are interested in China.

Even better news is that I have a contributed article at last. Thanks Lee! Now I need some more off the rest of you.

Dumb news of the issue is that I'm finally going to start taking Chinese lessons. Yes, I know, I should be striving for fluency in Japanese rather than farting around with another language (when I try to speak French or German nowadays, Japanese words automatically interject themselves). Oddly enough, this has coincided with the decision to *decrease* the amount of Chinese language used in *Outlaws of the Water Margin*.

And if this issue seems even more than usually obsessed with that stupid game, then just remember that a lot of good things related to it have all happened at once, including the discovery that my wife can draw exactly the kind of pictures I wanted to illustrate the game with. Examples are to be found in the *Once Upon A Time In China* column later in the zine. Now I've just got to get her to churn out three a day for the next month... **I**

This issue (16 pages):

imazine

1

REVIEWS

RIGHT, I SAID TO MYSELF, I'M JUST GOING to have to buckle down and make the best of it. No Western games are grabbing my attention yet (I'm still looking forward to *Feng Shui*) so I have actually been (gasp! wait for it!) buying some Japanese ones. I realise you aren't going to be able to rush out and buy them, and if you bought them you probably couldn't make much use of them, so I'll try to keep my reviews pertinent and ideas orientated.

Before we get on with the all-singing, all-dancing Yamato rolegame show, though, let's skip back to Blighty for a look at a few magazines which are well worthy of a mention.

Delusions of Grandeur

Robert Rees, editor of *Carnel*, continuing the noble tradition of slagging off competing zines, says of *Delusions of Grandeur*, 'Take issue three, Imazine may have had a long letters column but it was never the entirety of the zine—there was always some articles to go along with it.' It's an interesting comment. The letters column was, after all, the purpose of imazine, and if I could have made it the entirety of the zine I would have.

Thus by my own standards, *Delusions of Grandeur* appears to be more successful than imazine.

It also scores highly on the irregularity index. Issue 4 recently emerged, representing the first time that two issues had been produced during the same year. I thought I was being a bit excessive resurrecting imazine after a gap of however long it was (six years?), but that's just Nathan's normal production schedule!

Basically, *Delusions* is an entertaining read, a fanzine of the old school. It is more concerned with articles (in this issue: the future of role-playing, reviews, the world of Deverry and aborigine magic) than such flash as colour covers. This isn't a dig at those journals which do have colour covers (*Tales of the Reaching Moon*, and *Interactive Fantasy* spring immediately to mind), it's a dig at those people who consider such things important.

In this issue, the article on Aborigine magic was of particular interest to me. It takes a real world culture and extracts from it role-playing ideas, without patronising or distorting the culture, as is so often done in role-playing. The zine is worth getting for this alone.

Delusions of Grandeur costs £1.20 per issue from Nathan Cubitt, 446A, Garratt Lane, Earlsfield, London SW18 4HL UK. 24 page A4 magazine.

Borkelby's Folly

I mentioned this last issue, and since then he has brought out number two. It seems to back up the theory that although most fanzine editors put most of their effort into their first issue, the subsequent issues are usually much better. Here Ray has got into his swing, and a large dose of wit lubricates the proceedings nicely.

For those of you who came in late, the zine is dedicated to the fantastically realised world of Jorune (which according to some pundit on the Net is 'dead'—could have fooled me). Quite sensibly, the zine contains an introduction to Jorune for those who picked up the zine out of a mild interest. Backing this up is a lot of dedicated material, including modifications to the new edition Jorune rules, advice on applications and a large amount of background fleshing out. It's wrapped up with an interesting scenario based on the sport of *reener*, which makes it an interesting alternative to adventures involving monsters, and a good way of conveying the cultural aspect of the background.

Anyone with a slight interest in Jorune should pick up a copy of this zine, if only because it's cheaper than buying the game, less embarrassing than walking into a shop and asking to see inside the box, and supportive of fanzines.

Borkelby's Folly 2 is available for the price of postage, or some kind of a trade, from Ray Gillham, 22 Mirador Crescent, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0QX UK. 40 pages A4 magazine.

arcane

There was a time when I spurned prozines as soma for the masses, purveyors of mass processed, bland fare for the hard of thinking. Then I got an article accepted by *IMAGINE*. So I started to feel that all prozines except *IMAGINE* were soma for the masses, etc. Then I got a job on *White Dwarf*.

So as you'll imagine, my ideas on what to look for in a professional games magazine are not quite as radical as they once were. On the other hand, elements of my attitude remain. If I

tolerate prozines more now, it's because I've come to accept the necessity of taking a certain approach with them. When it comes right down to it, rolegaming is a tough market to make a mag for, so you have to sell your magazine.

Accepting the commercial necessities, I now tend to focus more on the attitude of a magazine. How is it pitched? How does it balance the populist concerns of the mass market, and the obsessions of the hard core? This latter is a particularly difficult balancing act, especially for those with little knowledge of the hobby. I think both *Fantasy Chronicles* and *Adventurer* suffered some kind of schizophrenia in this area, and probably the *Last Province* too. I haven't seen *Valkyrie*, only read what some of its proponents have written on the Net, and I have to say they come across as squawking elitists (someone correct me, please). The soon to be undead *interactive fantasy* on the other hand, is really a high-class fanzine masquerading as a prozine.

Judged by these standards, I think *arcane* is a qualified success. When I read it, more than anything else, I do get a feeling that this is a prozine for everybody. It doesn't pander to the fanzine hard-core, but nor does it ignore or patronise them. It is unashamed of role-playing, and it fairly glows with this message.

It contains a huge amount of stuff which doesn't interest me. I don't mind this, though, because I know that someone out there, who does share my hobby (though approaches it an entirely different way) is getting a buzz off it. It encourages diversity in the hobby, but embraces all.

Maybe this is its greatest flaw: its positivity leads to a certain wishy-washiness in the reviews. But then how many prozines have ever printed reviews with bite? I can't remember many: maybe old *IMAGINE* did a few. I know that I was their hitman reviewer at one point: if they had a game they hated they'd send it to me in the sure knowledge that I'd slag it off. This worked with *Indiana Jones* and *The Worlds of Boris Vallejo*, but rather failed when it turned out I loved *Chill: Black Morn Manor*. *IMAGINE*, though, had to tread carefully with most TSR products, just as *White Dwarf* punctiliously observed double standards when it came to Games Workshop games.

Since then most prozines seem to have employed wide-eyed fanboys as their reviewers. Only *interactive fantasy* aspires to any depth, and, as I mentioned earlier, it seems unlikely to survive. Despite the presence of *if*'s Andrew Rilstone as a regular contributor to *arcane*, the reviews still seem to be mostly pretty wide-eyed. Criticism is muted, praise is rarely faint, and

lavished on generous advertisers. The scope is very wide, however.

