IMAZINE

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COLLOQUY
Letters to the Editor

Contributions may be sent on paper, on disk, or by email.

THIS IS IMAZINE 26, THE LATEST IN A long thin line which stretches back in time to the release of number one in 1982. 26 issues in 14 years? Not a very good average, eh? Still, it's interesting to see what has changed in the rolegaming field in that time. It's a perfect subject for an editorial. So here we go.

Err, nothing much.

Ah well, you can't win 'em all. 14 years ago the UK rolegaming scene was buzzing with the exciting new role-playing magazine IMAGINE. *White Dwarf* had long been unchallenged as the UK's alternative to the tedious orthodoxy of *The Dragon*. Then along came, shock horror, a TSR(UK) magazine. It brought in a lot of ideas that shook up *White Dwarf*. It covered fanzines, it cultivated a much closer relationship with determined players in general and it had a surprisingly unbiased review policy. It couldn't last, of course. Gary Gygax shut it down at issue 30 in one of his petty acts of despotism.

Imazine took its name from IMAGINE magazine. That's why it's pronounced 'I'm a zine'. The only reason this zine has this title is that having spent ages drawing a logo for a parody cover, I was buggered if I was going to use it once and throw it away. Although I ended up only using it on issues 6 and 7, the name stuck. That's why when I resurrected the zine at issue 21, I went back to the original logo, pirated from IMAGINE.

IMAGINE also published my first ever article for a professional magazine. It managed 30 issues. In a year's time, I hope to finally exceed it.   **I**

Panurgic Publishing

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REVIEWS

FENG SHUI. I GUESS I HAVE TO THANK Daedalus Games for bringing China into the public eye, though whether this is a good or a bad thing remains to be seen. Certainly, with the *Bushido*, er sorry *Sengoku* supplement *The Middle Kingdom* on its way, things appear to be looking up for us sinophiles. It only remains to be seen whether these games will generate an interest in China, or whether they will have no effect other than to encourage rolegamers' (already prodigious) tendency to produce drivel about martial arts.

I like Hong Kong movies as much as the next Golden Harvest anorak, but the idea that a slew of games will emerge produced by people who've watched *Heroic Trio* and think it's cool (that word crops up with monotonous regularity) doesn't fill me with excitement. For one thing, it's clear that most of these Hong Kong movies go over the heads of Western viewers. Inevitable, really. They build on a culture, an assumption of underlying knowledge. I guess that's why I prefer the historical movies to the modern ones-I find them easier to understand.

Take *The Wicked City*, for example. A fantastic picture for *Shadowrun* or *Feng Shui* fans. But the whole story is rooted in the background, a mixture of the *wu xia* novels of the likes of Louis Cha, and the huge accretion of legends about the *xian*, the Immortals. I'm not saying you need to understand this to enjoy the movie. I am saying that you need to understand this to make the movie. Or a game based on it...

So anyway, let's whizz on with the reviews.

Feng Shui

Feng Shui is cool. I know this because every single person who has commented on it has said so. 'Cool' is a word which follows this game around like paparazzi round a royal. I can only suggest this is because the people who use it have a vocabulary so impoverished that they can't think of anything else to say... Or perhaps because it's an ironic comment on the nature and pretensions of the game.

The main point about *Feng Shui*, I'm afraid to say, is that while I had supposed it to be a game about China, it isn't.

I'm old and jaded, I know. When I hear a chorus of people saying something is 'cool', I am immediately put off it. In the case of *Feng Shui* I have heard it so many times that it has driven me to distraction. Another problem is the fact that *Feng Shui* is so staggeringly popular that it is unavailable, and so I have not yet managed to see a copy of the game. I have read the rules which are given on the game's Web site, but that's clearly not enough. As I am unable to judge this game fairly, and am depressed to find that it has nothing to do with China, I will simply stop the review right here in favour of something that is really worth a look (and which doesn't cost 30 dollars).

Cathay Arts

Actually the full title of this game is *Cathay Arts of Role-playing*. It is, believe it or not, a game designed to simulate the heroic strain of Chinese adventure fiction seen in a variety of works: from the novels of Louis Cha (who writes as Jin Yong) to the, er, *Water Margin*.

Yeah. Klungggg. When I found this on the Web, my curiosity was more than piqued. It was inflated with hydrogen and ignited.

I was even more fascinated to discover that there were many similarities between this game and my own Water Margin project. Its designer, Leonard Hung, has faced most of the same design problems I have, and, like me, he has done his best to explain why he did things the way he did.

Some parts of this game are remarkably similar to parts of *Outlaws of the Water Margin*. Other parts are radically different. Overall, I like it very much.

In particular, it benefits from the author's deep and scholarly knowledge of the world of martial arts novels. In particular, the influence of Jin Yong is apparent. Leonard has made comprehensive lists of the fantastic martial arts which appear in novels such as *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* (published by the Hong Kong Chinese University) and *The Book and the Sword* (published on the Web by Graham Earnshaw). These include genuine martial arts, but woven into a tapestry of fantasy in which kung fu masters can leap great distances, use 'light-body' techniques to scale sheer slopes, and knock out opponents by poking special pressure points.

His combat system represents Jin Yong's combat superbly. You could conduct a game combat, and then write it out without significant embellishment and it would be just like the source. The reason for this is the way that

combat involves assigning dice to five areas: initiative, attack, defence, movement and marvel. Since the overall number of dice available depends on overall gong fu, you'll see that untrained fighters have little flexibility, and have to concentrate on one thing at a time, while masters can perform moves of considerable subtlety and sophistication.

My only quibble with these combat rules is that they might lead to a more cerebral-feeling game, as there is no single 'roll to hit' to focus a player's martial intent. Leonard assures me, however, that in practice the rules work pretty speedily, and plenty of energy is generated.

I think overall my only major criticism of the game is that Leonard has billed it as a general game about Heroic China. While it does fulfil that role pretty well, I think he would be better describing it as a Jin Yong RPG. While the game could conceivably be used to simulate most periods of Chinese history, it would, to me at least, feel a little odd in some cases. As an example, the adventure that Leonard has started to put on the Web is set in Kaifeng in the Song Dynasty (the capital at the time of the Water Margin, and therefore probably the place and time of China I know best). It may just be my own prejudice, but the array of martial arts in the game do not seem to suit this period, but fit better into a game set in Qing times.

Such a game could use the theme explored in Jin Yong books, in which China is ruled by the foreign Manchus, and organisations such as the Red Flower Society hone their martial skills in order to further their dream of restoring an ethnic Chinese to the Imperial Throne.

As a side note, some of Leonard's ideas from this game, most especially the idea of dividing each attribute into two aspects: an external, or yang aspect, and an internal, or yin aspect, have found their way into another interesting Chinese RPG project to be found on the Web, Eric Yin's *Once Upon A Time In China*. This is a *Pendragon* variant, set in an alternative China in which the Ming Dynasty didn't unite China. Thus a China with the technology, manners and customs of the Ming has the fragmented nature of the various warring states periods, a clever way of combining the attractions of various historical periods.

