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This issue:

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AMAZINGLY I've finally got around to publishing this, no doubt just when you thought I was going to take another six year break. Was this prompted by the arrival of a letter from resident boddhisattva Nathan Cubitt *about the current issue?* Strangely, although the latter miraculous event did indeed occur, it wasn't the main reason. Rather, I've finally found myself in possession of a smidgen of free time.

At the same time, the nature of the fanzine is continuing to mutate. I'm afraid it has to perform a couple of functions in addition to the obvious one of containing material about rolegames.

Mainly this means that I have to learn something from it. Producing it has to be of practical use to me. I have to learn something about zine publishing, and I have to learn something about role-playing. The latter means that once again I find myself in the typical zine editor's position of begging for contributions. This issue sees some goodies, and a pretty full letters column which pleases me considerably. I want this to continue, though.

Now that I've finally got Adobe Acrobat going fine I also have to learn something about how to use it. You'll notice that I don't make too much use of its features at present. That's because I don't have time to fart around learning it (especially as they rather annoyingly only provide online documentation). But it will expand. This means that the zine will be blighted by a bit of colour, for those of you fortunate enough to possess colour printers. For those of you fortunate enough *not* to possess colour printers, I hope I've done things in such a way that your reading experience will not be fatally blighted.

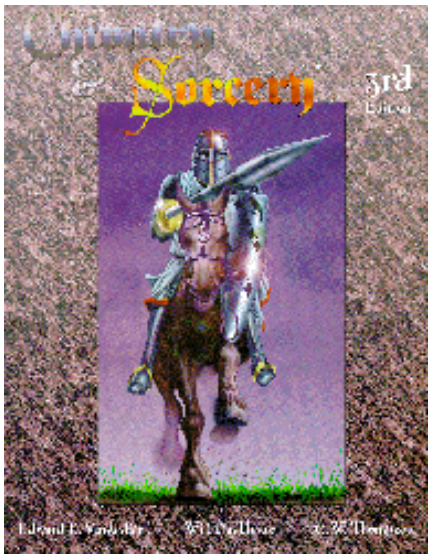
Acrobat readers will start to get little buttons here and there to take them to the next bit. Paper readers won't—these features merely compensate for the inherent inconvenience of the format. ▮

Reviews

I OBVIOUSLY haven't made it very clear, but I would be very grateful if any of you would deign to send me reviews, however short. I know there are fantastic magazines like *arcane* knocking around, stuffed to the gills with witty, incisive, pertinent reviews, but imazine does provide an opportunity to say what you really think in a way that is not possible in a commercial magazine.

Since I am stuck here in Japan, I don't get to see many games myself, and for that reason if no other I would be very glad of a few contributions. Ashley Southcott gets the ball rolling this issue with a look at *STOCS Lite*, and I'd like to see more of this in future.

This issue I'll finally take the blowtorch to the latest Tékumel rolegame, *Gardásiyal*, but before that I'm going to return to a very old stamping ground, with the latest version of the game that weaned me off *D&D*, and can to a great extent be blamed for my addiction to games with detailed backgrounds.



Chivalry & Sorcery

First published in 1977, *C&S* has only recently been reincarnated in its 3rd edition. I would imagine there might have been some legal brouhaha involved in its production. Other former FGU games such as *Bushido* are being prevented from appearing in new editions by the zombie who maintains control of the remains of that company. Hence the recent reprints of, bizarrely, *Space Opera* and other games.

Chivalry & Sorcery escaped the fold, with Ed Simbalist and Wilf Backhaus making it over to Highlander Games, and teaming up with G W Thompson to produce this latest incarnation.

For those of you new to the story, *Chivalry & Sorcery* was a direct descendent of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was a game of fiendishly complex rules, but it was one of the very first to propose the revolutionary (then) idea that the player characters existed in a world. More than this, the authors of *C&S* decided to let that world be an only moderately fantasised version of Mediæval Europe.

It was also famous in the early days for the detail and atmosphere of its magic system. For many rolegamers at the time (myself included) the ideal game involved somehow blending *RuneQuest's* combat and skills system with *C&S's* magic system.

Since then, it has fallen into something of a backwater, being superseded by the vogue for more streamlined, unified rules design, and more superficial backgrounds.

It is interesting to find, therefore, that the most immediately obvious change in the new edition is the adoption of a streamlined, uniform mechanic to drive the rules. Indeed, the entire game mechanic has been overhauled, so that a single system, the Skillscape™ system, handles everything.

No, you didn't read that wrong. Highlander Games have, indeed, trademarked the name of their rules mechanic. How long can it be now before we have Erick Wujcik introducing a series of games based on the Diceless™ system, or even TSR's Hopeless™ mechanic? Perhaps Ian Marsh should get the magic symbol for his Beat-The-Difference™ mechanic, and I should spray references to the MiddleFlat™ system throughout *Outlaws*? Bah! Humbug.

However, rants aside, what is the Skillscape™ system all about? Well, it's a percentage success system. But along with the percentage dice you roll an extra D10 which is the Crit Die™ (no, I'm not kidding—they've also trademarked Percentage Pair™ if you can believe it). This shows how well you succeeded, if you succeeded, or how badly you failed, if you failed.

This is, admittedly, a simple system. It has the advantage of resembling that used in plenty of games before, including *RuneQuest* (hence my reference above) as well as parts of the original *C&S*. The novelty is in rolling the extra die to see how well you did. In a sense, it takes one of the most ancient of systems (roll percentage to hit, then roll for damage), makes you roll the dice together, and applies the same mechanic to every part of the rules.

So hooray for Highlander on that one.

Bearing that in mind, then, let's go on a whistle-stop tour of the game, and see what we have.

Starting at the beginning, the production is, to borrow an expression from Andrew Rilstone, pedestrian. The font used throughout for headings is extremely unappealing, and worse, the lack of space above headings lends the game a cramped feel, which is in no way relieved by the occasional illustrations. Worse from an organisational point of view, the logic behind the headings isn't clear, at least to me. There were several times when I started reading a section, and halfway through realised that it was a subset of the previous section. I'm not asking for Avalon Hill-style numbering of rules sections ('See section 4.1.5b' or the like), just a little more thought put into this. Finally, on the production front, the game credits include an editor and two proof-readers. They either aren't very good at it, or were perhaps unable to provide much input, as the game is littered with both typos and sentences of such horrific construction that I must just provide you with an example from the Introduction:

> *'They will not outdate or replace the basic rules, unlike the practice which is unfortunately an occurrence which occasionally happens in the industry today.'*

We arrive at the first chapter, and start to create our characters, without being given any clear description of the world the game is set in. The closest we have is Ed Simbalist's introduction to Fantasy RPGs, from which we can glean that *C&S3* is a game about 'High Adventure'. This suggests that this edition is intended to be very much more generic than was the original *C&S*.

Stats

Character creation sees a choice of 5 methods, catering to those who want 'realistic' games (here called 'Historic') as well as those who want a more heroic option. There are also various levels possible between the extremes of full allocation, as in *GURPS*, and the venerable random rolls.

The attributes in this game are a tidied up set of 9 that do have some sort of underlying logic to them. Physical, Mental and Social attributes are represented, and for the first two at least can be divided into force (Strength and Wisdom), control (Agility and Intellect) and durability (Constitution and Discipline). At a relatively early point we find that we have to determine the Omens for our character, and find out their social class. These two are excellent features, but I have a problem with their presence given the earlier failure to root the game. A glance at the social class tables makes it clear that this is the same old *C&S*, albeit smartened up. The society your character is being placed in is feudal in character.

There is, I must point out, a disclaimer at the head of the section, saying that the referee may well have his own tables. I don't think that's sufficient, though, and in a way it merely serves to undermine the quality of what follows. As we move on, we discover that the presence of Skillscape™ has not prevented copious tables of the '% chance to resist disease for a given Constitution' variety.

The notion of character classes seems to have been pretty well overhauled, however. The problem here is to balance the excesses of rigid classes (the *D&D* legacy) with over-generalisation (the *RuneQuest* legacy). The *C&S* approach is that your character has a 'vocation', which represent where their strengths lie: what they are really 'cut out for', and an 'occupation' which is what they happen to be doing at the moment. It is quite possible, of course, that the two will not match up. This allows for a wide variety of character types, some of them unusual. It is also intuitive.

Skill

In Chapter 3 of the book we encounter Skillscape in all its majestic, trademarked glory. The chapter opens 'Skillscape™ is an (*sic*) straight-forward gaming system that is easy to use.' I wouldn't disagree with this. Earlier on, though, we have been told that the system '...adds something new to gaming.' This is true only in the most utterly trivial and mundane sense; in the same way that the full stop at the end of this sentence 'adds something new to gaming.'

Skillscape's problem is this: skills are divided into 7 classes of difficulty which affect both how difficult they are to learn and the basic chances of success (good), the class of difficulty of a given skill may be affected by the character's background (good), and the chance of success is a base percentage value from a table, plus 3% per level improved in that skill (oh dear). Sure, you'll have your chances written down on your character sheet. And it does allow the skill system to handle the first step of acquiring 'basic competence' in a skill rather well. It's just not very pretty, that's all.

Further, the table lists a minimum and maximum chance of success for each difficulty level. The nice thing here is that any excess over the value is still worth having, as it will modify the Crit Die™—and the same is also true in reverse for chances of success of lower than the minimum.

This solves that perennial problem of %-based skill systems: they are boring and ridiculous when everyone has tiny chances of success (remember original *RuneQuest's* starting characters?), and have to be fudged at the top end to make them worthwhile.

There is, as you would expect, a long list of skills. Many of them require special tables, but at least some harmony is preserved by most of them being 'critical tables' for that particular skill.

When we reach the marketplace, the old *C&S* qualities start to really shine through. In the old days, *D&D*ers would mock *C&S* for the completeness of its equipment lists and the extraordinary list of

magical materials. *AD&D* came along with a vastly extended (but still inferior to *C&S)* list which forced them to shut up. Why do you need to know the price and weight of a pint of bindery glue? Well maybe you don't. But if you ever do, it'll be there!

Fights

Most of the rest of the book deals with Combat and Magic. These are core areas. Combat, in particular, is a touchy area. Although I cannibalised it shamelessly, I always found original *C&S*'s combat system to be over-complex, and vague in the wrong places. However, its system of regulating action by the number of 'blows' each combatant had in a round did enable some interesting combat rhythms to emerge, making a pleasant change from the clockwork to-and-fro of *D&D* and *RuneQuest*. This latter system has been ditched in the new edition, and replaced with an initiative system that had me scraping my nails down a blackboard for light relief.

In principle, it's OK. Each round you roll for initiative, rolling 1D10 and adding it to your basic initiative bonus (which derives from your speed of movement). During the round you then count down the initiative levels, to see who acts when. So far, so good. This is, coincidentally, the same system as is used in the Tékumel games *Gardásiyal* and *Tirikélu*.

What makes this painful is that each action lasts a certain number of initiative phases (called AP or Action Points). When your initiative comes up, you announce your intention to act, and then move a counter down your initiative track the number of APs required by your action. The action will then be completed at this point.