On the articles front, *arcane* fares better. There are 'standard' subjects such as world design and characterisation, intermixed with more exotic fare. Issue 3 provides a home for Phil Masters' amusing *Skool Roolz* rolegame based on life in an English boarding school. This is an excellent idea. Magazines are the place for these kinds of games, either that or 'compendia' of half-a-dozen games, released in magazine format, which the Japanese have been doing for the last few years.

For my tastes, some of the articles are a bit simple, but then I've been knocking around too long. Recommending comics as primary sources of ideas for characterisation seems to me to be a peculiarly blinkered attitude, but for all I know in the years I've been gone Britain has zoomed into the same state of post-literacy as Japan, and comics are all people can be expected to read. (Yeah, I know, comics fans, comics can be great too, but can it be a coincidence that Alan Moore is a voracious reader of... books?)

Andrew Rilstone has a column which, given half a dozen issues to get into his stride, might eventually start to be about something. Like the above-mentioned articles, it does occasionally stimulate a train of thought.

A regular centre-page scenario usable in any background is a marketable idea. So far, the topics seem to have been chosen to get away from the clichéd monster-bashes, which is admirable. Issue 3's strikes me as a bit of a steal from Fritz Leiber, but then the current role-playing market could do with a bit more stuff of the quality of Leiber, and a lot less of this *DragonLance* crap.

The design, for my money, is excellent. It is, in short, designed by a proper designer. And there haven't been many role-playing magazines which could boast *that*. It's colourful, lively, yet avoids the whizz-bang excesses of many computer games mags.

Most importantly, it is backed, not, as has been the case in the past, by two men and a donkey, or by a games company, but by Future Publishing, a large, successful magazine publisher. This is significant. This is extremely significant. It means that while the magazine will have the usual Advertising vs Editorial pressures, it won't suffer from those two disaster areas: the games company looming over the shoulder, and the inability to get through lean periods or bad luck.

For me, it's a godsend. Now I can find out what's happening in the UK role-playing industry, something I'm not motivated to make

much of an effort to check up on myself, without any effort at all! And into the bargain I can be entertained with the odd article. And maybe even sell them the odd article (the *very* odd article, in the case of my first for them).

So a thumbs up to Steve Faragher, Andy Butcher and Maryanne Booth for a worthy solution to a difficult blending problem.

arcane costs £3 and should be available from your local newsagent. Grief, they even sell it in Nagoya's Maruzen bookshop so you should have no trouble at all!

Daikatsugeki

A Japanese rolegame based on the TV samurai dramas? *Bushido* done properly? The answer to the dreams of every fan of role-playing in Japan? Well almost.

It's another Japanese rolegame. It's like a Japanese car. It's pretty good, to be honest. But it isn't art.

So what is the score? *Bushido* is set in a very vague 'Nippon' which is never clearly identified with any Japanese historical period, although it mainly combines elements from the Edo period with the increased violence of the Warring States. *Daikatsugeki* was written by products of the almighty Japanese Education System, and let me tell you, whatever else they don't know, they do know their Japanese history. Date by date.

On the other hand, since they are writing for an audience which has also gone through the same education system, they don't need to fill the book with the history. Slight allusions here and there are sufficient.

The background is also crystal clear. It is based on *Mitokomon*, the most popular samurai

TV drama, and the other shows of a similar ilk. A feature of these shows is that they have the same story every week, to prevent the elderly audience from being unsettled by the unexpected. They involve a group of people (a gang of player characters, basically) wandering around Edo period Japan. Each episode they encounter some injustice. Each episode they sort things out. In the case of *Mitokomon* every episode ends with *Mitokomon* getting out his Tokugawa seal and revealing himself to be the Vice-Shogun, at which point everybody present hurls themselves to the ground.

So, the background is the Edo period. *Daikatsugeki* is actually set in Edo. Unlike most role-playing backgrounds, this is not a turbulent period. Japan has severed itself from the outside world, and Tokugawa Ieyasu's empire-building has created a strong, resilient central bureaucracy that is quite capable of keeping the *daimyō* in line.

The scale of the game is quite small, then. You won't encounter all-out warfare between *daimyō* (fans of Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* and *Ran* will be disappointed, I'm sure). Your problems will be more small-scale, more human.

The game comes supplied with a lot of scenario ideas and a sample scenario. These tend to revolve around incidents such as murders. May not seem much to the average rolegamer, accustomed to scything their way through fields of NPC baddies, but it's accurate. The Edo period portrayed in the TV dramas is fairly safe. A murder was a significant event.

What of the game, anyway? The rules follow the tried and trusted Japanese approach. You divide points up to decide your characteristics: the usual Strength, Dexterity, Agility, Intelligence, Charisma, plus the more distinctive *kiai*, which is a measure of determination and presence of mind. You then get to have appropriate skills according to your two professions: your *omote* (or surface skill, the one you present to the world) and your *ura* (or hidden skill, your real adventurer profession).

Skill resolution is very simple. The referee assigns a difficulty on a scale of 1-20, the higher the number the more difficult. You then roll as many 20 sided dice as your skill level. If any of them equal or exceed the difficulty you have succeeded.

Even combat preserves this level of simplicity. Hence the character book, containing the character creation, skills and ability rules is a mere 32 pages long, with copious areas of white space (and indifferent manga-style art).

The second book, the worldbook, is also 32 pages long, again because the background is so

familiar. The art is again rather weak, but is good at illustrating things you really need to see: what different types of people wear, for example, what the weapons look like, what money looks like and so on.

This gets even better in the third book, the game masters book. 48 pages were deemed necessary here. As well as the aforementioned scenarios, and descriptions of typical baddies, this includes fantastic descriptions of typical buildings, along with pictures and floorplans. These are great. *Bushido* should certainly have done this, and I'm going to rip off the idea for *Outlaws*.

The package is completed with a nice map of Edo, some floor plans and some cute colour cardboard figures (another idea I'll steal for use when playing my own game).

Overall impression is of quite a light game, but I think that's a good thing. It takes a genre its readers are familiar with and provides a simple set of rules, and a lot of scenario ideas and stuff to assist visualisation. I'm not sure how well this would do if translated into English, as the players wouldn't have enough of the necessary background knowledge. Gold Rush games, who will be publishing the new edition of *Bushido*, should definitely give it a look, though.

