

imazine

ROLEGAMING MAGAZINE

Issue 28 Autumn 1997

ISSN 0267-5595

Editor: Paul Mason

This publication is **FREWARE**. It may be freely copied and distributed on condition that no money is charged. All material is copyright the original authors and may not be reproduced without their permission.

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

Imazine/Paul Mason

101 Green Heights, Shimpo-cho 4-50,
Chikusa-ku, Nagoya 464 JAPAN

Email: panurge@tcp-ip.or.jp

Fax: +81 (Japan) 52 723-489

URL: <http://www.tcp-ip.or.jp/~panurge>

This issue:

REVIEWS

Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah, Feng Shui, Legend of the Five Rings, Alternate Realities, King Arthur Pendragon 4th Ed

I TÉKUMEL THAT EMOTION

Ray Gillham suggests an application for *Pendragon*'s personality system

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA

How do you handle background?

COLLOQUY

Letters to the Editor



NOW THAT I FINALLY have all the bits and bobs available to publish this zine pretty much the way I want to, I find I'm desperately starved of time. Always the way, isn't it. The cause in this case is a Masters degree I've just started. I mentioned in a previous issue that I was considering taking one, and now I am. As I'll probably be out of Japan before I finish it, and Masters degrees from California State University are hardly passports to employment in modern Britain, I find myself in the strange position of doing the degree out of interest, because I want to, rather than simply to get a useful piece of paper that'll ensure a high-paying job.

It's a refreshing feeling.

So while I stick the needle of knowledge into my watery veins, I'm afraid this zine will slide ever further into the glutinous black pool of infrequency. Is there anything you can do about this? Well, you can send me articles and reviews. The fewer I have to write myself, the more time I have to put the zine together. This issue is mainly coming to you because a number of people were kind enough to respond to my desperate pleas, and contributed.

What else can you do? Write me letters. They don't have to be comments aimed at the letters page (you can mark NFP—*not for publication*—anything you're worried I'll take out of context). But responses from you make me feel guilty about not doing this zine.

Sure, I am facing a fearsome welter of writing demands, ranging from Japanese company profiles, to course assignments, to magazine columns and restaurant reviews. And worse besides.

This is my zine, though. It has survived one extended hibernation. I have every reason to believe it can survive another. But if you prod me every now and again it'll help prevent me falling asleep. **i**

Reviews

A BIT MORE to get your teeth into this issue, and I am grateful for the contributions from Chuan Lin and Robert Rees. As always, contributions gratefully received. I can't guarantee I will use them, but don't let that get in the way of you sending them.

Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah

There is a lot of opportunity for making mistakes in this review. I could give you my opinion on *White Wolf* in general, the taste or lack thereof of writing a book about the Holocaust. Or maybe I should instead mention how much it moved me and how I cried for hours after or how my grandmother was mutilated by Nazis. Okay perhaps I'm exaggerating but there definitely seems to have been a lack of objective writing on the topic.

Firstly let it be said that I love this book and I think it's the best supplement of 1997 so far. So much for the balanced view—on with the critique.

The book doesn't look substantially different to a normal *Wraith* book until you are substantially into it. The piece of traditional fiction that usually kicks off a book is replaced with straight and, it must be said, fairly dull introduction by a writer on the Holocaust. Then there are the pages of disclaimer that patiently explains what the book is about and why it is a game about rather than *of* the Holocaust.

This done the book is split into 4 main chapters; each deals with one particular location that was important in the History of the Holocaust. These are model camp of Warszawa, ghetto of Theresienstadt where the Warsaw revolt took place, the mass grave created (with collusion from local Russians) by the German 'cleansing' squads as they entered Russia and finally Auschwitz-Birkenau.

If you know the book contains a section on



Auschwitz it's going to be tempting to skip straight to it. While each Chapter is self-contained I was glad that I took my time and read the preceding chapters first. After all Auschwitz was the ultimate expression of the Final Solution and the progression of the book shows the escalation of the violence and the slow dehumanisation of genocide into process and procedure.

In reading these sections you start to notice the differences between this and standard RPG books. Firstly, just within the *Wraith* line itself the artwork is very different. For example, *Haunters* features numerous 'fantasy' art elements with snakelike creatures erupting out of stomachs and attacking people. While the art doesn't consistently hit the target the themes and figures that run through the book are uniquely human. It would have been a disaster to allow the 'Tragically Hip' artists such as Timbrook anywhere near this book.