There is more to it than this, of course. If you are attacked when you don't have Action points, for example, you can get a chance to defend yourself by 'spending' Fatigue Points (FP) instead. The 'Advanced Initiative System' complicates things even more.

The heart of the system is the Skillscape™ mechanism, and therefore it works no worse than any other part of the system. Different types of weapons (piercing, slashing, crushing and missiles) are differentiated in terms of the types of effects if you score a critical. The critical system blends seamlessly with the damage system.

I used to like this level of detail, and 15 years ago would no doubt have loved it to death. Nowadays my reaction is coloured by imagining it in action in my game. It just wouldn't work. In a game where all the players are fully familiar with the system, and the referee has the technical skill needed to hurry things along, this could be a very detailed way of handling things. In a game like mine, where the players are all novices, this system would completely blow the Oliver Test ('Is it possible to run it effectively even when drunk?').

Miracles

Religion shows development of past treatment. The good points (the mediæval feel, the rooting in Christianity) are retained, while making the framework more explicit. There are two religious systems presented, which can (and perhaps should) co-exist. The first is an anti-magical Judaeo-Christian tradition of priests who perform Acts of Faith. When it comes right down to it these are, of course, clerical spells, but there has been effort made to differentiate them from the magic system proper. Apart from the obvious difference in nomenclature, the Acts of Faith 'follow no discernible pattern with regard to Fatigue costs, durations, dice rolls etc.,' which emphasises that they are religious, rather than the almost scientific precision of the magic system.

The second model of religion lies within the magic system itself, and covers those religions which embrace a magical tradition. The examples given are Druids and Witches, though these could be expanded in supplements. Of course, this would be where to place the typical Tsolyáni sorcerer, were one to use *C&S3* for a Tékumel game.

Spells

Magic has been substantially overhauled, though its most distinctive features (its complexity, the variety of types of magic and mage, the high profile given to enchantment of items) have been retained and made more comprehensible. Types of mage belong to different Modes of magic (which are learned as skills), while spells are grouped according to Methods, such as the Four Elements, Command, Illusion etc (which are also learned as skills). Sorcerers are 'encouraged' to learn from appropriate groups by tables setting out the particular difficulty levels of learning spells from the various methods at particular levels.

Enchantment of magic items retains its old concept of 'reducing the basic magical resistance of components', though this is handled slightly more simply than of old. More effort has been put into defining exactly *what* components are appropriate to the creation of a particular device.

Players who just want to roll up their sorcerers, get out on an adventure and starting blasting away with spells will have little use for the bookkeeping involved in playing a *C&S* mage to the full. I always appreciated, however, the way that these rules encouraged players of mages to get into the almost anal retentive mindset of a sorcerer.

Experience

Finally, before a brief section which gives monster stats (only—no descriptions), is the section on experience. Experience point systems have changed a lot since original *D&D*, that's for sure. Here we

have a relatively old-fashioned system. Characters acquire experience points for a variety of activities which might reasonably be considered relevant to improvement. These go into a 'pile'. They can then be 'spent' to obtain skills. There are a couple of interesting features here. The system is kept consistent by rating 'Learning with a teacher' in terms of how much experience it provides you. Secondly, when you 'spend' your points, you move them from the Accumulated Experience Pile to the Total Experience pile. The latter is like the old *D&D* experience points, which determines your overall level. So spending EPs not only improves your skills directly, but also contributes towards your level, which has an effect on how readily you learn skills.

I have a problem with this: it suggests that as people get older and more experienced, they become better learners. This is an arguable point at best. It also connects with another limitation with *C&S*: the game is designed to handle 'starting characters' of 18. While it is possible to generate a character at a different age, this is clearly considered unusual. You have to 'pay' to obtain an older character, which restricts your skills or abilities elsewhere. I feel that this is an artificial concept rooted in 'game balance', and a rather narrow perspective on the types of character that players might want to be.

I would have thought that at this stage in the development of rolegames we could reasonably expect games to ditch this idea that you *will* start at age 18, and your character *will* continue to get better and better until finally they are retired (fatally or otherwise). This does not connect with any world, fictional or real, that I am familiar with. People do get better, but as they get older their capacity, motivation or opportunity to learn may well decline. In addition, their physical abilities start to decline. There is a balance to be found, surely, between the vigour of youth and the wisdom of age? The ideal character description system will enable us to generate a character of whatever age we fancy, with the only limitations being those we can accept as 'real' (among those who lead hard physical lives, for example, we know that the strength of a 20 year old will probably be greater than that of a 40 year old, but that the latter may well have better stamina).

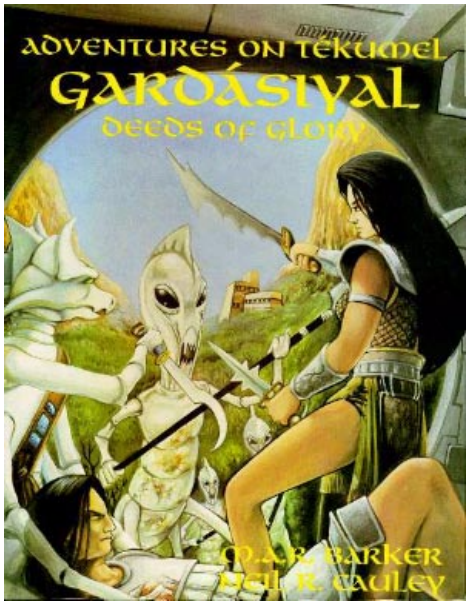
Ageing

Overall, then, the question to ask is how well *Chivalry & Sorcery* has aged. Has it, like its characters, continued to accumulate experience, and got better and better? To a certain extent yes. The Skillscape™ system provides what *C&S* always needed: a unity of mechanics. On the other hand the game is also showing its age. Or maybe I am. There are parts of the book in which the acronyms and jargon come so thick and fast that I had to nip into the kitchen and stick my head in the fridge for a few minutes. Even compared to its venerable predecessors, the book is almost entirely free of touchy-feely material. The first edition, I recall, contained a description of a mediæval tournament that was invaluable to me in compiling the 'Empathetic Response' section of the Castles project I did at 'O' Level. Perhaps because of the attempt to make the game 'generic', there's nothing like this in the 3rd Edition. It's hard detail, wall to wall systems and tables. Some like it that way, I know. The feudal background stuff is promised for later supplements, starting with the GM's Handbook, which is already out, but which hasn't arrived in time for me to comment.

My problem is that in the current, overcrowded RPG marketplace, what is *C&S3*'s unique selling point? The previous editions achieved the status of legend through their complexity and the attention to detail in portraying a feudal society. The latter part is played down in the new edition, which just leaves us with complexity. And Roisha knows there are plenty of complex games on the market.

I would like to see *Chivalry & Sorcery* succeed as a culture game about feudal society. Looking at this book, though, I can't see it happening.

Chivalry & Sorcery *by Edward E Simbalist, Wilf Backhaus and G W Thompson, published by Highlander Games.*



Gardásiyal

Well, I'm taking a risk, here. Steve Foster reviewed this game in the *Eye of All-Seeing Wonder* and took a hell of a lot of flak. However I can't really excuse myself from taking a look at it. Actually, the main reason I got hold of a copy was that I found a shop in the States which was selling copies of the old

Gamescience *Swords & Glory* Tékumel sourcebook. Ordering that alone seemed a bit lonely, so I slung in *Gardásiyal* and a couple of other EPT products to make the most of the postage.

What I received is, I have to say, fascinating. Unfortunately it is also very sad. The review in the *Eye* prompted quite a strong response from (mainly American) Tékumel fans, and this response had led me to believe that Steve (and Dermot Bolton, who also criticised the game) had simply allowed inflated expectations to influence their judgement.

I was wrong. The game really is that bad.

Starting at the beginning, have a look at the cover of the box, reproduced above. It's not very good, is it? On the back of the box is the blurb which claims that this contains 'a *complete*, alien and thoroughly enjoyable fantasy world.' (my emphasis). Opening the box, the first thing you see is an orange sheet introducing the game with these words: 'This box contains *much of what you need* to play a rôle-playing game based on the world of Tékumel.' (again, my emphasis)The contradiction is there, laid out quite explicitly.

However, let us accept that in the case of something which has such a huge corpus of material as Tékumel it would be ridiculous to expect the game to be 'complete'. So let's discount the claim on the box, and simply focus on what *is* provided.

Physical

The orange sheet alluded to earlier goes on to introduce Tékumel, and the authors of the game. Our attention then turns to the first of the three books, *Vol. 1—Player's Guide'*.

The physical quality of this, as with all the books in the boxes, is poor. The cover is slick paper, with a black-and-while illustration and a second colour for emphasis. The interior is plainly laid out, with extremely sparse illustrations. Granted, it is a little clearer than *Chivalry & Sorcery*, but it isn't going to be winning any design awards. Furthermore, at the bottom of each page is the curious message: 'Volume 3: Referee's Guide'. Why do I get the impression that the books were proof read by a devotee of Dra the Uncaring?

Artwork is sparse, and not of a very high standard. I consider much of the artwork in *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder* to be of a far higher standard, and the *Eye* was a fanzine produced by interested individuals, rather than an alleged games company.

Characters

The book launches, without so much as a contents list or a preamble, into 'Character Creation'. Except that it doesn't really, because reading further one discovers that the rules for generating a character appear in *Adventures In Tékumel Part 1*, published separately. In *Gardásiyal* you can basically select from a number of pre-generated characters, given in a separate book.

I don't object to this particularly strenuously. Indeed, in my own game we successfully experimented with the idea of generating characters by choosing an 'archetype' and modifying it in play to suit requirements. Actually the archetypes are among the best parts of this game, as they are reasonably illustrated, and contain a fair amount of background information and inspiration.

If only this were true of the rest of the game. Skipping back to the schizophrenic *Player's Guide (Referee's Guide)*, we find that it contains extensive price lists, followed by movement and combat rules. Only after these have been dealt with do we move on to the 'skills' section, which in this game is 4 pages under the heading 'Adventure Dice Rolls'. I don't see any logic behind this ordering, but maybe I'm just missing something.

Ancestry

One characteristic of the game which becomes clear as soon as you start to wade into the combat section is the extent to which *Gardásiyal* resembles its long out-of-print progenitor *Swords & Glory* (published by Gamescience). Even when it was published, *Swords & Glory* tended towards the baroque end of things, and many of its systems didn't seem to be able to do what they were claimed to do. In particular, several systems appeared to contradict Professor Barker had written about Tékumel elsewhere. Given that the Professor does not use rules in his own games, it has always been clear that it was the sourcebook which was to be trusted, rather than the rules systems.

For this set of rules the complexity of *Swords & Glory* has been somewhat ameliorated. That was a bare necessity, however. Whereas in the older game a character's Height-Build-Strength factor (!) was used to derive a Combat Factor, which would then be modified according to the situation and skills etc, and then compared on a combat matrix, in the new game the HBS factors are modified by skills and then directly compared on a table.