In Eric's game, player characters are adventurers in the world of Riverlake, a recurring theme of this kind of Chinese adventure fiction. In a way, the Water Margin was the first actual novel to establish the idea of the Riverlake, the brotherhood of heroes, which has been developed in countless stories since.

I also found it fascinating that Eric should have chosen to modify *Pendragon*. I've made no secret of my respect for the game, and the large

debt that *Outlaws* owes to it. In fact, at one point I wrote to Greg Stafford with a proposal for doing *Outlaws* as... a *Pendragon* supplement!

Both *Cathay Arts* and *Once Upon A Time In China* are inspirational creations which I will be taking a keen interest in.

Cathay Arts of Role-playing *can be found on the Web page of its creator, Leonard Hung, at: http://home.netvigator.com/~lhung/index.html.*

Once Upon A Time In China *is at Eric Yin's home page: http://www-hsc.usc.edu/~eyin*

arcane

A few comments on the recent issues of this, the great white hope of UK rolegaming publishing. What the hell has happened to it?

It looks very like a new editor has happened to it. The covers, never its strong point, have become utterly appalling, and while the interior visuals continue to hold their own, the quality of writing and editing has sunk to the depths we expect only from the more exclamation mark-infested depths of computer games magazines.

As for the content, well, we still have the problem that there isn't very much. Phil Masters' worthy trawl through the history of the world to see what settings for rolegames we can come up with is worth a look, but there's not much else. Andrew Rilstone still hasn't found anything to write about, apart from making ludicrous assertions that Tekumel is in some way based on oriental culture. Bizarrely, the editor defends the column against the charge that it is pointless on the grounds that it is there to 'encourage humour'. I can only assume that by this, he means that it is so lacking in humour that it will make the rest of the mag seem light and witty in comparison. Half right.

I should at this point declare an interest, and an additional reason for having a less than charitable attitude toward the magazine. When I first contacted them, Steve Faragher (the former editor) agreed to my proposal for an article about role-playing in Japan, and suggested that I submit a proposal for an article about oriental role-playing. The new editor then took over. His only communication with me has been to check about a stray comment I made that Bandai might be suing FASA over the licenses for FASA's *Battletech* designs. FASA's lawyers were breathing heavily over arcane and despite the rumours being based on the truth, arcane followed the great and noble tradition of a free press by capitulating immediately and printing an apology claiming that it was not true.

AHEAD

by Paul Mason

Continuing the series of articles on the computerised future of role-playing

LAST ISSUE, LEE BRIMMICOMBE-WOOD painted a rosy future for computer role-playing. As he pointed out, he is employed in the field (albeit with a company which makes flight sims), so he has a vested interest in its success. As yet, I am not employed in the computer games industry, and therefore I'm a little more sceptical about its possibilities.

Lee put forward several arguments in support of computer role-playing. The first was the high level of sophistication of computer Artificial Intelligence. I dispute this. Perhaps my definition of AI is a little more rigorous than Lee's (mine comes from people who actually did research in the field). It's coming along, certainly. But as far as games are concerned, my AI litmus test is actually very similar to the oft-discredited Turing test. I'll explain it more later.

Another of Lee's arguments was that computer games are on the way to becoming art forms because the technology is advancing. He backed this up with reference to the cinema. Yeah, and *Independence Day* is great art while *Citizen Kane* plainly sucks. Art is what you do with the technology, not the technology itself. I have yet to see any art produced using a computer package that is better than *Guernica*, painstaking daubed by hand. This doesn't mean that it won't happen. My point is simply that there is no direct connection between advancing technology and advancing art.

Finally Lee discussed the possibilities for on-line multi-user interactive games. Here I find much more to agree with. My original article was based on a lack of knowledge about what is happening. Despite this I did manage to make at least one point that is still pertinent: 'My only fear is that these will be entirely the work of computer programmers, rather than game designers, a problem which has bedevilled computer gaming since day one.' Since writing that I've discovered that many computer companies have recently wised up, and have been recruiting game design talent at a prodigious rate.

The result is that next year will see the first flowering of a number of on-line multi-user games. I know a little about some of these games, which are being designed by people I know. What can we expect, and what are the potential pitfalls?

Tension bars

The first thing to realise is that computer games companies are conservative in many areas. They have to be, as they rely on technological gambles for their bread and butter. Having invested a lot of money in technological R&D, they are understandably reluctant to chance their hand at something radical. On the other hand, the market is so competitive that a product has to stand out in some way. This creates quite a powerful tension in design. One way to make a product stand out is to employ a license. This was the case with the solo game **A Final Unity** which I mentioned in my article in issue 24. As I said then, a multi-player version of that could be wonderful. The problem was that having expended so much dosh on the technology, the license and the voice talent, there was none left to design a decent game. As so often happened, the licensed product was vacuous.

The conservative forces at work are going to pull the non-licensed games towards certain established genres. The largest of these is the hack fantasy genre, probably the single largest literary genre. It is an obvious genre for computer games. Its readers are already content to put up with semi-literacy, cliché and repetition: these things can be provided far better by a computer than by a book. The only other likely genre for computer games is that represented by *Doom*. I can only describe it as 'Guns.... kill!... explosions... blood....more guns.....kill! kill! Kill!'. It makes the hack fantasy genre seem tasteful and restrained.

The kind of multi-user games implied by these genres are fairly easy to construe. The latter genre will spawn a game in which players wander around trying to kill each other.

Basically it will be *Killer* played on a computer. Not what I, in my narrow, pedantic way, would call role-playing. Hack fantasy faces a different problem: at the heart of 95% of it is a grand quest. The necklace of Zog must be chucked into the Pit of Grunk. The Orb of Bro must be used in order to defeat the Dark Lord of Drolkrad. Y'know the stuff. In an on-line game this all goes out of the window. 100 on-line participants can't all be involved in such stuff—or can they? Indeed, an on-line game is unlikely to offer a main plot at all. It may not even offer any subplots. The participants are left to create their stories themselves.

For me, this freedom is one of the most exciting things about multi-user computer games. It is also their greatest weakness. A game in which the player is not given a clear objective is a turn-off for many people. For many, the self-created objective will be becoming the most powerful bugger in the kingdom. In order to achieve this, the player will wander around trying to kill other player characters. Basically it will be *Killer* played on a computer. Not what I, in my narrow, pedantic way, would call role-playing. Indeed, as you've probably already noticed, it would just be multi-user *Doom*.

For other players, the game will soon settle down into a rather expensive form of chat line. Conversations with other participating players will soon stray from the game-related.

Outdated Rules

Another problem with computer fantasy games is the bizarre design legacy by which successive generations have unthinkingly adopted conventions that were created by Mssrs Arneson and Gygax for a wholly different type of game, years ago. Whenever I look at a computer RPG, I'm gobsmacked at the fact they are *still* defining your character with ratings in Strength, Constition, Dexterity, Hit Points and so on after all these years. Time, it seems, has stood still.