Secondly the difference is apparent in the level of depth and detail provided. Names, dates and places are given, fully and coherently with none of the usual role-playing vaguenesses. The text is evocative of a time and a place and the illustrators do a good job with the raw historical material. This is clearly NOT the Anytown, Anywhere, USA where most of the *White Wolf* products are set. This difference is so important it's hard to explain. Simply because the whole thing is real, it *seems* real. The fiction blends with fact. The fact reinforces the fiction.

When the book says something is terrifying you can agree, rather than having a layer of illusion between you and the emotion of the matter. Unlike, say, *Vampire*, where you have 'Chimistry creates terrifying delusions.' The reader has to accept what Chimistry is and that if it were real then it might be frightening. The historical and familiar backdrop allows the writer to create a direct channel with the reader.

Thirdly the quality of the personalities of the NPCs are far more developed than is the norm. I would like to say that the fictional characters are just as well presented as their historical counterparts but sadly this is simply not the case. A historical character will have their date of birth, former residence, date and reason of death and host of other details even down to what officer or medical school they went to. Fictional characters can occasionally boil down to 'a Jewess from a local farm who now tries to help wraiths and draws disturbing but beautiful pictures'.

If you feel compelled to research your historical characters then the same attention should be paid to the fictional ones. What is especially unforgivable is that there are one or two stereotypes floating around here. A beautiful woman haunted by visions? Please. She expresses these via painting 'Bosch-like scenes'? What is this? The Holocaust or the World of Cheese?

Fortunately the generally excellent writing improves as the book progresses. By the time the section on Auschwitz is reached the glitches are ironed out leaving only strongly distinct characters defined in a carefully understated manner and brought to life with a minimum of sparse and expressive brushstrokes.

The quality of the entire book improves as it progresses. The horrors it describes (or perhaps 'records' is the more accurate word) also grow worse as the book reaches its climax and as the Nazi war machine starts to crumble exposing the fascist atrocities that it has perpetrated. The last months of the war resulted in a frenzy of genocide as the Camp Leaders tried to destroy all evidence of the pogrom that they had instituted. The remaining prisoners were murdered as quickly as the bodies could be cremated and the camps themselves were demolished and burnt. It seems that these final acts of atrocity bring out the most mature and sensitive writing in the creative team.

All this brings me into another point I thought makes a significant improvement in role-playing writing. While the book initially snipes at virtually anyone and everyone involved in the anti-Semitism (latent or otherwise) of the Thirties it makes fewer and fewer moral pronouncements. Finally it presents the facts without any moral framework or implicit condemnation at all. For example it baldly informs you that Russian POWs often had to eat one another at Auschwitz if they want to avoid death from starvation. It is entirely up to the reader to assimilate the implications of this statement. It is surprisingly horrific to be treated like an adult and not be patronised by having the writer tell you that *this is bad*. A pronouncement is not needed, what the reader needs is *time* to understand the depths that humanity can sink to.

I wish the *Sabbat* books could take this view rather than their constant bland assurances that the Sabbath are evil and sometimes do evil things. I don't think anyone reading *The Shoah* would want to play a Nazi camp guard and similarly I don't think that anyone would want to play a Sabbath member if the same neutral approach and realistic description of their activities were given.

Carrying on in this vein *The Shoah* is possibly a big mistake for the World of Darkness. It renders the previous evil almost laughable. Demonic wizards, animalistic gangs and corrupting corporations all seem fairly childish when compared to the brutalities we willfully help upon one another in the name of race religion, nation or philosophy. Not only that but creations such as the Lasombra seem very one-dimensional and wooden compared to the mixed

motivations and clear ideological foundation of the Nazis.

It is as if someone has introduced Brazilian torture squads into an episode of *Tom and Jerry*. We go from the four colour world of *Werewolf* to the grey of Auschwitz's ovens—and that is a great distance.

The neutrality of presentation carries over to the NPCs, the murdered inmates are not angelic Anne Franks—they are angry, brutalised people treated and finally slaughtered like animals. Their suffering changing them until they became so brutalised they are hard to tell apart from their former tormentors. What sets them apart is that we abhor the motive of hate but can tolerate that of revenge.

This avoids the accusation that the history of the Holocaust has been 'tidied up' to favour the victims and also throws the ball back to the reader. The book refuses to condemn from a moral standpoint either the inmates or the Nazis. It is up to the reader to ascribe the blame, if any. Who is to blame for this? I think that this should become the key issue for the gaming group when they encounter the groups described in the book.