Okahoshin

Or rather, *Ōkahōshin* (I haven't yet found a way of drawing a macron over letters in fonts that don't have the appropriate character—any suggestions, computer whizzes?). The title isn't easy to translate, but I'd render it very loosely as *Immortals of the Middle Kingdom*. Or if this was a White Wolf game, as *Immortal: The Confinement*.

It's a game in which you get to play a Chinese Immortal. Or rather, an Immortal in the land of *Ōka*, which is a sort of play on one of the names of China—I guess the nearest analogy is a game set in 'Albion'. It's therefore one for all you fans of *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain*, *Eagle Shooting Heroes*, or *The Swordsman*.

Unlike *Daikatsugeki*, which comes in a box, *Ōkahōshin* can be found on the shelves of many bookshops in the glory of its tiny book format. Visually, it's crap compared to *Daikatsugeki*. There are very few black-and-white illos, so you have to make do with the eight pages of colour at the front of each book. Here we have a feast of manga art. Yeah, I know, I'm old and prejudiced, but I don't picture Chinese Immortals as huge-eyed cuties dressed in primary colours.

This game is squarely addressed at a Junior High School audience (ages 12-16). In fact, some of the kids I teach play it, in between GURPS. It focuses mainly on the nasties which the Immortal player characters will encounter, and the Immortal treasure (magic items) which the player characters will use to defeat said nasties.

Oddly enough, this makes it very true to its source material!

The system contains a few novelties. At base, it's a rather fiddly version of the same old stuff you get in all Japanese games. Characteristics in Strength and Body, Dexterity and Adroitness, Knowledge and Reasoning, Willpower and Immortal Bones, and Charisma, are derived by a combination of dice and choice. Basically each of the pairs shares an assigned die roll, and then each gets another die roll on top.

You then get a selection of special abilities depending on what type of Immortal you've chosen to be. Options include Elementalists, Occultists, Illusionists, Feng Shui experts and so on. Each type has certain taboos and strictures that should be observed.

Maybe the most interesting area comes in the immortality rules. All characters are assumed to have become enlightened at some point. However this by no means guarantees that they will live forever. Instead their life has been extended, and this extension constitutes a game attribute (it's possible to take damage to it, and overusing your immortal abilities will reduce it). It's also related to your 'virtue' as all characters in this game are considered to be on the side of the angels. 'Hit points' are divided into two elements: one is 'human lives' and the other is 'heavenly lives'. If the latter is positive it represents *yang* energy, which in this game is good. Baddies will have negative 'heavenly lives', representing *yin* energy.

One thing I liked about this system is that the two figures are used in combat. They are represented on the character sheet by a lot of little boxes. Basically you have as many boxes in a line as your 'human lives' score, and as many lines as your 'heavenly lives'.

愛魔寺院

imazine

5

EARDRUM BUZZ

愛魔寺院

by Lee Brimmicombe-Wood

A response to last issue's Buzz Words by someone on the inside

HAVING WORKED IN THE COMPUTER Games industry for the past several months, I've come to a new appreciation of what the computer offers in the future of 'interactive' entertainment.

Though I understand your frustration at the industry's abuse of the term 'interactive' it has to be pointed out that there is a big difference between the 'point and click' passivity of a CD-ROM database and a computer *game*. In a game you are truly interacting, even if only with the game's AI. The AI is a big chunk of a game's software, invariably taking up a substantial proportion of the processor's time. Even a relatively straightforward AI program, such as that controlling the opponents in a racing game, represents a big workload on the machine and attempts to give you a truly intelligent opponent. What's more, game AI systems are becoming increasingly intelligent as players themselves become more sophisticated in their tastes and appreciation.

The Art of Noise

From where I stand now, the computer games industry is on the verge of becoming a respectable art medium. A loose analogy is to compare computer games with the development of cinema. Movies developed artistically as technical innovations—sound, technicolor and cinemascope—allowed moviemakers to refine their craft, develop an idiom and a grammar for the medium, and raise it to the status of an art.

With computers right now, we're still in the 'silent' era. Some basic game formats, such as the platformer, have been played out and may well (at least in their current form) die out. Others, particularly in the case of 'interactive movies' and those games that have substantial Full Motion Video linking/branching sequences, are embryo artforms. As consoles become more graphically sophisticated and more intelligent, as the industry becomes prepared to invest more time and cash into developing and producing these kinds of game, whole new forms of interactive entertainment will appear.

Flintstones

The game consoles of just ten years back are in the stone age compared to the 32- and 64- bit machines of today. And these machines themselves will be dwarfed by the affordable game consoles of ten years hence. Those machines will be intelligent enough to accept verbal commands; to talk back at you; to make reasoned reactions to your game decisions and provide a myriad of multiple storyline options—creating satisfying interactive stories. And who knows, if ten years beyond that someone builds HAL, or something like him, you bet the first thing the games industry will do is to have him create and GM a complete rolegame environment, to be beamed into your virtuality helmet. Science fiction? Well, I've seen the future, and I think not.

In the meantime, you're right to say that the most satisfying form of interactive entertainment will involve other humans. You talk about the need for some kind of modem-linked game, but fail to mention that such games, the multi-user dungeons, or MUDs, have been in operation for many years now. Of course, up 'til recently these have been very crude, entirely text-based affairs. But with the widespread use of faster PCs and even faster modems, the interactive divisions of all the big entertainment companies have seen the commercial potential of the 'linked' game and are, even as I write, furiously gearing up to run central MUD sites that will allow hundreds, even thousands, of players to interact within their attractive 3D graphically generated game environments. There, you will be able to customise the look of your polygonally-constructed character (à la *Virtua Fighter* or *Tekken*), talk to other players by text or compressed voice messages, and fight against them or the computer-generated bad guys. All you have to do is link up your machine to the site and pay as you play.

imazine

ONCE UPON A TIME IN
CHINA

Influence and Status In The Water Margin

I WAS HAVING A PHONE CONVERSATION with Dave Morris recently, and he was talking about *Mitlanyal,* a new product for Tekumel, to be published by TOME. This book, which covers the gods and religions of Tekumel has been promised for years. Why is it so late? Well, it turns out that the author is determined to cover *everything*, and so the job keeps on expanding. As Dave pointed out, most peoples' games are set in Tsolyanu, and that part of the volume is complete, so why not just publish that?

He's quite right, of course, and demonstrates another reason why it is that Tekumel is a minority game and always will be.

So anyway, you're thinking, this has nothing to do with *The Water Margin*. Actually it does. It made me realise that I have been doing a similar thing to the author of *Mitlanyal*. In my quest for the perfect game, I've been putting it off and putting it off.