There is absolutely no excuse for retaining these. I don't think there was much excuse in the first place, but nowadays it's just unforgivable. Here we have people who are so gung ho at the possibilities of what their computers can do in the graphics department, that they have utterly failed to see that this enables them to *show* players what their characters are capable of, to avoid upsetting suspension of disbelief with all this statistics shite.

There are exceptions. *Ecstatica*, a game which build on the graphical advances of *Alone In The Dark*, had no 'stats' screen. It didn't need one. It clearly demonstrated my point: that there is no need to hit a player with abstract points. A

'strong' character can smash a door down; an 'injured' character will move slowly and painfully. All these states of a character can be shown graphically.

Design by design

How do you design a game which gets past these hurdles? I have been thinking about this a little recently, and have come up with a few possibilities. It is unlikely that these will be implemented in the near future, but I can hope.

First, the Turing test referred to earlier. I feel quite strongly that when playing an on-line game, other player characters should be, at least initially, indistinguishable from computer characters. This is a flaw of tabletalk role-playing which the computer can correct. The problem is that companies are unlikely to see it as a priority, especially as they want to stress the 'Interact with other Players' aspect of the game. Ironically, however, making a clear distinction between computer characters and player characters decreases the value of the interaction. It emphasises that you are interacting with another person in our world, while it is surely more interesting to interact with a believable, fleshed out person in the fantasy world. That's what a multi-user game can provide.

The problem here is that of speech. The effort involved in designing a computer engine in such a way that it can hold intelligent in-game conversations is way too much for game companies. The most viable solution is to restrict almost all communication to a menu or similar. The problem with that is that it limits the communicative interaction which is the whole point of a multi-user game.

My own preference would be to have initial contact handled by menus. Only when friendship has been established (this would have to be designed into the background: many cultures have a formal declaration of friendship) would free communication be possible. You could either prevent players becoming friends with computer characters (but the player wouldn't know whether the refusal was from the computer or another player) or permit it and allow for the fact that the distinction would come in at that point.

Another point relates to unplottedness. Although it's clearly going to be very difficult to have a game with an overall plot, it's certainly possible to present players with a set of sub-plots, in which they could get involved through chance or necessity. It would also be necessary to design an engine which allowed players to effectively generate subplots for other players.

This would be especially true in the case of players who got established in the background, and whose rivalries with other players or computer characters stimulated adventure.

Personally, I think it might also be feasible to have an overarching 'Grand Plot' in a multi-user game. This could involve many players, but they wouldn't have to devote themselves to it if they didn't want to. Also it would be by no means clear what bits were actually part of the 'Grand Plot'. The book-lover within me also thinks it would be rather nice if a limited duration multi-user game with a Grand Plot ended with the story being written up by some impoverished hack (no doubt impoverished by the death of the fantasy genre in the wake of the development of multi-player computer fantasy games). Players would then have the *frisson* of possessing a novella to which they had perhaps contributed. A sort of competitive element would be introduced: who can be the hero of the story?

While in the UK this summer I was able to have a look at the kind of interface being developed for this kind of game. It is exactly what I envisaged in my article in issue 24, in which the player's character is animated as a *Virtua Fighter* type 3D figure, which can be pictured from a variety of viewpoints.

The technology now exists. It isn't the problem. The question, for me, is whether anybody is going to be able to see the possibilities of the field. Is a game going to be created and set in a fascinating fantasy world which interests its players so much that they are prepared to invest time and effort in generating and prosecuting their own adventures? Or are we just going to get Colin the Fighter and Dirk the Dwarf in a field discussing the relative merits of Oasis and Blur? Partly it is down to the people who play in the games. But a large responsibility also rests on those who create the worlds, engines and interfaces used in these games.

It boils down to the future. You'll always find people who reckon the future is just going to bring a load of crap, and the only value lies in the fusty old established ways. You'll also find people who're gung ho about whatever old bollocks comes out as long as it's new. I don't want to be either. I want to face the future with both eyes open. I want multi-user computer games, sure, but only if they're *good*. ∎

Now, admittedly, in my communication with the editor, I had happily suggested that he should just blame me and say I made it all up. Personally I couldn't give a toss if two stupid toy companies sue each other over the designs of some puerile robots.

Anyway, in the course of this 'important' communication I reminded the editor of the proposal that I had duly submitted in response to the previous editor's request. This all happened 9 months ago. I have still not heard a peep.

This is both unprofessional and rude. A simple one-line email message to inform me that my article would not be required would be a simple courtesy. Even in the case of an unsolicited submission, this would be a bare minimum. When the matter is a commissioned article, it becomes evident that we are dealing with amateurs here.

If I were paranoid, I might also wonder if the non-appearance of my contributions to the arcane on-line forum, and its classified section, were in any way connected with the above. As it is I have no doubt that it is simply inefficiency and cock-up.

With the sales of arcane now standing at around 7000 an issue, we can rest assured that when the Future Publishing money runs out, arcane will join the rest of the failures, glorious and otherwise, in that great role-playing magazine dustbin in the sky. I will certainly not be renewing my subscription.

IMNOT

Yes, a wacky title, not a million miles unrelated to that of my own august jade organ. The most shocking thing about IMNOT, however, is how late it is. The first issue (called issue #0) arrived nearly nine years after it was first planned. This makes my delay on the Water Margin game seem rather trivial.

The ethos of the fanzine remains in 1987, too, which is by no means a bad thing. IMNOT celebrates strange pictures, pub meets, signed photographs of Basil Brush's 'friend' and the like with a glee abandon that I haven't seen in a fanzine for years. It also carries a couple of cartoon strips, and articles on an interactive Sherlock Holmes mystery exhibit, and 'letter games' a form of interactive fiction.

It's fun, and for extras, it's free.

IMNOT *is available on request from the editor, Adrian Barber, at 10 Ruvigny Gardens, Putney, London SW15 1JR, United Kingdom.*

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ONCE UPON A TIME IN
CHINA

Motivation and Superstition in The Water Margin

LAST ISSUE I RABBITED ABOUT STATUS, and also printed an article exploring the problems of representing personality, in which I obliquely referred to a system of representing a character's motivation. Since then, the system for motivation has crystallised, and brought with it a system even more important in assisting players to get into the mindset of Song Dynasty Chinese. I'm particularly grateful to Dave Morris and Leonard Hung for inspiration and exploration of these ideas.
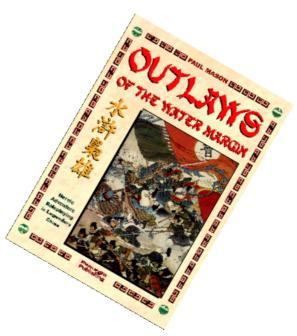
First, the motivation system. This is simplicity itself. A player may choose up to two motivations for a character (this isn't necessary: some characters won't possess a strong motivation). The current list of motivations includes: ambition, chivalry, desire, enlightenment, face, fame, filial piety, greed, happiness, immortality, justice, loyalty, mercy, perfection, purity, revenge and virtue. Descriptions are provided for these motivations.