As the above paragraph should show, however, there is no simple logic to this system which can be easily grasped and remembered. Your HBS Factor may vary from 1 to over 500, and it is by no means immediately obvious what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' value. To find your base chance to hit you have to cross reference your modified HBS on a table. The table therefore becomes an essential during the game; there is no quick algorithm which can be used to derive chance to hit.

Similarly, the damage your weapon does is derived from a table. Although quick reference tables are provided for sorcery, there are none for combat.

All this wouldn't be so bad if the details could be written on the character sheet. They can't.

The skill system, I have to say, is strange. Try this for size: your chance of success at doing anything is 70%. However, the dice you roll will be modified, depending on the difficulty of the task (up to +60), and according to your relevant attributes (between +10 and -15) and skills.

So having good skills and attributes leads to negative modifiers on the roll. It seems a complicated way of avoiding having a chance of success dependent on difficulty, with bonuses deriving from skill, or even a chance of success depending on skill with bonuses depending on difficulty.

These are mere quibbles, however. At the end of the book an even greater shock awaits us: no index! There are rolegames which are criticised for having no index (*Chivalry & Sorcery* for example), and there are games which have no contents list, but to omit both is just outrageous.

Magic

Moving on to book 2, *Sorcery & Spells*. This is a pretty close retread of the *Swords & Glory* magic system. This is not necessarily a bad thing. I quite liked the system—especially the names of the spells—and in many ways it is more related to the background than other sections. In his freeware *Tirikélu* rules for Tékumel, Dave Morris rewrote the magic rather substantially, and although his new system has several nice features, it always suffered, for me, from not matching the spell names here. Maybe this is just some kind of crazed traditionalist in me.

Anyway, let's whiz on to the *real* third book: *Referee's Guide*. What's the first thing we are presented with: an insight into the society of Tsolyánu, perhaps? No, a set of encounter tables. Followed by list after list of treasure and magical items. Sure, many of the magical items have a strong Tékumel flavour. But that's something we can reasonably take for granted. At the end of the book are ten pages devoted to scenario ideas—again featuring a number of tables.

As I put down the last of the three books, a horrible thought struck me. A long time ago, a role-playing game was published. The game came in a box, with indifferent artwork. Although it contained rules for fighting and so forth, it was by no means clearly explained, and left many of its readers baffled. It had three books. Repulsive though the thought may be, *Gardásiyal* brings to mind nothing so strongly as *Dungeons & Dragons* (the original).

Verdict

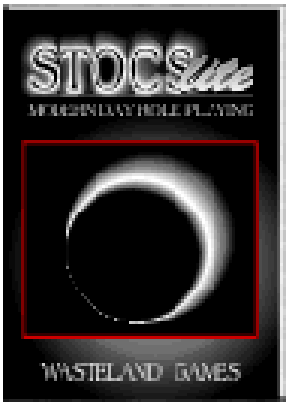
In all fairness, I cannot recommend this game in any way to fans of Tékumel. Indeed, publishing it is a disastrous move. As a world pack for a set of rules that work, suitably modified to handle its foibles, Tékumel could be a big success. Instead, thanks to *Gardásiyal*, it will continue to be relegated to also-ran underachiever status. As he does not use rules for his own game, Professor Barker can partly be forgiven for not being able to write a modern set of rolegaming rules. In that case, however, what was the point of teaming up with Neil Cauley to produce this game? Was the problem that Cauley wanted to update the rules more, and the Professor stubbornly refused, or did the Professor rely on Cauley to do the updating, and Cauley merely rehashed *Swords & Glory*? I have no idea.

All I can say is that at http://nexus.prin.edu you will find the FTP site of the Blue Room, maintained by Chris Davis, who is laboriously making the sourcebook and other out of print materials available in electronic form. Downloading these shareware materials and sending in the registration money will be of far greater practical benefit than buying *Gardásiyal*. If Professor Barker starts to receive more money from the Net books than from *Gardásiyal*, then he may finally start to see where a brighter future for Tékumel lies.

Finally, you may remember that I am something of a Tékumel fan, so I would hate to finish this review without having praised any part of *Gardásiyal*. So here goes.

The maps are nice.

Gardásiyal *by M A R Barker and Neil Cauley, published by Theatre of the Mind.*



STOCS Lite

Arcane's review for this was lukewarm, and I'll say from the outset that backgroundless games put me off: why should I buy a separate set of rules and tinker with a tagged-on background to make either of them workable? Well, there's always the argument that separately-sold backgrounds can be tagged onto other rules systems, as doubtless people will be doing with *Traveller's* Milieu 0 background. I'm told that the *T4* rules are sufficient dodgy that the

Milieu 0 Imperium—shortly to be published from Imperium Games—would be better played with other SF rules: *Star Wars* springing to mind.

Variants

STOCS Lite is Wasteland Games' core rules system for use with modern-day genres. Wasteland publishes its own background with the system in mind—notably *PHASE I* (standard aliens/FBI/conspiracy fare on a par with *Don't Look Back,* or even modern-day *Call of Cthulhu;* well, you can't blame games companies for wanting to take advantage of the *X-Files* hype); *Asylum Earth* (role-playing nutcases who aren't nutcases: heretics who can see the bizarre goings-on of modern day life, and which has driven them insane—and no, this has nothing to do with role-playing parliamentarians) and a couple of historical/scenario sourcebooks. These are all modern-day backgrounds with the exception of El Paso, a Western background, and the generic rules reflect that—so it ain't that generic after all. You can't blame them for wanting to cover as much of the market as they can. Or can you? Any system to which a background is tagged on later necessitates work, and while generic systems (like any other) are subject to additions from groups own house rules, the lack of tailoring in a generic rules system bugs me. Still, at least Wasteland gives guidelines on how to customise it to individual groups' play.

Oh dear. Now we come to the attributes: STR, CON, DEX, INT… I thought in twenty years of role-playing the industry had escaped these and found some alternatives (even if those alternatives are just differently-named ones)… does TSR know about this? (No, forget that: TSR will still be using attributes like these in twenty years' time.) At least the points for these are allocated individually instead of simply rolled and written (*AD&D* players are used to this anyway). Skills are assigned via points which are used to buy both basic levels in broad skills (eg Sciences) and levels in more specialised skills (eg Biology or Computing), which boost the level of the general skills. For example, a skill level of 10 in the Sciences is fairly average, and a Biology skill of 4 (depending on the level of expertise chosen by the player) boosts this to 14.

Quirks

The skills list is pretty thin on the ground and the upgrade skills list is more of a necessity than a luxury. For the unimaginative, there follows a list of suggestions to round out the character: key aspects of personality, 'secrets', quirks, flaws… all right, all right, inexperienced players need this in my opinion, so I guess it's a qualified inclusion.

Combat takes up a significant part of the rules, though whether combat's a central part of rolegaming with *STOCS* is debatable. The low number of initial skills indicates it might be, since if PCs haven't got many skills my experience is that they fall back on good old muscle power. I could say then that lovers of intrigue and power-politics could stop reading here, this game ain't for you; a bit presumptuous since I've not seen any of the background releases yet.

Similarities

The more I look through this the more it smacks of a cross between *Millennium's End, Don't Look Back* and *Feng Shui,* especially when I see optional stuff like 'Clever Move' (one for the GM to [ab]use). Things like this remind me of house rules that groups would make up anyway, but I suppose that if Wasteland hadn't included them they'd be open to the argument: 'You didn't have a rule to cover this <basic situation>'. Now all this sounds like I didn't think much of the system. It's basic, yeah, and the meagre skills list irritates me, but I can also say that rules-light systems appeal to me a damn sight more than their heavyweight counterparts. I suspect though that most generic systems start out as a set of rules for which backgrounds are later designed, when I think it should be the other way around: think about a range of backgrounds for which a general set of rules might be applicable, elaborate on the backgrounds and design a set of generic rules to fit them all later.

STOCS has its good points, but the lack of a background to apply them to outweighs any reasons I can think of to actually buy it (not while the shareware rules suffice for most role-play sessions anyway; you have to use the additional rules upgrades though). Mind you, at least they didn't try the jack-of-all-trades approach that *GURPS* pretends to: a restriction to modern-day genres narrows its scope to the point of usefulness. How much *STOCS* combat rules will intrude on role-playing will depend on the backgrounds published.

I can see now why *arcane* wavered with this. If you've got a modern-day genre background the rules are eminently pinchable, or at least smaller than the ones for *Millennium's End*. But the lack of a background makes work, and I'm a lazy gamer.

STOCS Lite *shareware rules are available from Wasteland Game' website (http://indigo.ie/~waste), or the full rules for £4.99 including postage from Wasteland Games, 67 Eglinton Street, Portrush, Co Antrim, N Ireland BT56 8DZ.*

Review by Ashley Southcott

A Matter of Honour

by Patrick Brady

Modelling social relationships in role-playing games

GAME mechanics are like clothes, we all have our favourites and our pet dislikes, but personal preference is not objective truth (the exception to this is anything in lime green, which is of course objectively wrong). It is not, however, my intention to tell you what to wear or how to game, and my approach will be pragmatic, a description of experience rather than a prescription for development.

Many of those experiences come from my Empire of the Petal Throne game (the Hall of Stone campaign), which is now in its seventh year, but the social and psychological models of fantasy worlds are something which I think could be generally more developed than they are. If you think there are better ways to do that than the way I describe here, then do it. My point is to describe an approach which has worked for some years, and what effect that approach has had on our gaming. Its continuity is one of its strengths, it works and it has helped me to understand the mechanics of social relationships a little bit better. You can compare some of the following with the system in Paul Mason's *Outlaws of the Water Margin,* which is a different line of development from similar roots. It exists to serve the game, not to be perfect.

Not just a stick

The idea of honour is an important one in many cultures, but in games it is too often modelled as a psychological problem rather than a reasonable world view. The most obvious examples are in the point building systems (such as GURPS and *Champions*) which clearly categorise 'Honourable' with 'Pyromaniac' and 'Berserk'. People are lumbered with being honourable; it is implicitly assumed that on balance (even if there may be minor benefits) this is a problem. I think that this is a mistake because it tends to push the group into seeing honour as basically a stick to beat the players with. My preference is for honour to become a link to a life other than our own. Players should be helped and encouraged to think appropriately, as opposed to simply having their character's actions restricted by the referee. In a sense, honour should be another place to play, a further dimension for the game rather than a purely personal feature of the character, it should be part of the geography of the world.

Quanta, quanta everywhere...

One of the peculiar conventions of rolegames is that we precisely quantify things, this tendency reaching its extreme in the 'twelve million characteristics for every character' approach exemplified by *Chivalry and Sorcery* and the 'this should be a spread sheet not a character sheet' point build games, such as GURPS. Real people do not have such absolute measures of their abilities and some of the things which games treat as important measures are obviously rather arbitrary categories which persist for mainly historical reasons, and because we can't think of anything better.

By the way, intelligence is just a popular superstition and is too easy a target. Other examples include Dexterity, which seems to be commonly used to refer to everything from hand-eye co-ordination, reflex speed, dancing ability, sense of balance and manual dexterity. This has produced generations of characters who are natural ballet dancers, typists *and* gunfighters, an interesting combination with little historical justification. The idea that you could have such an eclectic aggregate at a specific and precise level is one of the historical oddities of gaming.