So now I've decided. I'm going to go ahead and finish a flawed version of the game, in preference to never getting round to publishing a perfect version of the game.

The flawed version will have omissions. I'll try to cover these omissions after the game comes out. The flawed version won't be complete. I'll try to add to it after it comes out, if anybody's interested.

I've always been pissed off by games that were published this way, which is why I've been going on about getting round to doing the *Water Margin* 'some time' for the past seven years. However , my patience has expired. The game I publish will omit a lot of things I intended. These include: details of how to run a variety of different types of games, other than the 'outlaw' game which is the basic style envisaged. Anyone who wants to do a political game, or a magistrate game, or a supernatural (flying swordsman) game, will have to work it out for

themselves (or wait for the imazine article or, gulp, supplement) .

Also missing will be a lot of detailed background that I wanted to include. In its place will be moderately sketchy details about Daoism, Confucianism and so on. I'm sorry to have to do this, but then I'll still include more than such works as *Mystic China* or *GURPS China*.

Bad news for the ambitious, too, is the fact that I am resolved to go ahead with my rather amateurish, late seventies shoddy binding plans for publishing. The reasoning behind this is simple. Publishing the game properly, with offset litho printing and proper binding, is only economically viable with a print run of 5000+. Let's assume I manage to get the unit cost down to £3. That's £15,000 I have to lay out. Being a horrible capitalist who graduated in Management Science, I then sell the game at £15 a throw, reaping a magnificent 'profit' of about £5 if I'm lucky (shop margins, distribution). I sell copies beyond my wildest expectations (1001), which converts to incoming cash of £8008, leaving me a mere £6,992 down on the deal.

Now you know why I graduated from the UK's number one business school, and why I have little interest in starting a games company.

I'd rather work with a unit cost of around £8 and sell it to people who really want it at a price of £12 plus postage. Since I would not print more than I could sell, I wouldn't make a loss, and any small profit could be pumped into the cost of producing the follow-up game, *Kwaidan: Life & Death in Old Japan* (which I must confess is interesting me more and more).

If any of you think that my calculations above are fatally flawed, because I've grossly underestimated my potential sales, I can only

suggest that you take a look at the role-playing market. Phone up GDW and see what they have to say. Then ask Wizards of the Coast for their opinion of the rolegame market.

I will be hoping to make PostScript files of the game available to those who can read them, but they're going to be big, even zipped, so don't think that's the easy option!

Outlaws of the Water Margin *artwork by Keiko Kito*

Back In The Real World

So that's over a page I've wasted so far, waffling on about irrelevancies. This is supposed to be about influence and status, right? Right, so what are my thoughts on this? To an extent, a related aspect is covered in this issue's article *Black Box*, about the modelling of personality in rolegames. Here, however I want to focus on the way a character interacts with society. In a culture game, this assumes even greater importance.

For me, the challenge was to find one or two relatively simple concepts, which both provide a simple key to understanding the workings of a society, and which lend themselves to game mechanics.

In the case of China, I settled on the notion of debts of gratitude or, as I now call them in the game, *favours*. 'I owe you one' is an expression easily understood by Westerners. To reflect the relations between characters in more formal terms (important in a relatively formal society such as China), I thought it useful to formalise

favours. Characters will thus owe favours to anyone who assists them (especially those people whom they have *influenced*). They will also owe a favour to their patrons (in other words, their superiors in the hierarchy) and most of all they will owe three favours to their parents.

It's also possible, of course, that characters will be owed favours by others. When creating your character, why not put a few points into having somebody useful owe you a favour?

It needs a little bit more, though. The favours have to have some relation with society to work properly. What happens if you owe loads of favours? What are the consequences of refusing to repay a favour on demand?

Godfather Blues

This is where respect comes in. For a game set in a real culture, whether it be China, Japan, Medieval England or Tekumel, you need some way of measuring a person's informal standing in society. Call it honour, call it face, call it whatever you like. I call it respect. It's that quality which accrues to people who *do* things. And the more respect people have for you, the easier you find it to get things done.

So the consequence of not repaying favours is that people lose respect for you.

Respect has another use. It reminds people that they live in a hierarchic society. Song Dynasty China is a vertical society. There's no getting away from that. There are some people who cite the title of one of the translations of the Water Margin, Pearl Buck's *All Men Are Brothers* as evidence that outlaws, at least, practice some form of equality. This misunderstanding arises from the language. In China, as in Japan, 'brothers' are by no means equal. A different word is used for elder and younger brothers. The word used in that title is based on a two character compound which combines both of the words. In other words, all men (or all heroes) relate to each other with the closeness of brothers, but those relations are still vertical. When Lin Chong and Lu Da swear brotherhood, an episode well-captured in the recent Hong Kong movie, it is very important to establish that it is Lin Chong who is the 'Elder Brother'.

Respect is the stick with which to beat this into your players. Respect derives from what you do, but it is mainly based on your place in society. In short, if you are high up in a hierarchy people will respect you, because that's what society conditions them to do. Conversely, a player character group which persists in behaving as if they are democratic equals will be

treated with ridicule by those they meet, and their respect will suffer. A group of five player characters behaving as equals will have no respect score they can use. If one of them is selected as leader, that character will gain a point of respect. In the end, the whole group can benefit. My thanks go to Dave Morris for suggesting this elegant solution to a problem that had bugged me for a long time.

Outlaws of the Water Margin *artwork by Keiko Kito*

Status Quantum?

Let's move on to society. For years, people have been designing social status rules. These have often had problems because they tended to be one dimensional. A character was given a number which represented their status in society. It gave an absolute position. This is simple, but unsatisfactory to me. The kind of game I like makes the most of the possibilities of situations such as that in which a wealthy and successful merchant with influential friends at court meets an out-of-favour official who has been consigned to a dreadful frontier post as magistrate. It's not a one-dimensional encounter. The magistrate is from the official class, at the top of the Confucian tree. The merchant is at the bottom. On the other hand, the merchant has influence at court, and a lot of money.

In strict societal status terms, the merchant is far below the official. In practical influence terms, the merchant probably has the upper hand. But, by exploiting the merchant's overall low position in society, the official *could* redress the balance. It would depend on how much was public and how much private. In public, the merchant

would have little choice but to bow to the official. In private, his money would be a whole lot more loquacious.

To allow for the ambiguities of such situations, I felt it was important to avoid a single scale. Social classes are clearly arranged in order, and that order affects influence attempts, but it's not the only factor. Characters have positions within their occupations. For characters following the same occupation their relative position means pretty much everything, and relative social class isn't so important.

Professions are also rated relative to each other. There is no mechanic for multiplying your position within the status by the status of the profession itself in order to obtain a 'global' status value. Influence attempts will be affected however.