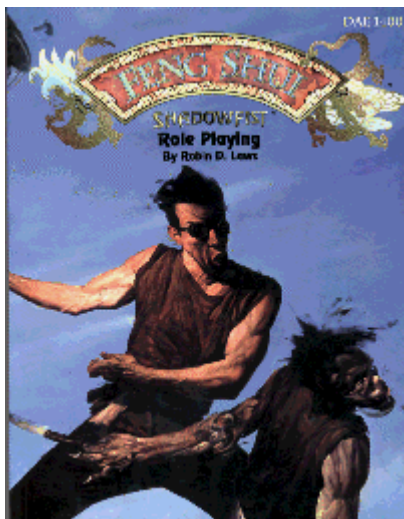
There is also a nice touch in that the former prisoners have recreated their prison on the 'other side' of the Shroud including the same routines and limitations. They have no hope of Transcending as they are so locked into their past. They have recreated hell and have volunteered to surrender hope.

This raises the issue of the treatment of the Arabs by Jewish forces in recent years. In failing to forgive the Holocaust Israel runs the risk of becoming a nation motivated by hate just like its former persecutors. I don't understand how anyone can say there isn't any game relevant information here...

The book is not a supplement, it's a sourcebook. It presents information that a GM can use or ignore just as history is used or ignored. The ideas behind the book are extremely relevant because in Europe we have to constantly forget the past to create our future. The unified Germany has still not exerted any control over its extreme right-wing elements and still shows no great desire to acknowledge its atrocities [*Editor's note: this is entirely wrong. Perhaps Robert is thinking of Japan?*]. However should we blame the current generation of Germans for this? They were not yet born when all this happened? It's not about our past, it is about trying to unravel our present. The solution is unclear and unlike those in the Weimar Republic the individual must stand for what they believe. The questions the Holocaust asks about Europe, racism and the nature of mankind have not gone away. It is fortunate that in the world of *Wraith* the voices that ask them have not gone away as have those of the millions who perished in Warsaw, Treblinka and Auschwitz.

Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah is a supplement for *Wraith* and is published by White Wolf.

Review by Robert Rees



Feng Shui

Yeah, I've been blowing hot and cold about this in previous issues. Now I've finally got hold of a copy, however, I'm going to be looking at it from a critical perspective, therefore: how well does it do what it purports to do, and what does it tell us about how to design a rolegame, the state of the industry and the price of yum cha in Lai Chi Kok.

Price

The first thing I noticed about *Feng Shui* was that 30 dollar price tag. Now it may just be too long since I last bought a rolegame, but that seems quite a lot to me. Ten years ago, a price like that would have hurt me pretty badly (although ten years ago I'd probably have got the game for free).

Now, I could react with the old fogeyish kneejerk 'Too expensive, blah blah!', but I resisted the temptation. The product is priced that way for a reason. Daedalus clearly feel they can get away with it, and, they appear to have done so. *Feng Shui* tells me that at least one section of rolegame publishing has recognised that it is a subcultural niche market that can be milked appropriately. Given its subject matter, *Feng Shui* is a subculture of a subculture. But it doesn't come on like that. It is brash and confident; it has colour on every page and it costs \$30. I feel a little bit like I did when I saw the US co-produced *Doctor Who*. If nothing else, it looks good.

Jargon

The second thing I noticed was the jargon. Not surprising, really, as the book opens with a piece of short fiction to set the mood of the game. Right away, we're into a world of 'mooks'. I still don't get this one. Can anybody explain it? In Japanese, there is a word 'mook' which means a cross between a magazine and a book. Somehow I don't think that's it. I've never heard or seen it in any of the Hong King movies I've watched

(and I've watched a fair, few, believe me). So where's it from?

Another word I've never heard in the source material on which this game is supposed to be based is 'schtick'. Yet another that I'd heard from discussion of the game before I'd even seen it is 'Fu Powers'. I'd been wondering for some time what they were on about. I now discover that 'Fu' is supposed to be an abbreviation of 'Kung Fu'. They're taking the northern Chinese feel of the term as special powers which are developed by effort. This is fair enough. Except that the 'fu' of Kung Fu means husband, adult male or labourer. Kung Fu acquires its composite meaning from the idea of 'acquiring merit through hard work'. 'Fu' on its own is just the sound of contempt I make when I hear the word 'Cool' used in a non-temperature-related sense. But wait a minute, I hear you say, what does that matter? We don't want to learn Chinese, so what do we care about the words? In that case, I reply, why is the damn game called *Feng Shui*, a title so obscure that even James Wallis thought it awful? Why is it full of references to Chinese tropes, and Hong Kong action movies? When you do a game like this, you have to make a choice: to what extent are you going to be merely a parasite, stealing superficial ideas from the source, and to what extent are you going to try to get to the heart of the setting? If all you do is the former, then you end up with the same basic ingredients, albeit tarted up a little with different spices. If you follow the Kevin Siembieda approach (in talking about a Japanese rolegame, he regarded simulating Japan 'Right down to the Japanese people' as a bad thing) that's all you want. I want more, however.