Sweet Freedom

At any time in a game, a player may announce that something has happened which has influenced their character. They then make a simple roll. The value for this roll is decided in the rules, and the referee is not allowed to reduce it, only add a bonus of up to +3 in the event that it seems appropriate.

The roll will produce a degree of success of between 2 and 10. Half of this is then claimed by the character as motivation, while the remainder is noted by the referee as 'bad joss'.

Motivation claimed in this way may be used immediately. It can be spent as a bonus to a roll to improve a skill (so in this respect it is a little like the traditional 'experience points') or it can

be expended directly to gain a bonus on a single roll (so it also functions as 'hero points').

That's it. The point of this system is that it is very simple, and it frees the players from the tyranny of referee control over their characters' psychologies. Players can go into whatever detail they like as to the way in which game events have shaped their characters' drives. It also provides players who prefer not to analyse their characters, with the freedom not to do so. And players who can't stand experience systems don't have to bother with them if they don't want to.

Determination

Motivation does have a few other functions in the game. The accumulated stock of motivation points can be used as a rough measure of determination in the area covered by the motivation. As I mentioned last time, I didn't want players to be rolling *against* their character's personality. The closest I get to this is the suggestion that some players who like to roll the dice may use their characters' motivation to resolve dilemmas. As an example, take a character who has both justice and revenge motivations. They find themself in a position to carry out their revenge, but it necessitates allowing a miscarriage of justice. What do they do? Sure, most players would just decide for themselves. Some, however, might like to make a roll against each of justice and revenge, as if it was a fight, and see which gets the upper hand.

It's all a matter of providing options for those who want them.

There are other uses for motivation. The

'Buddhist' motivations (Mercy, Enlightenment and Purity) can be used as a measure of dedication to Buddhism where game mechanics require such a thing. And so on.

Bad Joss

I can imagine a few wrinkled brows at this point. Allow players to give themselves experience points? Bad show! Damned anarchists: he'll be going all diceless on us next!

Not much chance of that, I'm afraid. There is a limitation to the players' abilities to grab motivation at any and every opportunity and motivate their character into a superbeing. That catch is the other half of the degree of success of the roll, already mentioned: the points noted down by the referee as bad joss.

What is bad joss? The Chinese expression is 凶 (*xiong*). It's a general way of describing what often gets labelled by hippies in the West as 'bad karma'. It isn't really karma, of course, because karma is an accumulation which affects your next life, whereas bad joss affects you in this one.

Bad joss is acquired in a number of ways. Apart from the aforementioned system involving getting motivation, you can get bad joss by close encounters with malignant spirits, by hanging around in places where people have drowned or killed themselves, by living in a house with bad *feng shui*, by having your ancestors buried in a grave with bad *feng shui*, by breaking an oath, by being cursed by a sorcerer and probably by a dozen other ways that haven't occurred to me yet.

In short, bad joss is all about superstition. Let's face it, superstition is rationalised paranoia. When things go badly, you decide that someone, somewhere, is out to get you. In **Outlaws**, they really are!

Suffering Spirits

Each player character will have an accumulated total of bad joss kept by the referee. Though they may have a rough idea of how much, they won't know precisely unless they get a Buddhist priest to find out (Buddhist priests are good at that sort of thing).

Once in each game session, the referee may use a character's stock of bad joss against them. The bad joss is used as the basic ease for a roll directed against the character.

So bad joss can be pretty nasty.

That's not all, though. When bad joss totals pass certain thresholds, or at certain other times, players have to make bad joss rolls.

The player rolls, and consults the bad joss table, which is a list of unpleasant things, from catching a cold to being struck by lighting. The roll is done in such a way that the player can see the table, and can see their roll, but doesn't know the exact number of points of bad joss they have. They roll, and the referee tells them if that's a successful or failed roll. They can then see the unpleasant effect which has befallen their character. The reason for this is to dissociate bad joss a little from referee whim. It's not productive for players to feel that bad joss is a referee stick to beat them with. Some referees have a habit of using such systems to enforce 'good role-playing' or 'conformity to the plot' or other such tripe, and I want players to have at least some defence against that.

So anyway, it's another table (boo!), but it does provide a whole list of plot developments (hooray!). And, at last, it is a system whereby disease is going to be a little more than just an annoying system that nobody uses.

This latter was important to me. Disease, in the *Water Margin* story, became a driver of the plot on occasions. Song Jiang, leader of the outlaws, at one point got a nasty dose of something, and seemed destined for an early grave. As a result the heroes had to get out and con a brilliant doctor into joining the band so that Song's little problem could be dealt with.

More generally, bad luck is one of those things that the player characters have to contend with, which creates the dramatic tension of the game. Traditionally, these have been provided by the referee, which tended to emphasise the referee's adversarial role. Sometimes a referee would use a 'random encounter table'. These have fallen out of fashion now, and are often just dismissed as lazy, unimaginative refereeing. Some will probably consider my bad joss table to be the same sort of thing.

Maybe it is. My goal, though, is to try to create the feeling that bad joss is some kind of a real thing, that exists outside of the referee's more-or-less brilliant literary ambitions for the plot. To do this, its results have to be extricated from referee fiat. That's superstition.

Religious Problems

You may be chafing now at an apparent inconsistency you've spotted in the above system. Why on earth does getting motivated cause you to get bad joss?

I have to admit, this was a big problem for me at first. In the last issue, when I was first developing the ideas of the motivation system, bad joss had yet to enter the equation, and I was

very worried about what the 'catch' should be on claiming motivation.

After settling on bad joss, though, a lot of pieces fell into place. **Outlaws** is a game about China. The three major religio-philosophic systems of China, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are all fatalistic. They all stress, in slightly different ways, the importance of knowing your place. Claiming motivation is bucking that trend.

The philosophical justifications go even deeper when you take a close look at Taoism and Buddhism. Both of these condemn attachment to the world. In the case of Buddhism, the ultimate goal is to become aware of one's non-individuality. Buddhist theology has it that all suffering is caused by desire. Suffering caused by desire? Bad joss caused by motivation!

Similarly Taoism stresses naturalness and balance. The Taoist sage follows *wu-wei*, which is usually translated non-action. It's really non-motivated, spontaneous action. The philosophic theory of the body which underlies the whole of Chinese medicine stresses balance, and that applies to the emotions as much as to such things as food and exercise. An excess of motivation is considered to cause a spiritual unbalance of the body which leads to misfortune.

Tekumel Blues

So, there we have a system which uses the background in order to drive a set of game mechanics. My problem, of course, is that I'm currently using the rules for a Tekumel game, and the above justifications most emphatically do not apply for Tekumel. All of which is, I think, another point in the argument against generic systems.