In short, the social status rules are based around practicalities rather than abstractions. To say that the official is higher status than the merchant is true in a theoretical, 'that's the way society as a whole views things' way. The truth of their relative status would only truly emerge, however, in an influence contest between the two. Here class would be a factor, but so would favours owed, position within the occupation, money, and the influence ladder used.

Social Climbing

I didn't mention influence ladders earlier? The influence rules as I've written them are fairly strict. A lowly clerk hasn't a hope in hell of getting an official to do him any favours. His boss, the magistrate is a different matter...

The way for an ordinary person to scale the heights is to go via intermediaries. If our lowly clerk can persuade his magistrate boss to intercede, he may be able to get something from the official without the necessity of robbing the Imperial Mint. He'll end up owing a lot of favours, of course, but what do you expect...

The proof of the pudding is in the culinary science textbook, of course, and these rules have as yet received little testing. I'm fairly sure, however, that they will encourage players to take a more involved view of society, and to think of it in terms of transactions, with the *favour* being the medium of exchange. This may strike some people as a bad thing, but I find it singularly appropriate for China, and I'm using a slightly modified version of the same in my current Tekumel game.

Comments, as ever, are invited. ∎

BLACK BOX

The problems of representing character personality in rolegames

IT'S QUITE POSSIBLE THAT THE RELATIVELY small number of fanzines around now is partly due to the Usenet. Many of the people who would normally be expressing their argumentative natures in the pages of a fanzine are siphoned off into newsgroups. Increasingly, the Net community is starting to acquire an exclusive mentality. People are forgetting that there are those who are not connected—that there are those, indeed, who do not even possess a computer.

This is why I persist in publishing a paper fanzine. The Usenet has its uses, but it is altogether too reminiscent for me of the mighty *Alarums & Excursions*, a 160-page zine which, at the time I was getting it anyway, was published monthly. For a student it was great—with the leisure to read it, you could wade through the kipple and find some fascinating insights. The world, however, as well as containing those who are not connected to the Net, also contains those who have little time to wade though kipple.

TV Personalities

All of which preamble is proffered as an excuse for the fact that this article arises from a discussion on the Net. The discussion was sparked by a piece by James Wallis in the Tekumel newsgroup, in which he lambasted the new Tekumel rules system and compared it to certain 'FGU games of the mid-eighties' because of its failure to provide guidance on the character's personality.

James subsequently caught a lot of flak for the inaccuracy of his comment about the 'mid-eighties'. It's a pedantic place, the Net.

Perhaps worse, though, was my use of James's comments as a preface to a rant about rules for personality, which provoked a long and heated discussion.

My point was rather simple. The personality of the character, I argue, is the province not of the rules, but of the player. It is what the player does. I stated this case forcefully, as I have been finding James's claims that spoof games about stuffed animals, D&D-worshipping societies, and Buck Rogers constitute the 'cutting edge' of role-playing increasingly hard to swallow. Maybe they represent the future of role-playing. Maybe they are innovative and funny games. But they are a long way from the sort of advances being discussed in serious gaming circles (that means *interactive fantasy*, by the way: imazine is a semi-serious gaming semi-circle).

As the discussion showed, the case is not simple. Many people cited *Pendragon* as an example of a game in which the character's personality is represented by traits and passions. When I played *Pendragon* this was an aspect I rather disliked. I do appreciate the intention, though. Greg Stafford was doing his best to encourage players to get into the mind of an Arthurian character.

The mistake, I can't help feeling, was to make it into a rules system. By making players roll 'against' their traits, you set up a situation in which the player feels that he or she is *opposing* an aspect of the character's personality. The medieval mindset is something the player has to struggle against.

Yes, I know. You don't *have* to play it that way; you don't *have* to think about it that way. But that, I feel, is what the rules set up. Most rules are about opposition of some kind. Surely if we think that developing an appropriate mindset is a good thing, then reinforcement is a more suitable strategy?

We thus have to think about what kinds of reinforcement we could employ.

Monty Haul

The traditional methods of reinforcement in role-playing games include the distribution of goodies. Experience points, treasure, status—all these can be used to reward players who do things right. Many articles have argued that good role-playing should be rewarded with experience bonuses. This baffles me. It has absolutely no correlation with any reality that I inhabit. If I happen to behave in a particularly typical way, do I suddenly make great strides in my *taiji* practice? Do I bollocks!

It also encourages the idea that the purpose of the game is *rules-based* and that role-playing is merely a means to that end. I favour the idea

that the purpose of the game is role-playing, and that the rules are merely a means to that end. Inevitably, therefore, where rules are unnecessary, they shouldn't be used. A strange comment, you might think, from someone who has previously shown few signs of championing the ruleless or diceless causes. Nevertheless it is strongly felt. Although the rules I design are a little overcomplicated by modern standards (I cut my teeth modifying *Chivalry & Sorcery*, you should realise) they are designed to wither away in use, not least because when I run a game I'm buggered if I can remember anything but the simplest of rules—even when I designed the rules myself.

So, coming back to personality, I don't feel that most aspects benefit in any way from being regulated by rules. There are, on the other hand, some areas where the rules intrude. These are those areas where a reflection of the character's determination or motivation enters the picture.

Self Control

Much of the discussion on the Usenet concerned the question of how much control the player should have over their character. If we believe that in our daily life we are to some extent controlled by urges, cravings or whatever, shouldn't we model that lack of complete control in the game? If a character is hypnotised, for example, the player loses control over them. What is the difference between this and the arachnophobic character encountering a spider?

There's no easy answer to this. Some argued that immersion was helped by imposing limits on the player's control because it modelled the experience of life more accurately. I can see their point. On the other hand, I've always found that characters in which I become immersed generate their own weaknesses. In other words, the 'game player' in me loses control of the character automatically. Ultimately, I am in control, but I am not aware of this, because as the character I am subject to the limitations of 'my personality'. This is my experience—what have you found?

My reaction obviously colours my response to this whole issue. Imposing personality via rules or referee fiat will interfere with this immersion, and lead to a dissociation between me and the character. I am not a very good player, so I would imagine that the above would apply to many other people who try to immerse themselves in their character. Rules for personality seem to me more appropriate to a manipulative, dissociated style of play. The snobbish, 18-years of role-playing part of me doesn't much care for that approach.