But we do need systems of measurement, and you can classify all systems of measurement into one of four categories, of which two are of immediate interest for gamers. The first are the nominal systems which allow for categorisation, and such things as gender and character class/occupation/tradition (or whatever euphemism we are using for character class this month) are the obvious examples. The other category is interval systems, using numbers (often integers) to represent a value, and most characteristic schemes fall into this type. What measures we choose will obviously go a long way to defining how the players will interact with the game world.

Honour in fiction

Although not all societies have an explicit honour system, it may be more common than is often recognised. Human groups evolve social systems for the same reasons that they demonstrate aggressive behaviour: it is part of our biology that we do so, we are social animals. There are great differences in expression and some even deny the drive, perhaps rightly so. But the need for interaction, suppressed, denied or misunderstood, tends to surface at different times and places.

Honour is one of the ways in which the social drive can be channelled, but it exists in numerous variant forms and under different names. For a Goth or a Cyberpunk setting, face is cool and vice versa. In a modern setting, that Mafioso may have a character killed, not because they took his money, but because by doing so they showed him no 'respect'. Money matters, but respect is crucial. In science fiction games different species are often used to exemplify particular social values, and although 'honour' may not be referred to by name, themes of correct behaviour and personal loyalty are very common.

So, honour should not be restricted to medieval or oriental cultures or treat as a cute oddity, it works in a variety of contexts and it matters. A man of honour is not necessarily a likeable man, but he embodies a set of culturally important values, he does 'the right thing', he represents something. His behaviour is therefore potentially quite predictable, if you understand his value system. So when some godlike alien makes a move on the starship Enterprise, Captain Kirk's response is entirely predictable. Kirk is not awed by anything and he sticks to his principles even when logic (Spock) makes it clear how futile that is. That is why Kirk is a man of honour and a hero rather than one of the technocrats of some other space operas.

The values which the man of honour holds are not universal constants—they will vary according to the cultural background of the character. For example they could be courage, honesty, cleverness, loyalty or anything else that the culture glorifies. If you take a look at a society's more successful mythologies, their popular stories, you can often see what they value in a person. For example:

H I G H N O O N

'I won't run'
—*Marshal Kane*

The old marshal is a man of honour, he will not run from a fight even though he apparently has no chance of winning. But his refusal puts his deputy and the rest of the town in a situation where they will lose face terribly unless he does run. The Marshal's honour gives him no choice, but it highlights the dishonour of the other townsfolk and denies his deputy the opportunity to gain face.

S T A R W A R S

'Your lack of faith disturbs me'
—*Darth Vader*

Vader may not be an obvious candidate for a man of honour, but don't doubt that someone is about to get strangled for his disrespect rather than his lack of religious conviction.

THE MALTESE FALCON

'If someone kills your partner,
you're expected to do something about it'
—*Sam Spade*

Spade despises his partner, but when that partner is killed, Spade goes after the killer and resists all distractions (even Mary Astor) to fulfil some sort of ideal. Finally he sends his love to the electric chair rather than compromise.

Honour in the real world

If you live in a culture that values courage above all, then playing chicken on the railway tracks might gain you honour. The fact that this activity is both stupid and destructive is not the point, its function is to publicise the participant's identification with the ideal of courage. It needs no other purpose.

Conversely, if you were discovered playing chicken in a culture which valued intelligence greatly, it could lead to dishonour, although it might not be called that. It is not the act, it is its perception that matters. Seen in this light, many forms of apparently deranged behaviour, and much posturing, are perfectly rational activities. On Tékumel, the violent pyromania that is honourable for a Vimúhla Priest is self-evidently dishonourable for the Priest of Avánthe.

Most people exist at a sort of neutral buoyancy, they represent the normal level of correct behaviour and therefore define what it is to behave well or badly. This is not an absolute scale because it is relative to the norms of a particular society, so the zero point for a Tsolyáni is probably higher than for a modern westerner. A higher level of conformity is considered normal by the Tsolyáni.

The honourable person moves through his culture like a fish moves through water; the more honour he has gained, the easier his passage becomes. The values of the man of honour are reinforced because they lead to success, he does well by doing the right thing.

Conversely, for those who travel further down the road to dishonour, the world becomes a harsher place. This happens for two main reasons. Firstly, they are swimming against the tide of behaviour which can both cause hostility from their neighbours and a simple lack of facility. For example, a homeless person who begs for money may suffer hostility from the suits on the street (people whose value system glorifies wealth), but on a more practical

level he is also more isolated from information and assistance, because the society around him is not designed for him. Secondly, because honour is so much about expectation and predictability, the dishonourable seem unpredictable to many members of the host culture, and that can become a source of fear. So, the homeless person could find that people are actually frightened by him, unsure of what else he might do. The frightened herd project their fears onto the dishonoured, eventually leading to scapegoating, be it of elderly 'witches' or unmarried mothers. This may not be sensible, but it is how the mechanism works.

What comprises the values of a particular culture is obviously open to argument and discussion. For game purposes the problem is hopefully somewhat simpler as it becomes part of background design. Some cultures are deceptive however, and a culture is often at its strongest when it is at its least obvious. Assumptions can be more powerful than arguments, especially if you don't realise you are making them. This can be particularly important in cultures which make an ideal of individualism, which may seem to marginalise the importance of personal honour. But a hundred thousand kids dressed like James Dean are all conforming to an ideal of the rebel, which is very different from some internal act of resistance. Attempting to conform to a value of nonconformity is very different from rebelling against your culture's values. In a teen culture the dishonoured are the dweebs, the uncool, not the ones in the leather bomber jackets. Social behaviour is difficult to avoid, and that brings us to the mechanics.

The Parallel Economy

Western capitalism uses a nearly universal medium of exchange—money. The modern idea, that everything has a cash price, should make little sense to any decent Tsolyáni. The people of the Five Empires have a different world view. If capitalism has a single trunk (labelled 'Cash') which supports its social system, then Tsolyánu is support by a forest of columns (including 'Rank', 'Honour' and 'Custom' as well as 'Cash'). These are parallel economies and they add depth to relationships in the Five Empires. The currencies of these parallel economies are not completely inter-convertible. It is quite possible to be rich in one and poor in others.

So honour can be seen as an economic system rather than a disability, putting it this way should give the players a more intuitive understanding of how they can behave. Each of the pillars of Tsolyáni society can be defined in terms of its measures (the cash measures are, of course, already game defined), but this brings us to the mechanics of honour.

Measure for measure

There are two important measures of honour. The first is a character's face rating, an interval measure of respect—rather like a credit rating; it does not wear out but it can be lost or gained. Face is not really about popularity, it is about your reputation, your perceived honour.

The starting point for face is zero, to gain face is good, to lose it is bad. A high face rating is therefore rather like being beautiful, it is sufficient, in itself, to change the way people respond to you. Face is held in the awareness of the population rather than a vault, so it partially translates to fame. It involves the players in accumulating it, losing it and because it is public it exists externally to the character (see the section on audio-visual whatsits). A person may be dishonoured even though they have really done nothing 'wrong'—all that matters is public perception.

It may also have only a tenuous link to legality. If a man attacks your daughter you may be doing 'the right thing' by killing him, but in modern Britain you may still go to jail and in Tsolyanu you may be presented with a huge shamtla bill. Honour is contagious—your level of face may rise or fall due solely to the actions of a relative. The face level of an entire lineage can be altered in this way, as every member will get some fall-out from a major gain/loss of face. The face from social proximity will be a fraction of that gained or lost by the person generating it. For example:

> Mórusai and Rhán are brothers, and even for lineage mates they are close (in game mechanics the players have agreed a 1/4 relationship). So when Rhán wins a duel in the Hirilákte Arena and gains 4pts of face, Mórusai gains 4*1/4=1pt of face as reflected glory. Had Rhán behaved dishonourably then Mórusai could have lost face even though he himself had not been directly involved. Relationships can change, but as long as they both gain face, then each is an asset to the other.

This quantifies personal loyalties and relationships, normally people live with the default relationships and this only really becomes an issue if players want to change their relationship with someone. Every cousin in a clanhouse has some relationship with every other, but it is reasonably distant (about 1/20) so it would take a great honour or dishonour for it to directly effect a distant cousin. But, the point of this is that everyone in the clan is linked, however distantly, and great changes in face will spread out through the clan, like ripples on a pond.

The Social Arena

The Face mechanic allows social interaction to become a place of conflict in the same way that hit points let the combat system work. If a player character has something to lose or gain, then he has something to fight for. By moving into the social arena we can also change the weapons. At a basic level arguments between individuals can escalate to minor matters of honour, and matters of honour are zero sum games. In Tsolyánu the classic method of

resolving these is by duel, but that is a relatively extreme solution and much gameplay can be had from much less lethal resolutions of much lower levels of conflict. This is important to model the very elliptical arguments managed by people in etiquette-heavy societies, where direct abuse or physical attack would be crass. The mechanics are quite simple, once a conflict between two characters becomes fairly public they can either resolve their differences amicably or continue and risk it becoming a matter of honour. Once the referee declares it has become a matter of honour, the first person to back down in such a situation loses face to the other. How much Face is at stake is decided by the referee on the basis of the situation. For example:

> A Vríddi and an Íto are discussing Engsvanyáli poetry at a social gathering, and they disagree about some matters of historical detail. Neither is willing to accept that the other may be correct, as they are amongst friends and colleagues and wish to make their erudition clear. It becomes a minor matter of honour and an contest of knowledge rather than arms. The Noble Íto wins the argument, and gains both 1pt of face from the Vríddi, and an enemy for life.

This is certainly not intended to replace duelling, but to give colour and motivation of social interaction. The Vríddi and the Íto both have too much etiquette to make their opinions clear, but that doesn't exclude conflict which may eventually become violent. A matter of honour can start very minor and gradually escalate into something much more serious. So it becomes harder and harder to become 'reasonable' as the personal investment increases. For example:

> A group of clan cousins intend to engineer the destruction of a den of thieves and professional gamblers in the slums of Chéne Hó. But, they cannot agree on their tactics. Orún hi Khársan wants to do it one way and Rhán hi Koródu wants to do it another way. They cannot find a compromise and the argument gradually becomes both heated and public. The referee declares that it has become a matter of honour for both men (so, initially 1 point of face is at stake). But, neither Rhán nor Orún is willing to back down, so neither loses face to the other, yet. The matter is gradually escalating and over the course of the next week the stake increases to 2pts of face. The argument is part of the game and leads to quite a bit of role-playing. Eventually they turn to the Clan elders for arbitration, which increases the stakes even further, and both get their shot at proving themselves. The one who takes down the opposition is right and can claim an amount of face (from a range given by the referee) from his opponent. Note that this has nothing to do with who is objectively 'right', and leads to a race for glory which may not be the best conditions for anyone to achieve their objectives. This is the social dimension to a tactical situation and it's one of the things that make a rolegame different from a skirmish wargame.