If any Tekumel experts among you have any idea of how I can get the same mechanical effect while using Tekumel fixtures and culture, I would be very happy to hear from you. In the meantime, however, I'm likely to be switching my game to Outlaws very soon, so I'll finally be able to make use of all the stuff I've been writing for the last few years. And the rules will get ripped to shreds (again). Sigh. But that's role-playing.

Coincidentally, there also exists a version of this game adapted for use in Tekumel. I have refrained from making that version available, as there are already plenty of Tekumel rules available, and the producers and supporters of *Gardasiyal*, the 'official' Tekumel rules, don't seem to take too kindly to the suggestion that people might like to use others. Still, I can report

that a less 'heroic' version of my rules does seem to do the job fine for Tekumel, so if anyone is interested they only have to drop me a line for more info.∎

Publishing Update

Thought I'd better let you know the latest on how the game is being published.

As I've got closer to getting a game of some sort out, more and more people have helped me with the rules. Originally, I had a credits list which listed Dave Morris, Gail Baker and Ian Marsh as having assisted the design, and a few other people as playtesters. I now have a considerably longer list of credits, resembling those in an Iron Crown product (which ironically did not include the actual playtesters of a product, but gave a mention to warehouse workers and other employees of the company). I had this idea that anyone who has helped with the game should receive a free copy. But now it's starting to look like the majority of people who are interested in getting the game will be receiving free copies, so I thought, dang it, I'll put it up on the Web after all.

I don't like this all that much. My experience over the last year is that the Web is a lowest common denominator. While it is useful as a means of posting information on a global bulletin board, many of the messages my Web pages have attracted have been, to say the least, challenged in the literacy department. A typical example would be:

'China is cool!!!!! I love samurai. Please reply.' A glance at the address quickly reveals that this is mailed from a US High School, and that any reply is extremely unlikely to reach the sender.

The Web makes it easy to distribute the game cheaply, though, so I'll do it.

The HTML version of the game doesn't have any artwork (yet), but it is freely available. I'm investigating the possibility of doing a PDF (Adobe Acrobat) version of the game, once version 3.0 comes out, allowing me to use Chinese characters. Such a version would be available for download from an on-line retailer, or directly from me on disks.

Incidentally, the first book, which features most of the game mechanics, is finished now. I'm hoping to get the second book done before the New Year.

I'm also working on scenarios. One introductory scenario is sort of written, and I have a crazy idea for a mini-campaign including sections written in gamebook form so that the referee can 'play through' the adventure before running it. We'll see.

COLLOQUY

Letters to the editor

LAST ISSUE ROBERT REES COMPLAINED about me chunking letters up into chops. This issue I'll make a special effort to let people run on at greater length.

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

Matters arising
Phil Nicholls
Many thanks for the latest issue of imazine. It may be my imagination, but it seems that your rate of production is slowly increasing.

明尊 *Spoke too soon, didn't you Phil?*

Ray Gillham
Thanks for issue 25, and I must say you were remarkably affable in the letters page!

明尊 *Yes, and it's taken me a long time to recover.*

Influence & Status
Phil Nicholls
I enjoyed your article on Influence and Status as well as your comments regarding my Napoleonic RPG.

As I was considering this issue, I realised that what I had simply been terming 'honour' was a combination of several different things. The honour part is really military honour involving martial prowess, bravery, loyalty and discipline. Another part is a question of social status. This would allow admittance into fashionable salons, tickets for the opera and invitations to official balls. Finally, I thought of political influence that would affect all sorts of intrigue and chicanery. The interplay of these three separate factors would be very similar to your example of the merchant and the official. The difference is that my system is tailored to the values of Napoleonic Europe. Somehow I feel that this realization that mechanics must fit background is a fundamental principle of game design, but I feel like Paul on the road to Damascus!

Paul Snow
The problem of getting players to pick up a mindset for a culture game is a problem I've been wondering about as I am about to start a new Tekumel campaign. I was going to take two approaches. The first tack was to try for strong immersion in the details of the world. I have been generating family tree structures for several lineages of two clans and was going to start by allowing players to select from a limited number of spaces in the structure. Instantly you generate parents, siblings and a family environment for the character. This plus history of the lineage and clan and you should have a good launch point for forming a character that is part of the world.

明尊 *This was one of the good points about the introductory Tekumel scenario from the* Eye of All-Seeing Wonder, *which I used for my group. That family tree really drives home the importance of family in a way that a sheet saying 'Family is really important' just can't achieve.*

Paul Snow
The problem with this arises if the player wants the character to become a priest of Wuru when the lineage has always (well pretty much-you know...) worshipped Avanthe. I was thinking of handling this not by saying-no you can't do that-as Tekumel is a pretty liberal place and my players won't take it but using a system of clan merits and demerits.

Brownie points, clan favouritism points or whatever they are best called would go to and from a character according to whether he followed the path of a good clan member or some other strange aberrant path. A positive amount of clan favouritism could then be cashed in later when you really needed some cash to help lubricate yourself into that desired promotion.

Clearly, there is some overlap here with your idea of favours and the debt you owe your parents. In your system what happens if the child follows a wayward path from the parents point of view? Do the number of favours owed increase as a result of rebellious action by children? This would mean more deeds are required to get back to the normal relationship? Can the favour burden grow so high that the obligations are written off by casting the child out of the family? I guess that parental favours

are a different case to most others as the favour debt is imposed on you without you asking- normal favours arise from an agreement of action and subsequent owed favour.

Ray Gillham

Another tricky one. To go back to *Bushido*, the rules there for group, personal and social status worked well broadly, but broke down when the PCs were dealing with each other and with higher-ups. Players find it very hard to back down. Ironically, they don't wish to lose 'face' with the other players and GM.

How many other of the status associated behaviours do we have in the West but don't recognise as such? Quite a few, I'd say; I was particularly intrigued by a documentary on Hollywood recently, that I saw after I'd been reading about Tsolyani eating habits (the tiered daises and formal seating arrangements etc). They interviewed a restaurateur who spoke at length about where to seat people, when, next to whom, etc. There was a dazzling array of social protocols to follow, and I thought, 'Hang on, I've just been reading about this in the *Eye of All-Seeing Wonder.'*

I guess status in fantasy RPGs usually goes no further than slave-peasant-soldier-thane-noble, because that's the pseudo-European view that many are based on. For players in other genres you'd have to get them to understand the philosophical backbone of society.

明尊 *Now this reminds me: our discussion doesn't just relate to those games with 'exotic' backgrounds. It relates to any game which has a background. Those fantasy games with the 'slave-peasant-soldier-thane-noble' set-up don't really have social backgrounds. They're implicitly our own society, but with different names applied to some of the ranks, and a bit of simplification and fudging. This was first driven home to me by the original Chivalry & Sorcery, which demonstrated what a sham the then-universal pseudo-medieval background was, and still is. By a fascinating coincidence, the 3rd Edition of Chivalry & Sorcery has just come out, and I will be reviewing it next issue.*

Slide Rules

Andy McBrien

Like you I favour games which stress roleplay over games play. However I believe the best way to achieve this is not to design rules to influence how the players will roleplay, but to minimise the amount of rules.