In this case, many systems reflect the situation with a rule. The most common is to have some kind of attribute called willpower. So, the determination of the character is quantified in some way. Are these rules necessary? Not strictly. As an aid to characterisation; certainly not! As a mechanic to divorce certain elements of personality from referee fiat and the personality of the player: yes. Willpower is not an aspect of player personality which often figures in games (except perhaps in those cases in which it's late and you're trying to stay awake, or when you're trying to remain focused while fellow players discuss the plot of last night's *X-Files*). However, like the physical characteristics of the character it is both necessary to most games, and difficult for players to simulate directly.

Smart Money

A similar problem arises with intelligence, though here the issues are more complex. Unlike willpower, intelligence directly correlates with the player's abilities. A logic problem facing a character poses a logical problem for the player. Here, the issue is a little different. A system for intelligence is clearly not necessary. On the other hand its presence makes it easier for us to role-play characters who differ from us. It still cannot be done perfectly, of course, but without a partial systematisation of intelligence I certainly could not play a genius. With a system I am at least reassured that my character is going to be able to show some (dice-inspired) flashes of brilliance.

What other aspects of personality are there? Back in the mists of time, when people wrote systems for anything they could think of, many personality systems were created. These often rated the character on axes such as introvert-extrovert, cheerful-depressed and so on. I even used such ideas in one of the worst articles I ever wrote, about characterisation, for the late, unlamented *Fantasy Chronicles*. You might like to ask yourselves why such systems failed to make it into the current generation of rolegames—yesterday's 'cutting edge'.

As a general rule, those personality rules which have survived the test of time have been culture or genre specific. I would cite the *Pendragon* traits and the White Wolf use of willpower. In other words, the rules are invoked in cases where it is felt that the players might not be capable of adequately characterising a person from that culture or background without assistance. For this reason, it is of crucial interest to a person like me whose favourite games are

Chinese, Japanese, Arthurian or Tekumel-based. Yet, as I have mentioned, I oppose the use of rules in opposition to the player, and I feel that rewarding good role-playing is a meaningless activity.

What I'm left with is this: I am currently trying to formulate a method of encouraging players to cast aside their 20th century ideas *without* pummelling them into submission with rules systems or giving them illogical sweeties. There are two strands to this.

The first, and most important, lies in the background. If I can make the non-player characters reasonably credible denizens of their culture, the players will be encouraged to adopt a similar worldview. Further, the way the background operates—the way people relate to each other—can help to challenge players. Getting used to a vertically structured society can be difficult, especially for Americans. But if a player character group of 'equals' is persistently met with the question 'Who is the leader?' and is treated with contempt and disbelief if they don't have a clear hierarchy, then they may get the picture. Obligation and influence are other ways of demonstrating differences in the social fabric which affect personality: they are discussed elsewhere in this zine.

The second method is through motivation. Motivation, for me, represents a very strong link between the rules (in the form of the character advancement system) and the character's personality. People are motivated by many things. Many are common to all humans—the pursuit of happiness, for example. Others are shaded with more culture-specific ideas—such as a desire for spiritual perfection, or a love of justice. I therefore persuade my players to choose a motivation, and provide them with a list appropriate to the setting. They have a free choice, and that motivation does not restrain them in any way. What's more, the motivation may be changed at any time. Its purpose is to allow the referee and the player to negotiate a level of effort which the character is likely to bring to skill improvement.

At the moment, this part is rather loose and undefined. I feel that the referee and the player should take a couple of minutes after a game to discuss how the events of the game contributed to their character's motivation. This is imperfect, I am aware, and there are those who don't like the idea at all. I know many people who find an analysis of their character a little distasteful— they feel it interferes with immersion.

Actually, I feel this way myself, so I am also considering the idea that the discussion should be between the *other players* and the referee. In other words, the reinforcement or otherwise of your character's motivation would be decided by other players. Hmm, that has problems too, doesn't it.

Either way, specifying motivation and using it as a means of assisting character advancement is a useful way of tying role-playing, the setting and rules together. It doesn't restrict the player and, unlike the experience for good role-playing system, it has a direct correlation with in-game reality. It can also stimulate narratives: a character with a motivation of revenge, for example, has a good story-related reason for improving skills.

Maybe I'm trying to be too arty-farty here and straying into Mark Hagen*Daaz territory. Then again, his idea of having *another player* as your shadow-self (it was him, wasn't it?) is, for me, one of the most innovative solutions to the problem of self-control... for that background, anyway.

It's also possible that you'll consider what I've written a betrayal of my argument that the character's personality is the province if the player. James Wallis, in particular, might be narked by this, given the bashing he received as a result of me lifting his comment out of the Tekumel newsgroup and dumping it naked and unprotected in the miscellaneous role-playing arena. Them's, as they say, the breaks.

Whatever, I'm very interested in any contributions on this subject. ∎

Eardrum Buzz, continued

The first such 'new generation' MUD sites are just months away from coming on-line, and subsequent generations will refine both the user interface and the sophistication of such games even further.

There'll be some fallout from this, of course. I predict that eighteen months to two years from now (and no later), the *Daily Mail* will be telling the story of how little Johnny spent hundreds of hours and thousands of pounds playing in MUDs; how MUDs threaten to turn him into a homicidal devil worshipper; and how some kind of censorship is absolutely required. The knee-jerk is just a handful of months away.

Though I look forward to such things—and believe me, they're so close they are 'tangible'— I'm happy for the moment with my *Tohshinden* and *Tekken* games. (Which are not quite the rip-offs you claim them to be, I have to say.)

I'll meet you in the arcades. Expect to have your arse kicked, pal. ∎

COLLOQUY

Letters to the editor

'SO HERE WE ARE ONCE MORE.' AS THE immortal Fish out of Marillion once sang. On the first song of their first album. Stupid bugger. Anyway, allusions to dismal Genesis-rip-offs of the dim and distant past aside, what have we in the post bag this time?

In the following, comments by me are italicised and preceded by 明尊.

Matters arising

Robert Rees
I do dislike the way that you chunk

明尊　*I'll thank you to keep your personal comments to yourself!*

Robert Rees
letters up into little bits though. Not a real criticism but I like to do letters as a coherent piece.

明尊　*If letters are written as coherent pieces, that's fine. My way, on the other hand, allows people to make piecemeal comments as they like. In theory at least,* I *provide the coherence.*

Robert Rees
As an idea for the next letters col could you be really nice and see the gram of validity in everyone's point of view? Please?

明尊　*Whyever would I want to do that?*

Robert Rees
Ha, only kidding.

明尊　*Phew.*

Nathan Cubitt
The only way that I can see someone 'going pro' is to freelance for the various companies, and, except for a very select few, there certainly wouldn't be a living to be made from it. This, of course, is going to make it a very interesting time for any fanzine editors out there. Given that the new pro-rag (arcane—明尊) will cover fanzines, I wonder how many will jump on the bandwagon like I did in the 80s (*Was it the 80s? Somehow it seems longer ago than that...*—明尊). At

least I realise that this time no real career in gaming will come from it. Will they? Tee hee.