Formalising this makes it part of the game rather than simply an argument between two players. The second measure of honour used in the Hall of Stone campaign is that of the Favour. Favours are a currency (credits or debits) and an honourable person may have many of both types. Owing favours is in no sense dishonourable and being owed is not inherently honourable, but a dishonourable person will never be offered favours whereas the honourable person will be. Favours are a nominal system, as you either owe a favour to the Temple of Thúmis or you don't. A single, well placed favour can be a lifesaver and players tend to remember where they picked them up. So Favours can become both a source of neurosis ('Oh god I still owe the Temple of Sárku don't I') and a sort of autobiography for the character as the origin and reason for the favours are recorded.

Favours are rated for size (from Trivial to Great). Favours are an important enabling device for the players characters as they are a good way to get access to resources in an emergency. Basically if you are willing to owe someone a favour, you can get them to do stuff for you. Favours are particularly useful because they are a tool for the player rather than the referee. For example:

> Dhála hi Morútess finds herself in a difficult situation in Chéne Hó (again !). She needs some sort of backup but none is readily available. Dhála seems to be in a dead end until her player comes up with an interesting suggestion, that she tries to turn an acquaintance with some members of the Legion of Sérqu into direct support. The referee points out that they would be doing her a great favour, but the character manages to persuade them on that basis and the plot is driven forward quite dramatically.
>
> Mórusai hi Koródu chances upon a Nlýss warband who he may be able to persuade to defect to the Imperium, if he can show them enough gold. Unfortunately Mórusai doesn't have that kind of dosh. He does have some rank in the Imperial bureaucracy and is a Lay-Priest of Karakán, but his status is not that high and the Nlýss frankly couldn't care less. Mórusai does not have time to go through channels, this is a once only opportunity. Fortunately, Mórusai does have great face, he is known as a man of honour and if he says that he will sort the situation then people tend to believe him. His word is good enough for many people, especially if he already has some rank with them, so he gets a loan from the Temple, some from the local Palace of the Realm and shows the savages something of the glory of the Empire. Even though the cash is reimbursed, Mórusai still owes a few favours, but that is more than compensated by the face he gained from bringing a new warband to the defence of the Empire.

So favours can give the initiative back to the player, which is where it should be. They also involve the

player in developing the campaign, as in future the character will know where his commitments lie. Instead of having to drop, coerce or cajole characters into future adventures, the seeds of those developments are now part of the character. The player decides where he will look for favours and so has some control over whom he will be indebted to.

Being owed favours is also a plot device waiting to happen, rather than have a character develop skills to an insanely high level or collect enough precious metal to fill Switzerland, it means that the character can collect a currency which supports further adventures. If your character has a fortune in gold, then risking his neck any further may seem increasingly implausible, but if the head of the Death Lords and the LAPD both owe him a Favour or two, then his ability to adventure is improved. Translating this situation into cash may actually encourage him to take some further risks so he can make that big score. In short, favours allow the character to be successful without them becoming cash rich.

Favours are actually very flexible (an intelligent player can think of a variety of uses), but they are also localised, so they do not spell death to game balance (an Avánthe scribe who is owed a single Great favour by a High Priest of Sárku may have few situations where he can make much use of it). A loss of face can be resisted by the special use of a favour, the oath. An oath is a type of favour, but the recipient is either not designated or it is the person making the oath. This protects you (your honour) by using it (rapidly putting the appropriate currency into your 'account'). For example:

> Urutlén has been embarrassed by an unknown poisoner, rather than take the loss of face, he swears that he will owe a Favour to anyone who brings him the name of his enemy. His oath is finely judged to exactly cancel the embarrassment.
>
> Chiríngа is slighted by a merchant of the Black Stone Clan. He declares his willingness to duel the entire Clan (a major Oath). This is quite excessive, easily cancelling the embarrassment and bringing a great gain in face for the best dressed killer in Chéne Hó.

Other currencies

It is possible to work in other categories of the parallel economy. For example, rank and custom can be given the same treatment as honour. There are also other more marginal dimensions to social interaction, and the subtle use of threat and bribe can be handled in this way. The smile of a pretty girl may have motivated more activity than history records, and a lot of money is earned to purchase intangibles such as status or even just the ability to live in obscurity. The cost of conformity can be significant.

Audio-visual whatsits

Rolegames are fundamentally verbal forms (the LARPers are an exception and are something different from tabletop gaming). This is the basis for our hobby, but it does have its limitations when it comes to representing some sorts of social measure. Although it is obviously possible to attempt to convey the social rank, face level etc of a character in normal verbal communication, it is intermittent and it tends to get in the way. Social measures like honour should be the social property of the group, not something that sits on a character sheet or gets in the way of the game. To this end I use two main types of visual aids.

Firstly there is a face chart, a line graph that traces the rise and fall of the characters face score over time. Thus everyone can see their position relative to the other characters. The back of the face chart has the public reputation of the character (up to a paragraph each). Some characters have no reputation, but even that is public property. Generally this tends to make players see the value of honour, for more or less the same reason it works in the real world. Even if you're too sensible to be a gloryhound it is nice to know you get respect. The face chart sits in the middle of the gaming table.

Second, there are the badges. The Tsolyáni are a very label conscious society, everyone carries their personal heraldry and in my game so do the players. If you've ever put on a mask you'll know the difference in feel it can produce, having physical symbols of membership and allegiance is useful in encouraging identification with the character. So every player gets a set of badges similar to the symbols which their character would wear, and 'badging up' is the signal for the role-playing to begin.

Conclusions?

An EPT game without honour is like Tékumel without the chlén and the hlýss. If you take a look at your rolegame collection, how many pages are dedicated to ranged and melee combat as compared to non-physical interaction? Why is that? A rolegame does need conflict, but much of human aggression has been in the head, not just the hand. Even modern military writers find the psychology critical, and rolegaming is fundamentally a head game anyway. As a method of giving motivation and shape to conventional adventure, some idea of social norms are critical to distinguish role-play from gameplay. If that interests you, try it.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA

Brief Notes On Magic In The Water Margin

SINCE last time remarkable things have been happening. I have actually been running the game every Friday. What is remarkable about that, you wonder? Nothing in itself, but *I haven't felt any need to change the rules.* That is pretty strange. Admittedly in the sessions we don't tend to use rules too much, but when we do they seem to work OK.

So that's good news. The bad news is that I haven't managed to add much to the background. I got a lot of work done, especially on the *I Ching* and the various gods, and then lost it in a stupid accident at the time I installed Windoze95 (I also lost the original version of this issue of imazine, as it happens).

Moving right on, though, I'd like to take a look at the way I treated magic in the game.

Ancestry

Magic is one of the most touchy-feely parts of a game. By that I mean that while people imagine themselves to have a pretty clear idea of how combat works, magic tends to be a product of the imagination.

It doesn't *have* to be this way, it can be argued. Surely it should be possible, for a historically based game, to simply research how the culture you are representing believed magic to work, and design an appropriate system around it?

Ha!

Anyone who has ever done any serious investigation into magical beliefs knows that they do not lend themselves easily to systemisation. This is particularly true when a culture has a number of different perceptions about magic, as most do.

To take China as an example, for once, you can develop an idea of magic from its folk tales. Like Western folk tales, these are full of talking animals, strange transformations, and fate. Then you can start to look at what we know of the *wu*—the shaman sorcerers. Many people lump these in with the Taoists, but closer inspection reveals quite a gulf between them. Although much Taoist superstition (and many of the rituals involved in the production of protective Talismans) derived from the practices of the *wu*, that doesn't mean that the *wu* themselves practised Taoism. I haven't seen any evidence that the *wu* were concerned with immortality, or that they believed that the universe was structured according to the five elements.

What did arise from the *wu*, as is made quite clear in Frena Bloomfield's *Chinese Beliefs*, is the concept of the world of the supernatural. Bill Hoad, who until relatively recently lived in Hong Kong, provides more examples of this in the letters column.

Coming back to our different ideas about magic, we have the Taoists. As Erick Wujcik demonstrated with *Mystic China*, a whole book can be written about the different Taoist approaches to magic; two books if you care about getting it right.

Then there are the Buddhists, whose beliefs about Lohan contain much that can be described as magic.

The situation gets even worse if we accept that our source is not just historical beliefs, but presentations of magic within fictional sources. Add in *A Chinese Ghost Story, Blades From The Willows,* and several dozen other representations, including *The Water Margin* itself, and the situation gets seriously out of hand. In the combat section I mentioned that I wanted the combat in my game to resemble that of the movie *A Chinese Ghost Story*. I think many of my players also want the magic to resemble that movie. Master Yan shouts *Pao Yeh Pao Lo Mi*, draws a symbol in blood on his palm, and a series of explosions rip across the ground towards the Evil Tree Spirit.

Just to make things even worse, when designing a magic system for any background, we find ourselves facing what I can only describe as a paradigm clash between the Arts and Sciences. Some people feel that magic is an Art, and strenuously resist any attempt

at systemisation. In order to retain the mystery, they argue, the magic system should be kept vague. A sorcerer's powers should be fluid and unpredictable.

Ranged against this is the theory that magic is a crude form of technology, its exponents citing Arthur C Clarke in their defence.

Add this all up and you have a set of demands and limitations which are pretty much impossible to overcome. What can you do?

Solutions

Various parts of my game have been seen by a number of people, and I think it is the magic system that has drawn the largest number of contradictory comments. You simply can't please everyone all the time. I therefore decided instead simply to please myself.

First of all, I decided in very general terms what effects I wanted to be possible. This was easy. There are lists of powers acquired by Lohans at various stages on the way to enlightenment; there are the spells used in *The Water Margin* book; those used in *The Water Margin* TV show; and the various movies.

Having decided that I did want some relatively powerful effects to be possible, I simultaneously made the decision to limit magic drastically. I drew some criticism for this, and have had many comments along the lines of 'Hah! It's hardly worth bothering with!' Well, if it's hardly worth bothering with, don't bother! The Taoist sorcerer in my Friday game was far and away the most powerful character in the group, and it something of a relief that he has now gone his own way (especially given his somewhat eccentric habits, such as visiting a magistrate to see his collection of curios, and over breakfast getting so incensed by an argument regarding the relative merits of Confucius and Lao Zi that he hacked the poor magistrate to death).

I wanted a little of the illusion that formed the main basis for magic in the TV show, but at the same time I felt it was important to have elementalism, as that seemed to lie behind a lot of the magic in the book. I also wanted to represent some of the magic from the *A Chinese Ghost Story* movies, at least at the higher power levels possible in the game.

But wait. I had to pull myself up sharp at this point. The Art-Science divide hit me full on. In earlier incarnations of the game, when I was running it in Putney, the magic system had been rather simple and interpretative. At its most extreme extent, the system turned into one in which a sorcerer with the power of illusion was able to 'hijack' the game reality. The way it worked was fairly simple: the sorcerer's player made a roll, and if successful was able simply to describe how the world was responding, and what was happening. When the sorcerer was attempting to use illusion against someone who was resisting it, the idea was that it should become a battle of wits, as the person resisting the illusion attempted to twist the newly described reality to their own purposes, find holes in it to exploit, and so on.

As you can imagine, this system relies entirely on the abilities of the player playing the sorcerer. It also provides them with extraordinary power, which might be resented by other players.