明尊 *A 'minimal' set of rules is, in itself, a design decision which influences the way the players roleplay.*

Andy McBrien

For my own game I have chosen to use a descriptive based system. I know this is not a new idea but before you dismiss it completely it isn't, at least, just a numerical system in disguise. Perhaps the greatest difference is character development. Rather than rolling and applying points to develop the best 'design' for your purposes, character development becomes simply a matter of the players describing their characters. Of course they need guidance from the presenter *[code for 'referee'*—明尊] in order to develop a character that fits the settings. So the game must include adequate details of the background. The presenter will also lay down certain restrictions that apply for the particular game that is planned. But basically the character will be the product of a discussion between the player and presenter. It's entirely up to the player how clearly defined and how full the character description is. But for the game the player's interpretation represents the character's perception of themselves and the presenter's interpretation always represents the reality.

明尊 *There are a number of points I agree with here; not least the notion of the character as a contract between player and referee, and the potential advantages of a descriptive approach. However I absolutely disagree with the final point. Reality is joint-created. I do not believe that the contract is so one-sided as to allow the referee to usurp full control over the definition of 'reality'. That, for me, leads to the Thatcher Syndrome, in which the referee tends to see the game as an opportunity to drive the players through her plots like performing hamsters through hoops.*

Andy McBrien

When characters attempt tasks the presenter sets a required roll to be equalled or exceeded on three dice, based on the character description and the difficulty of the task in question. Non-physical tasks are resolved by roleplay. It is only for combat that I felt the rules needed to be precisely defined, as this involves situations of such obvious importance and involve so many changeable factors.

So for combat a character's ability with any particular weapon as it is described on the player's character sheet is matched up with the closest definition on the combat skill table to give the appropriate skill bonus.

明尊 *Now oddly enough that's by no means dissimilar to the way I've always gone about running things. The question is, how much control does the referee allow to be wrested from him or her, how arbitrary-feeling are the results of the rules, and what atmosphere do they generate?*

Bill Hoad

I invented quite a simple system where combatants gained temporary advantages or disadvantages. (I noticed that in the medieval re-enactment fights I used to do, when one opponent got the advantage they could sustain a number of attacks while the opponent could only defend. But strength and skill could only maintain this advantage for so long.)

明尊 *Starts to suggest a sort of 'bidding' approach might be in order. The question is, what do the characters 'bid' with? My thought would be that you 'bid' with your energy, with a value limited by your strength and skill. The disadvantage would be that you wouldn't recharge your energy very fast: you could keep the advantage for a while, but it would be tiring. Of course, the problem is how to make a system like this simple enough to run in practice.*

Personality

Adrian Bolt

Personality is down to the player not the rules. The one that's always stuck in my cram is the Cthulhu persuade/fast talk etc: I don't know what I said to the NPC but with rolling 01 it must have impressed the hell out of him... Encouraging players into a mindset has to come from the world's depth and attention to detail. Motivation is interesting, but you need to making it more than taking one step back from experience: compare 'I used my sword' with 'I used my sword because I'm motivated by a love of justice'. You need to get away from the look and feel of experience points.

明尊 *Oops: I have experience points in the game.*

Adrian Bolt

Perhaps you can only look at the extremes: something strikes you as grossly in or out of character so you reward or penalise it. You may have to analyse it with the player afterwards- how can it interfere with immersion when the session has ended?

明尊 *While I may still be a retro on experience points, I'm absolutely dead set against this idea of 'rewards' and 'penalties' for role-playing. Analysing a character interferes with immersion, for me, because it forces you to look at your own character in an*

analytical way, rather than the intuitive way I prefer. Back in issue 8 or so of this zine, Pete Walker called this distinction 'playing to' (analytical) or 'playing from' (intuitive) a character. On the Usenet they talk about IC POV in this connection. Now you can see why I'm abandoning the Usenet.

Ray Gillham

I agree that the character personality should come from the player, but in practice it rarely does, even if the player tries. I have a player who does his best to create a separate identity for the character, yet still flies into very personal rages when things don't go the way he planned them, which usually translates to the character doing something very stupid in the game world. Most gamers need a list of do's and don'ts, rules and regulations.

明尊 *Hmmm...*

Ray Gillham

I have had some interesting games when a player did carry through his character's personality though: notably an ex-nun in *Call of Cthulhu* who stole the other PCs' mythos diaries, notes and spell books, and burned them. The player took a lot of flak for that but it was spot on for the character.

明尊 *I suppose it's worth remembering that we are not professional actors. Even professional actors have a limited range of characters which they can bring to life. We don't need to aim for flawless characterisation at the drop of a hat, but I do think it is reasonable to hope for characters who have different views to their players.*

In fact, for me that's one of the great appeals of role-playing. Becoming more self-aware by transcending your own personality limitations may sound like some kind of tosh trotted out by the scientologists, but it is unquestionably possible in rolegames. For example, try to persuade your player who flies into a rage to play a fatalistic character. The results can be stunning.

Personally, I think the best results are obtained if you play a few characters who are different to you, and then try to identify some of your own traits that you dislike, and play a character in which they are emphasised. Thought-experiments. And fun too. That's rolegaming.

RPGs Suck

Adrian Bolt

I'm not convinced RPG is trying to grow up, it's been stuck for the last decade by the suits aiming at teenage males. TSR dominates the US,

GW the UK; both are effectively a separate hobby. Other splinter groups are the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks [*Now dead*—明尊] and Live RPG. And, of course, computer RPGs are maturing and far more teenagers have home computers these days; also MUDs are getting visual. All in all I think the chances of a player 'graduating' to more serious rolegaming has drastically decreased. And for the record: a) I don't consider computer games to be role-playing, and b) with very few exceptions I realise there's little roleplaying in LRPGs-most are just tactical combat. I think this debasing of the name and the pigeon-holing of RPG=D&D and the media bullshit have marginalised us akin to comic book fans and trainspotters.

明尊 *Ho ho. I can picture the apoplexy induced in certain of my comic-fan readers at being compared to trainspotters. Terribly unfair of course-everyone knows that trainspotters are far more mature...*

Jibes aside, I mostly agree with your points based on my recent experience in trying to get new players into my game. It's difficult enough in London. Here in Nagoya you can imagine that with a small, pretty transient, population of English speakers it's a serious challenge. It is made no easier by the way peoples' eyes glaze over as soon as they realise that what I'm describing is in some way connected with D&D. There have been times when I've got very close to being abusive when people come out with the 'Huh, you mean you sit around and talk? Is that it?' type lines that they so often do. Never mind that these same people have nothing to do of an evening but sit around and talk, or perhaps play some mindless computer game.

I share your dislike of computer games, especially when onanistic mouse clicking is somehow considered more socially acceptable than using your imagination as part of a group. On the other hand, we shouldn't let ourselves be blinded to the fact that certain limitations of the technology are now being overcome which are making possible forms of role-playing that we have previously only been able to dream of. Will they be exploited properly? Probably not.