Instead, what I get is 'fu schticks'. 'Pooh sticks' I can handle. 'Fu schticks' is just, as we say here in Japan, bollocks.

Rules

I have to say, I do like the basic *Feng Shui* mechanic. I like the fact that it's 2D6. I like the fact that it's used for everything. Even better is the fact that the 'one die is plus, one die is minus' mechanism reflects yin-yang dualism, an important part of Chinese philosophy. This could profitably have been made more explicit in the game.

I have only two problems with it.

One is relatively minor. In this game, the quality of result is derived by subtracting the number you needed to beat (the Difficulty) from the number you actually rolled (the Action Result). This feels nice, but my experience is that the constant subtraction becomes a pain. I say this because such a system was at the core of the Top Flat system, the original rules I used for my Water Margin game. It was ditched for precisely this reason. Maybe I, and my players at the time, had a lower tolerance to playing with numbers than the average rolegamer. Or maybe we just drink too much while playing...

The second problem is the open-ended rolls. Any six is rerolled and added (whether to the plus side or the minus side). I can't find a reference to what happens if the rerolled dice turns up a six. If it, too, is rerolled, then we enter the realm of totally open-ended rolls. I have a problem with this, especially with those skills that have a 'soft' (explained), rather than a 'hard' (numerical) result. Say you get an Outcome of 5 on one roll, and an outcome of 15 on another. How do they differ? In general, the idea of the Outcome seems to be here mainly to generate a damage figure for the combat rules. Its uses with other skills don't seem to have been exploited.

Character Templates

These seem to have been the source of some considerable argument since this game was published. In principle, I'm not opposed to the idea of customisable templates as a method of character creation. Certainly, I've found it works very well when dealing with players new to role-playing (as most of my players are). What matters, of course, is how well the templates are executed. For me, the problem with *Feng Shui* is summed up by this comment from the GM's Tips chapter: 'When you think of the great heroes and villains of pop fiction, most of them are elementally simple. The kind of brilliant simplicity behind Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, and Batman is actually very difficult to do well. A character based on a single strong idea is always more memorable than one created from a laundry list of minor quirks and complex life experiences.' Wrong, wrong, wrong from beginning to end. I spent my childhood reading Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes, although I confess I came late to Batman. Anyone who thinks they are simple characters is demonstrating a dazzling level of myopia. Even if he were right, *Feng Shui* is not a game about jungle-dwelling English lords or cocaine-addicted private detectives in Victorian England. Few of the memorable characters in the movies on which *Feng Shui* is based are 'elementally simple'.

So the templates we are given are, for me, perfectly suited to a game based on Japanese manga, but flawed for the game that *Feng Shui* actually is. As many people have noted, there are templates which should have been included, but which weren't (the most notable being the 'Magic Cop' which is referred to in the scenario, even though it isn't provided in the book). This is forgivable in a game which combines the templates with a system which allows you to build up exactly the character you want. *Feng Shui*, however, is not that game.

Flicking through the templates also highlights a general problem with *Feng Shui* which I'll come back to in more detail later: they are simply the characters from the movies on which the game is based, lifted from the movie and all packed together. Why on earth would characters from such different contexts hang out together? Well, er, because of the Secret War.

The Background

With a name like *Feng Shui*, I had erroneously supposed that this game might be about China. Sadly, although it does exactly what *Mystic China* should have done (provides background information about Hong Kong) it isn't. It lifts gimmicks from Hong Kong movies, but very little of the culture behind those movies is presented. It's a sort of uncritical exoticism. Now maybe I'm being overly critical because I happen to think that some, nay many, Hong Kong movies are crap, and I don't like to play this game of pretending that I watch crap movies 'because they're crap'. But is it really enough to just take the surface, the superficialities of a set of movies, and consider that representative? I like Hong Kong movies. To mush them together into a sort of 'generic' background I can almost accept, although I think it's a waste. To plonk a tedious old conspiracy plot on top, though, is a bit of an insult.