When it came to writing up the *Outlaws* magic system, I toyed for a long time with the idea of presenting the above as the magic system. It would be short and relatively simple. It would even resemble slightly the approach taken in earlier editions of *Pendragon*, which, as I have already mentioned, was my principal model for this game.

Several things decided me against doing so.

One was the conviction that the interpretative model described above rested too heavily on the abilities of the player. Subsequent experience here in Japan has done nothing to dissuade me from that conviction.

Maybe more important, however, was that such a magical model did not, to me, *feel* right as an interpretation of Chinese magic. Or at least, a large proportion of Chinese magic. It would be perfect for a game which dealt with Taoists becoming Immortals, or Buddhists becoming Lohans, but that wasn't what I was making. Coincidentally I did at one point write fairly comprehensive rules for just these latter eventualities. They won't be appearing in the game rules, though, as I felt that they had nothing to do with *The Water Margin*, and would just turn the game into a sort of high power *D&D*-in-China effort, akin to the Japanese *Ōkahōshin* (reviewed in issue 25 of this very magazine).

The more I read, the more I felt drawn to a, perhaps rather Confucian, feeling that Chinese magic was a little too organised for this approach to work. I also wanted to make sure that people who *didn't* have a strong feeling for Chinese magic would be presented with a fairly strong framework grounded in Chinese ideas.

Finally, I was constantly drawn back to *Chivalry & Sorcery* and its lasting influence on my magic systems. I had always felt that the systems themselves encouraged an attitude which felt appropriate for a mediæval sorcerer. I wanted to try something similar with the Chinese background.

I'm not denying the validity of the interpretative approach, I should stress. I'm simply applying in refined form my philosophy that it's nice to have rules there even if you don't use them. My magic rules systematise aspects of Chinese belief, especially in relation to the Five Elements and the Otherworld, and with such a system in place I now feel that it should be a relatively simple matter to run an interpretative version of the magic system.

In short, my magic system is disposable.

How can this be? It weighs in at a hefty 28 pages, has 37 spells (each divided into a number of effects), and a sheaf of Talismans. It has charts showing Elemental affinities which may be employed to improve casting chance, and the way in which those Elements interact, for use when attempting to combat other sorcerers. It has various different ways of generating the Cosmic Breath which fuels magic, including Dragon Veins (tapped by what you may best recognise as *Feng Shui*), Yin Energy from the world of spirits, and manifesting the Buddha-nature.

All this is window-dressing. It is there for those who need it. As soon as the player with a sorcerer has reached enlightenment, I assume that this system will be transcended, and the referee and player will be able, between them, to come to some kind of consensual agreement about how their magic can work.

If the system is window dressing, many people would suggest that I shouldn't bother with it. I think it's very important: Bruce Lee's main mistake as a teacher was that he felt that his highly advanced system could be transmitted to people without the grounding in fundamentals that he had himself learned (I'm being unfair on Bruce Lee, here; he wasn't actually as naïve as this). In almost every form of learning you have to grasp the basics before you can progress to the subtleties. This is true even in those areas where the subtleties appear to contradict the basics.

So it is with my magic system. The basics are fairly easy to grasp. The first main division is between magic which is based on the five elements: water, earth, fire, metal and wood, and Buddhist magic. This is not to say that Buddhists can't learn the elemental forms. It's just that there are certain magics which they are very good add, because of the spiritual nature of Buddhism. Religious Taoism aspires to the spiritual heights of Buddhism, but according to my interpretation at least, it is too bogged down in the here and now. As a result, Taoists excel in the practical, elemental magic, while Buddhists are better at, for example, deciding how much bad karma someone has acquired, or imparting a sense of peace.

Spells are learned in the same way as other skills. Just as other skills have bonuses, so do spells, and most bonuses have a spell effect associated with them. Thus, when you learn the *Master of Fire* spell, you don't simply acquire one effect. You have learned the principles lying behind a range of effects from creating a small flame, to a flame-thrower like gout. Your chance of casting effects with a higher bonus than you have in the spell are drastically reduced, of course, but it does compensate somewhat for the relatively small number of spells a sorcerer is going to be able to master.

Power

I mentioned somewhere up there about Cosmic Breath. For a long time in this system, I wanted to unify the idea of energy, employing the Chinese term of 氣 *(qi)*. Thus magical power derives from the same source as any other application of skill. This is important. It resembles those magic systems which use 'fatigue points' rather than 'spell points'. On the other hand, by explicitly describing the source as 'energy' and identifying it with other forms of energy (*feng shui* Dragon Veins, Spirit Power etc) the world acquires a greater sense of unity.

Thus, in this system, spells require energy, and for the most part this energy can be derived from any source. In an emergency, a sorcerer can simply spend (in other words, lose to fatigue) his own personal energy. This is rather inefficient, of course, because it also limits his ability to take actions. Obtaining energy from other sources, however, generally requires the casting of a spell (a geomancy spell to obtain Dragon Vein energy, or a mediumistic spell to obtain energy from the Otherworld), so the sorcerer will have to expend a certain minimal amount of energy in any case.

Even as I type this, I have come to the conclusion that a restriction I had imposed—namely that the same type of energy could not be used to cast a spell to obtain energy, is illogical and arbitrary. The reason I did it was that I was afraid that sorcerers would be able to generate huge amounts of energy without any personal inconvenience. Experience in the game, however, suggests that there are other, more effective ways of limiting this: namely that wandering around with tendrils of cosmic energy seeping out of one's ears is likely to attract a large dose of bad joss.

Casting a spell is just a skill roll like any other, though the ease does depend on the power level of the game, enabling referees to fine tune the system to the level of power that suits them.

There are some additional bells and whistles in the form of increasing casting chance by spending more time, by using elemental affinities or magical ingredients and so on, but these are merely there to enhance the flavour a bit.

COLLOQUY

Letters to the editor

LET THE bells ring out and the flags be unfurled! A letter from Nathan Cubitt has arrived, in which he writes about *the latest issue!* Now I *know* this issue is late. Still, on with the show. Comments by me are indented and preceded by 明尊.

Snippets

Phil Nicholls
Thank you for another issue of imazine. Incidentally Paul, how is this pronounced? Does it rhyme with magazine? Or is it 'I am a zine' spoken very quickly?

明尊 I've always said: pronounce it how you like. I took the piss a bit in issue 19 when I said that it was imm AH zhin ay. So I suppose that that is probably the one pronunciation that isn't right. For what it's worth, I usually say 'I'm a zine', but most of my readers say 'IMMazine'. It's only a pathetic joke, after all, which stuck because I was so pleased with the spoof title I'd knocked up…

Nathan Cubitt
Luckily the planets are in accord at the moment and it is less painful for me to briefly inhabit your plane.

明尊 Phased in just in order to fold your fanzine, eh?

Ray Gillham
I may be alone in the world but I enjoy Andrew Rilstone's comment page (明尊 in *arcane*). I think it's sad that the editor has taken to clarifying his remarks after the main body of the text; his piece about culture games made me laugh out loud because I could see myself in there.

Ashley Southcott
There're times when I've thought the zine's veered dangerously near the sort of academic nonsense hat gushes from the frp.advocacy newsgroup. On the other hand it's good to see character issues being aired as well as design issues: 'Influence and Status in the Water Margin' was a good read and I'll sprinkle a few favours-owed and owing among my player characters next time I can get a regular game together.

明尊 Ah hah, the archetypal imazine reader. The dead giveaway is that final line 'As soon as I can get a game together.'

Robert Irwin
I liked the Acrobat 3 version of Imazine. It felt almost like reading a real magazine. Perhaps a landscape format would be suited better to on-screen viewing. I don't know how many people are really likely to print it out.

明尊 A number of people who receive the zine don't have access to the Net, and therefore receive it on paper. I therefore design it for paper. I *could* redesign the electronic version, but quite frankly I don't want to have to lay the thing out twice. That was one reason why I abandoned HTML.

Phil Nicholls
I applaud your sentiments regarding scenario design. So many published scenarios focus on a single plot, leaving a campaign with lifeless locations once the main plot has been resolved. Perhaps scenario writers should also consider the long-term usefulness of their settings. Do you remember Irillian in *White Dwarf* or those city locations in *Imagine*? Of course, from a marketing viewpoint the publishers are interested in disposable scenarios!

明尊 I remember Irillian as something which was spoofed in passing by Danny Herbert, in an IMAGINE piss-take in a very early issue of this zine (6, if memory serves). Wasn't it the place done in cod Swedish or something? I do recall that it had a very loyal following among *White Dwarf* readers who were, or course, rather more serious about things in those days.

Robert Irwin
I was amused by your portrayal of the game *DOOM*. I have to confess I love it. I assume from comments made you're a fan of martial arts games like *Tekken*, so I don't see how you can reasonably slate a very similar kind of game in the blood'n'guts context. Or are you just picking fights again?

明尊 Me? Pick fights? Only with that scumbag Akira! Actually I don't rate *Tekken* (even in its third incarnation) very highly at all. I like *Virtua Fighter* because it represents the martial arts with commendable accuracy, and because watching it made me feel that this sort of representation should be possible with RPGs. But I would never pretend that it was a role-playing game. There are

those who make that claim for DOOM, however…

Rules For This And That

Andy McBrien
Regarding the case for using rules to influence the way players role-play: I accept that it can be beneficial, but personally I feel the same effects can be achieved without rules. If the system provides the players with a 'well-focused, believable impression' of the social environment of the game setting then this is obviously preferable to a vague descriptive impression'. But a descriptive approach is not inevitably vague or less clear than a rules bound approach. In the end I would say it depends whether for the particular game in question it is more interesting to define elements in terms of the rules or by simply describing them. For games in which the characters' advancement is given greater stress, the rules play a more important part in the game and so defining things in terms of rules is more interesting. But for games in which little stress is placed on a character's advancement, defining the game descriptively is more natural and more interesting.

Bill Hoad
Ray Gillham's comments on *Bushido* and his players who would not back down for fear of losing face illustrates the limited effect rules can have on players styles, if it contradicts their views of the world. It sounds to me that the characters might have had more in common with Hollywood cowboys than Japanese warriors. Japanese social codes are strict and face is important. But as a result, I believe the Japanese are very adept at avoiding conflict. One might even say they are pragmatic, if they didn't dress up their actions so as to appear regimented and intractable. I think *Bushido* rules encourage this sort of play, that or frequent deaths. But as this is so at odds with the Western idea of Japanese heroes, frequent deaths is the preferred style.

明尊 Good point: absolutely true. Many people have this view of Bushido as an ironclad, alien (and to be honest, unworkable) code, and that rather gets in the way of role-playing. This is one reason why I'm loath to play in a Japanese game.

Phil Nicholls
Many of the rules discussed in the letters page raise the age-old realism vs playability debate. As ever there is no one answer. It is really for the GM to run the rules the way that both he and the players are happy with, and to run the style of game appropriate to the rules. Thus, for example, the swashbuckling game is likely to run better with fast, slick rules.

明尊 People always talk about realism vs playability. I want both, and I want them now!