Lee Brimmicombe-Wood

As for your comments on comics (and yes, I did see your disclaimer), it smacks, not a little, of a kind of snobbery. Books, comics, roleplay games: they're all storytelling media. I don't think there's a problem with cross-pollination amongst them here. If anything, the links between comics and games may be slightly closer because of the limitations imposed on them by format. In both cases it is much harder (though not impossible) to realise the interior lives of characters than in prose fiction. This may be one of the reasons why games and comics

tend toward a more melodramatic type of storytelling. Since many comics characters fit this mode of storytelling, is it so wrong to recommend some as a primary source? Is it inappropriate? I think not.

明尊 *I'd like to make two points. Firstly, I like many comics. Secondly, I find comics, as an art form, are undeveloped and superficial compared to, say, film. You can claim that no medium can be compared with any other, but if you did, you would find yourself defending such an absurd position that I really don't recommend it. Comics, incidentally, cannot possibly be 'primary sources' for personalities. The only primary source for personalities is people.*

Ray Gillham

I can well understand Lea's need for legitimacy; I know I can be pretty defensive about rolegaming. As an aside, some friends of mine think nothing of whooping it up in a murder mystery game at a dinner party, but still look askance at fantasy RPGs. Maybe this is it, you need the psychological predisposition to the genre. I won't say imagination because plenty of people have a great capacity for imagination without it being at all connected with the fantastic.

It must be said that role-players often do themselves no good; I've met people who take the World of Darkness gibberish seriously, and that's just sad. And the last time I was in an RPG shop the staff were too busy swapping Magic: the Gathering anecdotes to actually serve anyone.

明尊 *I'm not sure even a psychological predisposition to the genre is enough; fantasy books are at present the most popular form of fiction. I think the point boils down to social acceptability. We live in fundamentally conservative societies, in which we are conditioned to be consumers.*

Adrian Bolt

What innovations have appeared in the last decade? *Amber* diceless RPG-not really. Dark futures-just bandwagon jumping. Multi-genre games like *Rifts*—just throw in everything and the kitchen sink. Or the flip side like GURPS—a separate book for everything (which probably makes it the best buy these days, and it's oh so OLD...) plus duplicates (eg multiple SF settings). Lots of small press stuff with the original *D&D* look and feel-what's the point?

明尊 *My experience of the small-press stuff is that it's more based around simple-mechanic, 'universal' rules.*

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Adrian Bolt

What else has happened? Avalon Hill has moved into computer games, Traveller is reheated once again, *RuneQuest* is back on the slab in the morgue, I blink and miss a couple of role-playing magazines. Oh yeah, trading cards appear and give the hobby a thorough nuking as companies trample each other in the stampede to cannibalise their RPGs.

Perhaps I should change my question to 'Do we still have an RPG hobby?' Perhaps we are not in puberty but in senility, a few aged eccentrics who remember the days when there was nowt but 'a heady blend of fantasies, genres and dreams...'

明尊 *I don't think the number of people playing is significantly different to 15 years ago. In those days, of course, we believed that the hobby was expanding, and that it might eventually obtain widespread recognition. Now I think we have to accept that computer games are the only type of RPG which are going to get widespread recognition. Is this a bad thing? I'm not sure that it is. Widespread recognition seems to lead to the lowest common denominator.*

And isn't it widespread recognition of D&D*, and the approach to rolegames that it propagates, which is responsible for so many of our problems?*

Andy McBrien

I am surprised that anyone questions if roleplay is an art. If art is taken to be any form of creative expression then roleplay must be included. The real question is whether rolegaming has the capacity to be good art. Good art can enable people to see subjects in new ways and can make them examine their own preconceptions. Good roleplay definitely has this capacity. The greatest difference I would say is that unlike most art, roleplay is not geared towards an audience. Perhaps the reason people find it hard to think of rolegaming as art is that the standard of roleplay is often so poor. And this is a big part of the reason why its image isn't good.

It could be said that the most crucial fact about rolegaming is that the quality of the game experience is mostly dependent on the creative ability of the players of the game. Rolegamers therefore demand that their players be of a certain level of ability and also are interested enough to invest a certain amount of effort to produce a satisfying game. The poor image puts off precisely the sort of person rolegaming needs.

But the games available don't give much encouragement either. Most games still leave far too much work to be done on the part of the participants before they can get down to roleplaying. But most of all is that nearly all rolegames are written in a language that is more or less inaccessible to non-rolegamers. I can't help feeling that many games have a problem regulating 'poor' players precisely because it isn't clear whether the game is concerned principally with roleplay or is instead a contest between sets of statistics. If the object of the game is sufficiently clear it ought to be possible to attract players who adopt a compatible approach to the game.

Paul Snow

The particular playing needs of older players also have to be addressed. Is it just my perception or is it only TSR that produces lots of scenarios now? Older players need games and scenarios that are easy to pick up and play with little preparation-yet they don't exist. In some ways, the detailed worlds and characters of mature gamers' games (we hope) may make it harder to write adventures that can be plugged into campaigns but no company seems to be trying to do this. *RuneQuest* had a few good attempts but has died down again-perhaps the new *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios pass this test-but they are mostly one-offs.

明尊 *I think one problem may arise from the fact that so many writers of published scenarios do not play (and I use that term in its narrow sense, though often it is also true in its wider sense) very often if at all. Maybe things have changed since I last looked at a set of scenarios, but I still have the impression that writers think they have a duty to tell people how to play their games.*

You're absolutely right that the problem is that the more developed the game, the more difficult it is to slot scenarios in. Especially in my case. I'm desperate to acquire good scenario ideas, but what I want is, for example, a town and a set of people and relationships which will work. In my campaign background, of course. What I don't want is 'Here's the plot-make up the NPCs and surrounding yourself.'

Gail Baker

Maybe RPGing as we know it has gone the way of Heavy Metal and programming computer games for fun, ie replaced by Technobabble, Sega/Nintendo, and Games Workshop. I know it may seem like a cliché but I've been studying my kids' education and they are not challenged at school, they are not corrected if they are wrong (only ticked if they are right in case the poor sensitive souls get scarred for life by being told that they didn't do it right), and they get to play too much instead of learning (in case they learn to hate school). As for universities, there is no interest in the student union or student issues,

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they just want to have a social life, get a degree, and get a well paid job. A lot of students aren't even interested in their subject.

I'm sorry if I sound bitter but I feel that we have created a waste of space society that has no 'backbone'. I don't mean we should have compulsory military service, I just mean that, because people are fed their entertainment, they don't know how to work at it. It was inevitable when companies like ICE said that they had to support their RPGs with off the shelf scenarios to sell them. When I go to a game shop these days the shelves are full of scenarios and supplements for about 10 major games and virtually nothing else.