明尊　*Astute readers will notice that Nathan always comments, not on the last imazine, but on an older issue. Don't be alarmed, this is merely his style, and is fully consistent with the publishing schedule of his fanzine,* Delusions of Grandeur. *Talking of which...*

Nathan Cubitt
One day I'll finish one and go 'Yes—that's it' exactly how I wanted it. One day.

明尊　*That's the day you put out your last issue. Trust me. I know!*

Robert Rees
Thanks for the review of Carnel and it costs 50p. Basically Issue 6 was the let's get it done so I can get rid of it issue.

明尊　*Funny that,* all *my issues are 'let's get it done so that I can get rid of it' issues.*

Water (Margin) Bill

Paul Snow
I am sure you will be pleased to know that the *The Water Margin* has just been released on video in the UK at least according to *Empire* (Britain's Biggest Selling Movie Magazine).

The details are The Water Margin cert.15. £12:99 (Fabulous Films) —*Empire* no. 80 p114

Also tells us, ' Don't despise a snake for not having horns, who's to say it won't become a dragon?'

明尊　*Good advice, that, though I must admit that despite being a Water Margin junkie I still have no idea what the hell it means. David Weir, who handled the translation, did a bit of a* Magic Roundabout *on it, to tell the truth, hence his book is set in the wrong period and features more court intrigue and Daoist philosophy than rip-roaring swordplay.*

Still, great news, and my deepest thanks to their bearer for sharing them.

Nathan Cubitt
Have you considered releasing *Outlaws* on disk, like *Forgotten Futures*. It's not the ideal

method, but...?

明尊　*I have a sentimental attachment to paper. However I* will *release a disk version of* Outlaws. *It will consist of PostScript files, and can therefore be expected to occupy several disks.*

Japan
Matthew Pook

I think that much of what you are saying about Japan comes down to the concept of their own cultural identity, and how that is perceived not only by us (the West, primarily the Americans and ourselves), but also by themselves. What does our media paint but a simple choice of 'noble samurai', 'worker-bee salaryman' and 'faceless soldier of Imperialist expansion'? True, some of these perceptions are being changed as reported in the news, but only to highlight the new differences that are perceived in Japanese society. We, of course, buy all of this. Why? because not to do so would be getting into complexities that most people cannot or do not want to understand.

In some ways I think that you are in the best of two worlds. A stranger in a foreign land able to look in at their culture/society from the ground up and an exile abroad able to make the comparisons between Japan and home. If the Japanese as a whole suffer from an inferiority complex, what does British culture suffer from? Apathy?

明尊　*Er, well, like, y'now? Erm, did you see* Cracker *by the way? Well, y'know, it's sort of... this whole kind of British thing, it's sort of, well, how can I put it?*

Ray Gillham

Bushido—I still think does what it sets out to do, that is create a playable and fairly believably version of a pseudo-Japan. I certainly enjoyed it as a player and later as a GM, in fact it's the only game that I've done both with.

明尊　*All right. I bow to the massed opinions of the* Bushido *fans (which include the editor of* arcane *magazine). I guess I'm overly harsh on the game, and overly pedantic in demanding that a term like 'on' (which actually means obligation, but is used to mean honour) be replaced by something more appropriate, such as* 顔 *kao meaning face.*

For anyone who doesn't know: Bushido *is about to be republished by a company called Gold Rush games. Imagine my excitement when I discovered there's going to be a 'Middle Kingdom' supplement for it. And that some people I know are going to be writing for it. Probably.*

Phil Nicholls

Have collectible card games penetrated the Japanese market? Many of the CCGs show a lack of play-testing in the design stage.

明尊　*Not surprising, given the speed and quantity with which they are being released. In answer to your first question, yes, by golly, they have. Despite the enormous hurdle of having to understand cryptically worded cards, the Japanese have taken to* Magic: The Gathering *like flies to a dunghill.*

Hobby Image
Matthew Pook

How do you bring new blood into the hobby ? No idea. I can identify what the problems are in the UK though. They are two fold. Firstly the image of the hobby. This term I put up a notice at college asking for RPGers to contact me and within days it was plastered with derogatory terms. Two stuck in my mind: anorak and Star Trek fan.

It appears that the hobby cannot escape these labels: *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game for geeks, nerds and so on.

Secondly it faces the marketing giant that is Games Workshop. Traditionally shops that stocked GW products also carried RPGs and new blood could gain exposure to both because they were near each other on the shelves. But GW open up their own shop and stop supplying or undercut the old shop and the new blood no longer go to the old shop, but to GW's own and do not see RPGs. Now you can find GW games in the high street, but you have not been able to do this with RPGs for a long time... And just to be controversial, Games Workshop products are not as difficult to play as traditional RPGs ...

Lea Crowe

I have to confess that critical legitimacy is something I do crave. It's partly just an ego thing, of course, but there is the point that by winning that sort of respect for the hobby it becomes easier to develop and market 'serious' games, and to bring in players who play in a 'serious' way. Obviously this is predicated on the assumption that 'serious' is a good thing, but for some of us that's certainly the case.

I don't know about other people, but I think there *is* something of substance to be gained from considering 'role-playing as art.' You asked 'what has art got that role-playing needs?' Depth is the answer that leaps to mind. Most role-playing games are very shallow by comparison to a novel: the characterisation is poor, the

description is flat, there's little or no thematic content, the setting is unoriginal, clichés abound... you get the idea. By trying to learn from other media, we can develop richer games. As ever, this is only relevant if that's what you want, so the argument is somewhat circular. 'I want to consider role-playing as art because I want my role-playing games to be artistic.'

明尊   I agree up to a point. But... 'Most role-playing games are very shallow by comparison to a novel'—which novel? If you mean 'Most role-playing games are very shallow by comparison to a good *novel' then I'd agree, but I'm sure you see the problem with that line of reasoning.*

I want my role-playing games to be artistic... up to a point. More importantly I want them to have depth, but I don't think art has a monopoly on depth. I think that's why I'm increasingly tending towards a sort of 'authenticity' (not 'realism') in the games I play and run.