Patrick Brady
I find that running a game puts perfecting the rules into its proper context, when you're actually doing the business, improvising and doing what I guess we do the hobby for. Rule design brings the pleasure of anticipation, rather than being an end in itself.

Robert Irwin
I note with interest your changed views on rules. I haven't actually played a game with a rules structure other than character statistics in about 4 years now. The depressing thing about the role of fanzines in all this is that the two best GMs I've known in the last 10 years have never read a zine in their lives and still run superb games instinctively.

Andy McBrien
You expressed misgivings about the way I treat the presenter's (明尊 read: referee) interpretation of a character description as the truth while the players' represents their self-image. But this is simply the most logical approach. In most cases, the presenter's and player's interpretation will be the same. But if a character is described vaguely, as a 'good climber' for example, it has to be accepted that the presenter's interpretations of this may not be identical to the player's. The player will not be aware if this is the case, but should be aware that vague terms may be interpreted differently to the way they were intended. For players who might find this a problem, they can describe their character in clearer terms.

明尊 This approach appears the most logical from one perspective: that of the referee. As a player it simply seems to me like another example of the referee taking on a mantle of omnipotence. I am aware that it is in the nature of the referee's role to take on a certain amount of power, however I regard this as something to be taken on sufferance and minimised if possible, rather than celebrated.

In a way, we return here to the old debate. Who is the 'author' of a rolegaming session. I know many people regard the referee as *auteur* and the players as mere actors. I don't. I take the idea of joint-creation quite seriously, and part of that involves given my players maximum control over their characters. As referee, anything I say about the world is true. However, when it comes to the psychology of the characters, the players are the creators, and therefore they have final say.

Robert Irwin
Onto the 'who determines reality in a game' debate. I vaguely remember some of my old psychology lectures about a theory called social constructionism. In this, all morals, customs and behaviour patterns are determined as a kind of unwritten contract between members of society. Or in other words, society determines

how we perceive reality. The theory is a bit more profound than this, but I wasn't paying much attention at the time. Anyway, the crux of the matter is that even in a game, nobody should have a monopoly on the reality. It is all a messy, evolving interactive exercise.

Tékumel

Wilf Backhaus
Interestingly enough one of the *real* inspirations for *C&S* 1st Ed was Barker's game *Empire of the Petal Throne*. It proved to me that it was possible to have a role playing world but without the later Tékumel novels *EPT* was almost impossible to get comfortably into. I remember saying to Ed that we could do the same thing with a world that everyone was very familiar with, namely the Medieval world of Arthur and Robin Hood. We used the *Morte De Arthur* as one of our main guides.

明尊 I found this comment especially interesting, given my longstanding interest in *C&S*. Even though I wasn't playing it, I always pointed to it as an example of a game which tried to capture a world, with some authenticity. This perhaps explains why I got into *EPT* to the extent that I did, why I got stuck into this Water Margin thing, and why I also number *Pendragon* and *Ars Magica* among my favourite games.

Ray Gillham
Motivation in Tékumel: maybe you could try the bad joss thing in a Tékumel game by tying it in with *lán/bússan* and *khomoyí/ramoyí*. I hadn't realised that lán/bússan was relativistic good/bad and that the other was the noble/ignoble thing (I thought the former was the latter). So maybe you can set up conflicts between what is good/bad for clan and what is noble/ignoble for faith or job.

明尊 Interesting idea, but it gets very tricky when you are talking about social consequences of motivation rather than spiritual. I think people would find it harder to swallow, and I'm not even sure it is justified within the Tsolyáni mindset. On the other hand, you are right in suggesting that a solution has to be found within Tsolyáni terms of reference.

Robert Irwin
On the idea of culture specific games, one point I think is being missed is a focus on goals. The suggestions being bandied around are stick rather than carrot type solutions. People don't do things without a reason, even if that reason is culture specific. In an *Amber* game, you don't have to keep ramming home that you are part of a royal family with duties, customs etc etc, it becomes instinctive for players as most plots revolve around backstabbing their way to the top within that environment. My experience has been that players quite gladly latch onto any thread of a plot that a GM offers them, so it shouldn't be hard to create attainable goals which require actions conforming to social requirements. Once players get the hang of it, things should become a bit more instinctive.

明尊 I think this is an excellent point, and deserves more attention. After reading it, I realised I had been stumbling towards something like it with my *Outlaws* game. The whole name of the game is designed to suggest that your characters are outlaws, and their goal is to fight against the authorities.

I think this is often a problem with Tékumel: that however much you like the world, you're not sure quite what you should be doing. Thus the long-running appeal of the 'foreigners off the boat—become a citizen' starting plot. I now realise how smart Patrick Brady was to focus his game on a single clan, implicitly making the goal of the game a combination of personal advancement within the clan, and advancing the fortunes of the clan in society.

Ray Gillham
Tékumel sexism: we had a chat earlier about the depiction of sexuality on Tékumel and after talking about it with Julia we both agree that the artwork has a lot to answer for. Gardásiyal has a pic of a fully clothed man and a naked woman communing, and Eye 6 has a tits-bared front cover. I guess it's because most of the artists are me. Anyway, since the Tsolyáni like physical adornment so much I'd like to see some seriously ornate cod-pieces on some legionaries, just to even things up somewhat.

明尊 Here I would also suggest that the culprit is our own society, rather than Tékumel. Quite simply, female nudity is more socially acceptable than male nudity. In Tékumel both are equally acceptable. What an artist draws, however, is limited by the restrictions of our own society. Imazine has included a picture including male genitalia (issue 17), but I am also guilty of censoring male genitalia in an ad for Nathan Cubitt's *Delusions of Grandeur* (my excuse being that the picture was appalling). Japan, at the moment, is especially arbitrary on the subject of depicting genitalia, and perhaps highlights the hypocrisy of the whole subject. I do agree with you, though, that truthful representations of Tsolyánu should make no gender distinctions in nudity.

Ray Gillham
Question: Tékumel is in a pocket-dimension, but the 'skin of reality' is weak on the planet, hence inter-planar high jinks. Why can't nexus points be opened outside the pocket universe, if it's possible to travel to all sorts of other universes via the Planes Beyond?

明尊 They can. The explanation I've heard, though, is that you have to travel a very long way in the Planes Beyond to actually reach a point in 'our' universe.

Outlaws

Phil Nicholls

The *Outlaws* article was once again the centrepiece of the issue. It was ironic, however, that this time you started from the rules then found justification in the background. This seems to be a departure from background-led mechanics. Yet the rules fit elegantly, which only goes to show the complete lack of hard and fast rules for game writing.

明尊 I suppose I've finally realised the paradox that pursuing a wonderful game design paradigm too closely seems to be a recipe for failure. In other words, any limitations on the way you go about designing a game, implied for example by an insistence on symmetry (I've made that mistake often enough), consistency or whatever, can become obstacles to design. Not that symmetry and consistency aren't good things. It's just that it's important to remember that the goal is a good set of rules, not symmetry and consistency in their own rights.

This was drummed home to me by Dave Morris's *Tirikélu*, a set of rules for Tékumel. I ranted at him often enough about how inconsistent it was to use different mechanics for this and that, different dice, and so on. But the fact remains that they do a good job of representing Tékumel. I would have even used them for my own game had I not been blessed with a bunch of novice players, on whom it seemed more sensible to lavish the consistent mechanics of my own creation.

Ashley Southcott

Why is it that games companies still insist on constructing rules systems first and then getting the background to fit? It's like constructing a tepee and then expecting a middle-class nuclear family to move into it. Only by examining the background (or backgrounds, in the case of generic systems) can a set of rules be formulated that reasonably represents it. This is why I dislike *GURPS* on principle: I don't think its rules setup is all that bad, though its sourcebooks vary wildly in quality, I just think it was designed the wrong way around.

Mind you, I can see the attraction for games companies. Write the rules first and tag on new universes as they're written… works well for *GURPS*. I'm just not keen on it as a principle of design since the backgrounds are inherently written to fit the rules.

Thankfully it looks like the Water Margin rules are being designed to fit one background only—the Water Margin, on which I'll say no more as I know nothing of oriental rolegames. Or are you going to write the *Kwaidan* background for Water Margin rules?

明尊 I'm not going to write the *Kwaidan* background; Dave Morris is. And from the conversations we've had already, I can see that although many basic mechanics will be shared, Dave's approach to the rules will also be very different. I think this is a good thing. Also, bear in mind that Dave has contributed mightily to the design of the *Outlaws* rules, and many of those ideas arose out of the *Kwaidan* game he was running. So *Outlaws* contains many ideas that were created to represent the Japanese setting, but which, suitably modified, applied to the Chinese one. I'm thinking here particularly of bad joss, although it is rather different, and perhaps less mundane, in its *Kwaidan* version.

Bill Hoad

Can I suggest the motivation of superstition to be added to the list. I don't really like the term 'superstition', in that it implies backwardness or foolishness. Superstition may well be foolish in the real world. It may or may not be foolish in the world of Outlaws. But to the superstitious, their actions are just good sense and caution.

明尊 The reason 'superstition' doesn't appear is that the motivations are supposed to be things which might induce people to improve themselves. I felt that superstition by definition causes people to look outside themselves for the causes of things, and therefore be less inclined to study or practise. Certainly many students in Moslem nations work on this basis (my sister, who taught in Nigeria, said that many just shrugged and said *'Inch' Allah*'—it is the will of Allah—when urged to prepare for a test).

I wanted to introduce the superstition somehow, though, hence the use of bad joss. I will be amending the rules slightly, to point out that players can come up with their own motivations (one of my players wanted his character to be motivated by bitterness, specifically against the authorities who were responsible for his business enterprises' failure to be as successful as he had hoped). But I don't intend to specifically include superstition.

Bill Hoad

It struck me that your system of bad joss addressed a problem which I have long been aware of but had no idea how it could be tackled. Superstition, charms and fortune tellers are common in all pre-industrial societies (明尊 …and pretty common in industrial societies, too, if we're honest). Arguably, it is the widespread acceptance of these irrational beliefs

which sets our ancestors apart from us in outlook. But these elements are usually only represented in RPGs in the form of magic and fantastic creatures. But magic and fantasy bestiaries just converts the fantastic into a set of physical laws and a zoology, excluding trusting to luck and seeking protection against evil spirits. It is true that Lady Luck plays her own part, in the roll of the dice. But when a poor roll brings a bad result, the player/character is not left wondering if it could all be blamed on losing their lucky rabbit's foot, or failure to make amore generous offering to the spirits.

明尊 Although this is true, a surprisingly large number of players generate their own superstition in the form of 'lucky dice'.

Bill Hoad
In *Bushido*, my character was often to be seen making prayers and offerings at temples, especially prior to a long journey or other major undertakings. At the time, as a player, I rather resented that my efforts at playing out the Japanese culture were not rewarded in some way. (I am no longer certain that my attitude was correct. I enjoyed playing this aspect of Japanese society and so it didn't need rewarding). The other difficulty is finding a role for fortune tellers, which does not cramp the freedom of the ref or players.

明尊 This is a topic addressed in the current (final) issue of *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder* by Ian Marsh, who has been playing a successful fortune teller in a Tékumel game.