Maybe the appeal is the crossover; creativity within scientific constraints. I like having to know about a number of subjects (eg plate tectonics, climate, meteorology, practical history, social patterns, religion, genetics (this sounds a bit high blown but I only really scrape the surface)) and using them to create something fictional. I find this cerebrally satisfying (it tickles an area at the back of my neck and makes me feel relaxed). It's the same enjoyment I get from answering maths questions or writing an essay on a subject I enjoy.

When I play I also get the escapism (which is more intense the more realistic the world, hence my strong desire for creative realism) and the companionship, and the opportunity to relate to individuals in new roles through their characters (eg being a sibling to someone you don't know, or hating your best friend).

My feelings are that younger people do not get this cerebral kick from creation anymore, they have adapted (within a single generation) to do instead of create. They also have more transient superficial relationships than previous generations, and peer pressure is stronger and more insidious than it used to be (just take 'Politically Correct' attitudes which are often superficial and avoid any thought about the real moral issues by using 'pseudo-caring' with a strong dose of pragmatics). Maybe younger people don't want to explore roles anymore, just like they don't want meaningful lyrics!

明尊 *From what you describe, it sounds like the UK has learned a lot from Japan.*

Ashley John Southcott
Too arty for most scientists isn't far off the mark, but in all honesty the hobby doesn't do itself any favours when appealing to artists. True, the backgrounds of RPGs-in terms of both colour and depth-are improving; but the rules systems that make these games work remain so bloody abstract that a lot of artists can't be bothered to

read past the first chapter. I buy games principally for the background, now; I can chop and change the rules if I want to-should we expect this of new blood who want to have a good time while expending minimal rule-bending?

Rule No. one for RP publishers: do the background first. Rule No. two: follow the KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) adage for rules design. Some people like messing with rules design-most of us would really rather play the games instead.

明尊 *Now that hit home with me. The rules issue is absolutely true. The problem is, a part of me says that if you have minimalist rules, you might as well ditch rules altogether. Many people have done this. The trouble is that rules are what make it role-playing. Get rid of them and you have something that drama students have been doing for years, far better than us gamers.*

Rules add an extra dimension: they allow you to roll back the forces of arbitrariness a little. Minimalist rules, in my experience, are less able to do this.

Therein lies the problem.

Arcana
Lee Brimmicombe-Wood
Regarding your review of *Arcane*. I'm not sure I share your view that *Arcane's* reviews are wishy-washy or wide-eyed. Admittedly, I've only done two game reviews for the magazine, one of which I praised with a few worthy damns, and the other I rightfully slagged. As for the reviews of others, maybe I've missed something. I'll go back and re-look at what other people have written.

Matthew Pook
I have to admit that I hanker after the old days of *White Dwarf* and *Imagine*. They are what I was weaned on, so I suppose that I fall within the camp of the hard core Gamer. At the same time I also understand the problems of marketing a magazine like Arcane. Its steadfast refusal to support actual games by not providing system specific material is the wrong decision to take. How long is it going to last on 'How To . . .' articles? What this means is that there is no home-grown magazine easily available that provides material about games. Rather they prefer the easy option of writing about them. The end result of all of this is that Arcane is generic and bland... At the same time as they have an article on how to avoid stereotypes and cliché in role-playing, the same issue has a generic bar/tavern as its scenario. Hands up all

those who can spot the cliché? The scenarios are virtually useless and why should I have to mutilate something in order to make use of it? Yes, *Arcane* looks brilliant. It is informative and for the first time I years I can go into a provincial branch of W H Smiths and buy a gaming magazine. I just wish it was a little less mediocre.

明尊 *It's a sad fact but every RPG magazine gets bollocked no matter what it does. I kept this in mind when writing my review of the magazine last issue, and was careful to praise the areas I felt deserved praise. Since then, however, they've just continued with this 'Hey! Look! Aren't we fantastic!' computer game mag attitude while filling the pages with an ever diminishing supply of the same old fodder.*

Marginal Constituency
Adrian Bolt
For distributing Water Margin I suggest you take a look at Adobe Acrobat software.

明尊 *When you wrote your letter it wasn't really viable, because Acrobat 2.0 didn't handle double-byte characters (and I perversely insist on decorating the game with huge swaths of Chinese writing). I therefore settled on PostScript which could handle downloaded Chinese, and could be used on any computer with the help of GhostScript. Unfortunately, PostScript files of Outlaws were absurdly big. I've therefore recently ordered Acrobat 3.0, which is capable of handling double-byte characters. I just hope Acrobat files will be a little smaller than the PostScript ones...*

Patrick Brady
Personally, the source material is what I enjoy. I'd say that the key points are surely those elements which make Outlaws different from any other rolegame, and that seems to mean the social aspects rather than the combat system. Where you really score over the dozen or whatever other games is your grasp of the culture and how it should be woven into the game. The people who will want your game will have seen a hundred combat systems but your chapter on social relations and the concept of respect and gratitude is unique.

明尊 *Now that I've got the combat system 'out of the way' I can devote more attention to those more unique areas. Perhaps one reason I've put them off so long is my deep lack of confidence in being able to adequately represent what I'm striving for. I'm far closer now than I was before I came to Japan, though, and time is running out, so maybe I'll just have to slap something together before we all die of old age.*

Incidentally, while I see your point about the combat system, Patrick, one of the themes of the game's design is that the systems come out of the background, and enable that background and atmosphere to be represented. That's the criteria on which I want the combat system to be judged, ultimately: does it feel like a heroic Chinese combat? If it does, then it's successful, and if not unique, then at least one of a small number of games. I rather unwisely chose to do so without a list of exotic weapons and martial arts, which would have been the easiest (though inauthentic) way of achieving the goal.

The Last Word
Ray Gillham
I sent Nathan Cubitt £1.50 in December 1993 for issue 3 of *Delusions of Grandeur*. Where's my bloody fanzine, then Nathan?

明尊 Haven't you realised: Nathan inhabits a parallel plane which is only rarely in phase with our own. This can be the only explanation for the non-arrival of Nathan's letter of comment on imazine 24.

END PEACE
Yes, yes, very late. Why? Well, I spent most of the summer in the UK, living the good life (for those of you who remember Richard Briers, Felicity Kendall and co...). Amongst other things, I finally got hold of videos of the Water Margin, and my collection will be complete just as soon as Fabulous Films get around to releasing the last one.

Although I'm still keen to continue this fanzine, my patience for farting around with HTML has run out. From this issue, the zine will be available on paper, or by email. As soon as my Adobe Acrobat software arrives, I'll experiment with doing Adobe Acrobat versions.

However I end up doing it, I'm going to revert to the idea of 'publishing' and 'delivering' the zine. Just bunging it up on a Web Site is precious little incentive to anybody to read it.

In private correspondence, Cheryl Morgan suggested that the Net might be killing fanzines. I think it's probably true. By making everything so easy, people are deprived of the incentive to put any effort in. All comments and discussion are off-the-cuff, very often almost unintelligible, either sickeningly PC and over-mannered, or downright abusive.

I don't care to allow the Net to kill this fanzine, though. ∎