It's interesting that role-playing has tended to attract people from the 'science' side of the science-art divide. As a child I displayed the classic 'art' characteristics, but my education funnelled me towards science. My post university-life has been concerned with writing and publishing, as well as 'arts' education. It's only relatively recently that I've fully come to terms with the fact that temperamentally I don't perceive a divide *between the two—I like both equally. I think role-playing attracts me because it, too, spurns a clear distinction. Thus it is a niche hobby: too 'arty' for most scientists, and two 'engineering studenty' for most artists. Since that is its appeal for me, it might explain some of my resistance to an over-emphasis on 'role-playing as art'.*

Tarts Magica

Matthew Pook

Tarted up dungeons? Dungeons are all a matter of perception, intended use and so on. In *EPT* you have the Underworld: a mixture of the sun-conscious, the built upon buildings of previous civilisations, the travel tubes and so on. In Jorune you have caves and tunnels—this is where the original inhabitants of Jorune, the Shanthas lived. Also in FASA's recent game, *Earthdawn* you have dungeons. These, though have been lived in, people using them to hide from 'horrors'. Some now lie vacant and ready to explore. It is all a matter of perception and rationale. The basic idea of a dungeon in *D&D* is just a beat 'em up session—boring and pointless. The last time I ran a game of *AD&D,* I just said that there were no dungeons. Simple.

明尊   Good stuff. Were there any Dragons, then? Or Advanceds?

Ray Gillham

I think you've been unfair because the snippets read like I'm denigrating EPT in favour of *Jorune,* for example in your reply to `Tekumel nuts'. In fact I was commenting directly on the `feel' segment of Daedal Visions (*an article by me appearing in issue 3 of Ray's* Borkelby's Folly—明尊*); though I'll stick my hand up and admit I got carried away and talked shite. I'd have preferred that you'd made clear that a large chunk of my letter was specifically tied to the article you'd sent me, and the particular excerpt you quote came at the end of numerous points that discussed EPT and *SkyRealms of Jorune* in what I consider to be pretty fair terms.

明尊 Consider it made clear. Actually you weren't really talking shite. There is a lot of Tekumel-fan snobbery about. Some of it even happens among *Tekumel fans!*

Matthew Pook

What Ray Gillham says about the elitism between EPT and Jorune players has only a ring of truth. It is not wholly true. Tekumel has the advantages of a more intricate and deeper culture. It does not have great artwork and it has yet to have a decent, well supported game system. Think about it, give the game to Steve Jackson and let him do the GURPS version, it would have an amazingly high profile. Paul, I can see you gagging at this idea, but what else do you suggest ? Jorune has great art, is better supported with a (for the most part) better game system. I like both games, although I have only played EPT via the solo books.

明尊   Those solo books could be a lifesaver for Tekumel, though goodness knows they should have been written as either *gamebooks* or *stories, rather than the somewhat wasteful form they appeared in. I have no objection to the idea of a GURPS Tekumel.*

Social Pressures

Phil Nicholls

I am hoping to run a Napoleonic RPG and I would like my players to act as 'gentlemen' as defined by early 18th Century European society.

In my rather limited experience it is very difficult for rules to impose too heavily on the character's position within society. Honour systems and the like do not work for all players. Dedicated players will act within such a system, but then would probably do so anyway. Those players who lack conviction in the milieu will

ruin whatever system the rules use. Perhaps a set of 'Commandments' would be best. GMs have enough to do without keeping track of running 'honour' totals! Yet some numerical value may allow players to keep track of any progress they make within a social structure.

明尊   *Yes, and I feel the key is to make sure the players appreciate the value of that 'honour' (or as I'm calling it, respect) total. If the players realise that it has a practical use to them, and is not just an abstract 'thing' that the referee, only, uses, they may be more inclined to do what is necessary to increase it.*

As you say, those who want to play well probably will anyway. Thus our task is to structure the game so that those who have little inclination to play well don't spoil things for those who do. I don't care much for commandments. Bribery is marginally better, and I'm prepared to go along with it as long as the bribery is logical within the context of the game background.

Lea Crowe
I'll admit to rather a lot of pretentious thoughts in the 'art' direction myself—but I have always found the concept of *legislating* role-playing bizarre. You can encourage it in good ways (the *Lace & Steel* combat system) and bad ways (giving experience points or other bennies for 'role-playing'), but you can't make rules for it.

The Last Word
Matthew Pook
Look forward to Imazine #25. I can only hope that I don't get too much of a mauling in the letters page!

明尊   *Grrrr.... Woof Woof! Grrrrrrrrr.*

END PEACE
I'm starting to wonder about the wisdom of doing an electronic version of the zine. All that fussing around with HTML (and goodness knows, I do precious little) seems to be something of a waste of my time. I wouldn't mind so much if it led to a flood of contributors, but I'm realising that most inhabitants of the Netscape eschew traditional forms of communication and intercourse.

On the other hand, I have got in touch with a few people simply because of the presence of the zine on the Net. Maybe the solution is just to stop all the faffing around with HTML and upload the zine in PostScript format? ∎

Reviews, continued

When you suffer one lot of damage, it *must* be written on the same line. The next lot of damage you suffer may be written on a different line, however. When any one of your 'human lives' lines is filled, you are dead. This means that a phenomenally powerful blow will kill anybody, no matter how many 'heavenly lives' they have. However a character with a lot of 'heavenly lives' will be able to shrug off a large number of lighter wounds.

I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I?

Skill resolution works like this: the referee specifies a level of difficulty from one to 40 (you have to be three times better than human best to have a chance at 40). The player rolls two dice and adds his skill. The referee rolls two dice and adds the level of difficulty. The higher score wins.

Combat and opposed rolls work the same way, of course, but with the opposing character's skill replacing the difficulty.

Combat is dead simple. Different varieties of weapon don't make any difference—only what they are made of counts for anything.

The rest of the two little books are mainly taken up with monsters and treasure. The referee's book betrays the fact that the game is aimed at the young with copious explanations on how to play a game (at a level of detail most would find amusing), along with a 'replay', a blow-by-blow account of a game. Even the designer's notes are presented in the form of a conversation, and here the designer reveals that the game is based on a Chinese novel, which he hasn't bothered to find out any details about. He does, however, compare it to the other famous Chinese works: *The Water Margin, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Monkey*. There is little basis for comparison.

封神演義/Fengshenyanyi (the work on which the game is based) is set in a mystical version of the dawn of Chinese civilisation. As with all Chinese novels, however, it mixes in copious contemporary references. It's the direct ancestor of the movies I mentioned earlier, the books of Louis Cha, *Blades From The Willows* and the entire corpus of flying swordsman literature—China's pulp fiction, in other words.

I'm happy to see another Chinese-based rolegame. I'm a little sad that it's set up mainly as a monster bash. At least there's some imagination in the monsters and magic items, but I do wonder if the kids I teach will be playing it in a year or two. ∎