Bill Hoad
I like your rationale of the balance between motivation and bad joss. You also refer to the joss caused by contact with unlucky situations. It is this latter I would like to expand upon. To the Chinese, there are many, many things which are associated with bad and good luck. These items may be highly personal. In a game this has to be kept simple, or else ref and players won't be able to keep track the effects of joss. (Well actually, I have had various ideas for greatly complicating it and they could be fun, but they would dominate the game.)

明尊 That's why I've kept it reasonably simple in the game: with the most obvious ones like the spot where someone drowned or hanged themselves, the location of an ancestor's grave, or the touch of a baleful ghost.

Bill Hoad
But the ref may wish to drop in the occasional cursed item or locations. To find out if a character has a lot of bad joss for these reasons (or so that the player can find out why he seems to keep failing his bad joss roll), a visit to a priest is in order, or to a fortune teller.

Fortune tellers are important persons. A few years ago, there was a run on red knickers in Singapore, because fortune tellers were advocating them as the best defence against the bad fortunes of the coming lunar leap year. It was also common to read of court cases involving fraudulent fortune tellers, in the Singapore *Straits Times*. Many of them were very close to the following typical story.

A woman suffering from bad luck, goes to a fortune teller for help. He promises to conduct various rituals, for which he exacts a price of say S$100 (US$60).Sometime later, the woman concludes that she has been cheated and demands repayment from the fortune teller. He refuses but offers the chance for her to recoup her losses by giving her a share of his takings, if she introduces a new client to her.

So the woman tells one of her friends, how marvellous the fortune teller is, how her life has turned around after his advice and suggests that the friend is herself in need of such advice.

So the friend visits the fortune teller who divines various problems for which he carries out suitable rituals. He also instructs her to stand in front of the aquarium at a specified shopping mall for an hour. (Honestly this is a common feature of these news reports.) When this fails to work, the fortune teller divines that the problems are more deeply rooted than first realised, requiring more rituals. But fortunately, he can also arrange for his brother who is a priest at a Buddhist temple somewhere in Thailand to conduct prayers, in return for donations to the temple, which the fortune teller undertakes to pass on. Furthermore, the ill fated woman, has to stand in front of a different aquarium for a couple of hours. And all the while the first woman is telling their so-called friend what a marvellous job the fortune teller is doing.

But, in the reported cases at least, finally the second woman does see through the con and takes the fortune teller and her now ex-friend to court.

In a fantasy setting, the fortune tellers can be just as devious and dishonest, but their bizarre advice might in fact be right. So if a character goes to a fortune teller, who divines that the number seven is particularly unlucky for that character, the ref may increase the bad joss of the character at any time at which he is associating with that number. Rituals can be performed to counteract this.

I think it would upset the game balance if rituals could be used to counteract bad joss gained from motivation. So one need two types of bad joss, but which are cumulative when it comes to figuring out the effects of bad joss.

明尊 I've never cared much for 'game balance', and don't see any reason why rituals can't

counteract this sort of bad joss. The rituals will take effort and expense, of course.

Bill Hoad
I don't really like the idea of the bad joss table. It struck me that bad joss points could be used against characters much in the same way that players can use motivation points. Some supernatural creatures, could have the ability to use a character's bad joss to modify die rolls against the player. How many bad joss points a creature could use in one go would depend on how powerful the creature was (and could not exceed the character's bad joss points).

明尊 The reason for the bad joss table is to ensure that players realise that bad joss is not just the referee being mean. Bad joss has to acquire a life of its own, and be an entity outside the arbitrary control of the referee. Sure, this isn't 100% possible, but I want to make it clear to players that this is the intention. The referee can affect both motivation and bad joss, but in the end neither are completely within his power.

Bill Hoad
Alternatively, the bad joss table could become a shopping list of bad luck actions. The supernatural creature can then spend the character's bad joss on events chosen by the creature.

明尊 This would be OK except that 'the creature' you refer to is the referee!

State Of The Hobby

Nathan Cubitt
I think I'd have to disagree with you when you state that the number of people playing isn't significantly different to 15 years ago. I'd agree that the number of people playing games set within the fantasy genre hasn't really altered, but I'd suggest that the number actually role-playing is far less. Trading cards are *in*, GW shops are solely wargames based. At the same time the range of RPGs in high street shops such as Virgin has fallen dramatically. Many of my, for want of a better term, contemporaries no longer role-play—not by choice but from lack of opportunity, ie people to play with. Perhaps this has always been the case, after all when you're young, at high school, whatever, you're a member of a larger social group that is restrained in what it can do (by law—drinking age, or by maturity—limited sexual possibilities) and is much easier to find people of like interests, or to drag in your best friend into a game. Once you're into the 'real world' it all becomes that much more difficult… many friends last role-play group was at Uni. But I find it hard to believe that as many young newcomers now enter into role-playing. Back in '82 it was the 'cool' thing to be into for a while (明尊 Not round my way it wasn't!), that certainly isn't the case now. Granted, there are still young people entering the hobby (*arcane's* style, and letters I've had regarding *Delusions* are evidence for this) but I believe Adrian Bolt is right, the opportunities for 'graduating' upwards are severely limited and I'd guess that there'll be a higher drop-out rate than is in my generation (or in yours—ho ho).

Bill Hoad
I think I tend to agree with Adrian Bolt about the inability for RPGs as a whole to grow up. There are some very fine things said in your zine about RPGs being an introduction to real life experiences. It is certainly can be true. And one of the major attractions to me has always been the playing out being in different civilisations or cultures, in times I shall never visited in countries I never really expected to visit except as a fleeting tourist. But most of my friends consider this attitude weird, to them it is pure escapism. And unfortunately I see more signs of their games being very limiting, as their mutual fantasy worlds reinforce each other's rather parochial outlooks, albeit in settings as diverse as starships, post-cataclysm Sheffield or Glorantha.

明尊 I think a lot of people are, deep down, afraid to let their games be more than escapism. They worry about their image ('You take *games* seriously?') and perhaps also they are afraid of the discoveries they might make. This is one reason I have returned to the fold of rather conventional adventure fantasy games, because I have found you can often sneak a lot more past people than if you tell them that you're playing some kind of subtle sophisticated exercise. The latter usually ends up with people being self-conscious and hamming it up.

Ray Gillham
Difficult to find gamers? With Tékumel I think it's the other way around, it's difficult to find an existing game. This has been my experience and others.

Nathan Cubitt
It's also interesting to note that by late '95 there was an interesting change in fanzines. The successful ones became tied to a specific games system, for example *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder* (Tékumel), *Beaumains (Pendragon)* and to some extent imazine (Water Margin and games design), and non-specific fanzines didn't appear to do as well. This contrasts somewhat with the mid-late 80s, when non-specific article etc were *de rigeur* in fandom and lacking in prozines. Interesting that *arcane* is now doing systemless generic scenarios etc…

Bill Hoad
I fully agree with the end comments about the Net killing zines, the WWW being the worst offender. My own minor fanzine efforts have now come to

almost a complete halt, as has my letter writing. And while, my emailings are probably greater than my previous written output, I have fallen into the trap of rarely writing anything other as an immediate response to what I receive. You are only getting this email, because Star Plus is now Hindi for much of the evening on this satellite footprint and I have to find something to do other than play pool and drink.

Robert Irwin
Maybe it is just a sign of age, but I do miss the days of paper fanzines with worthwhile contents. A quick look at the net newsgroups shows that all this technology has done nothing for real creativity. I don't think there was ever anything inherently superior about printed fanzines over the net as a medium other than that you have an editor. Maybe there is a lesson in there somewhere for scripted versus non-scripted gaming? As a newcomer to the Internet, I can see an amazing number of parallels between newsgroups /email and role-playing.

Ashley Southcott
Is Usenet really killing fanzines? Anyone can see that Usenet is more of a place for flamebaiting and question-and-answer sessions rather than lengthy debate, but my favourable view of fanzines is perhaps coloured by the fact that since I've come to university, I've seen several titles spring up. (Shame that *The Eye of all-Seeing Wonder* ground to a halt though.) I'll not throw in role-play-related mailing lists into the same category as Usenet though since I have seen *some* debate come out of them.

Robert Irwin
The old question of recruiting new players into the hobby. My gut instinct is still that the problem lies with RPGs being so strongly associated with fantasy. A recent offshoot of this is the new *Vampire/Werewolf* craze. I suspect that if your average RPG had more socially acceptable subject matter, things would be a little different. Given that there are so many geeks already within the hobby, I don't think it will ever get outside the circle of people who also read comics and sci-fi.

Another observation. I've only gone onto the Internet, but the number of people whose names I recognise from late 80s fanzine days who are already on here is quite astounding. I really think that there is a common lack of ability to interact on a normal social level, preferring instead to have a regulated, structured mode of communication. I do as a result think that computer moderated interactive gaming will take off, whether or not you or I would like to think of it as true role-playing.. It is the natural home for the two great classes of the socially incompetent.

Nathan Cubitt
26 issues in 14 years! Jesus, man, you really should sit back and take it easy.

明尊 I thought I just had.

Ashley Southcott
I shall watch for the return of Dave Stone, if only because the spittle-laden rants that will undoubtedly ensue will be even more entertaining than the review section's current fare. Is that enough reason to bring him back?

明尊 It's not a matter of me bringing him back. It's more a case of whether he feels in the mood to write anything. At the moment, he doesn't. Perhaps he's just too depressed at the bleak prospects of the rolegaming industry.

END PEACE

I hope it's not too frustrating for regular readers that this magazine periodically goes through convulsions in its appearance. It's not just me farting around and experimenting, but is related to the medium by which the zine is principally distributed. As the Acrobat PDF file is the 'standard' form of the zine, I can insert colour. On the other hand, to get maximum clarity I have to use PostScript Type 1 fonts. And if I'm changing font I may as well overhaul the thing a little.

Having said all that, it is still very plain fare, so that I have a hope of putting it together in the meagre amount of time available to me.

One change this issue is to put the accents on Tsolyáni words (ie those used in Tékumel). This is because Gail Baker pointed out that I always used to, and I wouldn't like anyone to think that I am less of a pedant than I was ten years ago.

I have to admit I'm quite pleased with this issue. Maybe it's time for me to plug imazine as the 'successor' to *interactive fantasy* (now *there's* a hefty dose of irony), with the advantage being that it is freeware. I don't want to expand the zine and do this, however, until I know that *if* has definitely kicked the bucket. Perhaps Andrew i staking the imitation of imazine just a little too far and has decided that he, too, needs to have a ludicrously long hiatus prior to a triumphal relaunch. The problem is, of course, that he is still in the UK. In order to do it properly he would have to relocate to some improbably distant country. So maybe I should propose that we open the 'Send Andrew Rilstone to the Kalahari' Fighting Fund? Any contributors?

On the personal front, April brought the start of a new academic year here in Japan, and a drastic reduction in my regular employment (and therefore my guaranteed income). Whether my freelancing is going to be able to make up the difference, I don't know, but at least I finally have a little more time to devote to those many projects that have been on the back burner for so long. Like, er, *Outlaws of the Water Margin.*