The fundamental problem with the background is the *TORG* syndrome: in trying to be everything, it ends up being nothing. It is a multi-genre game masquerading as a single genre game. What do I mean by this? Think of all the movies that *Feng Shui* claims as influences. How many of them involve a time-spanning conspiracy in which kung fu shaolin monks interact with modern-day gunmen? How many of them weave futuristic technology together with traditional magic and superstition? Not all that many. I've seen a lot of these movies. And the number which have even a fraction of *Feng Shui*'s eclecticism are few and far between (two reasonable examples: *Magic Cop* and *Wicked City*. There's also a Joey Wong movie which I only know by its Japanese and Chinese titles, which involves a time slip). If the movies of this genre are successful, it is not just down to the non-stop action, but because they create an atmosphere. They create a (moderately) consistent world. Extraordinary things happen, for sure, but these are underlined by the limits placed on the world. In one of the early movies in *The Swordsman* series, a particularly powerful warrior manages to reknit his body after an enemy has hurtled through his chest. Ridiculous! This particular example goes way beyond my willingness to suspend disbelief. Yet how much more ridiculous if you then take that historical/fantasy background and mix in loads of stuff from *Saviour of the Soul*, *Wicked City* and *The Heroic Trio*?

Every time *Feng Shui* refers to the 'Secret War' I'm taken back to Dave Sim's excellent parody of the ridiculous Secret Wars marketing wheeze that Marvel foisted on us some years ago. I picture the 'Secret Sacred Wars Roach' grimacing around and ranting his absurd paranoid fantasies. And that's the mighty background that underpins *Feng Shui*, and which 'explains' why you would have characters drawn from such disparate movies as *A Chinese Ghost Story*, *Leon*, *A Better Tomorrow*, *Wicked City* and *Captain America* choosing to band together. It's contrived. In the extreme. And when you are dealing with a set of

backgrounds which are already this contrived, the last thing you want is to pile it on.

Why is it this contrived? Could it be to do with the fact that it is based on a card game?

Conclusion

This, I have to admit in the end, is a game I will never play. It just doesn't push any of my buttons, and I find the relentless Beavis & Buttthead-level talk of kicking ass just ends up getting on my nerves. On the other hand, that is just a matter of taste. What I do find about *Feng Shui* is that it has, for all its faults, been executed with a quality which I can only describe as 'sincerity.' The author's enthusiasm comes bursting out of the page in four colour 3D. Even better, he seems for the most part to have made an effort to research his subject. I don't hear, as I did with *Mystic China*, an authorial voice in the background muttering 'Hell, I'll just make this bit up, they'll never know the difference'. Well, I don't hear it as often, anyway.

Feng Shui is published by Daedalus Games.

Review by Paul Mason



Legend of the Five Rings Role Playing Game

Legend of the Five Rings (L5R) started out as a collectible card game in late 1995, building up a dedicated following. At GenCon 1996 nearly \$10,000 worth of starter decks were given away, gaining much needed recognition for the game. Since then, its numerous expansion sets have made *L5R* into one of the few thriving card games not produced by Wizards of the Coast [Editor's note: since this review was written, Wizards of the Coast have acquired the *L5R* game]. Building upon its success and brand recognition, the card game designers created the *Legend of the Five Rings Role Playing Game (L5R-RPG)*.

L5R's story concerned Rokugan, an oriental fantasy empire with a dying Emperor. With no apparent heir, six major clans fought among themselves to become the successor. The story unfolded with each successive

expansion set. An evil deity, Fu Leng, plotted its return; a clan of snake-people, or *Naga*, awoke to confront this evil. A clan, thought destroyed, made its move for the throne. A *ronin* rallied a rag-tag army to fight Fu Leng. A corrupted *shugenja* (wizard) was ordered by the evil deity to seek out and destroy the Seven Thunders (the spirits of the seven original samurai who banished Fu Leng at the start of Emerald Empire). A leader of a minor clan began to unite other lesser houses in order to make their voice heard before the Emerald Throne; and monks began to take more active and direct involvement in the affairs of men. As if these major plots were not enough, there were numerous sub-plots about personal honour, revenge, politics, and backstabbing to maintain one's interest. The story is not static nor pre-determined. It is based on the results of game tournaments at major cons (DragonCon, GenCon, etc). Supposedly, the story ended at GenCon 1997, the final confrontation between Fu Leng and the Seven Thunders.

Legend of the Five Rings Role Playing Game is a 250-page hardbound book. It includes 16 pages of color that describe the background and benefits of each major clan and school. There is also a color layout of the map of Rokugan with a brief description for each key location. Each page has a 2-inch margin, to allow the insertion of short stories, optional rules, and comments. Almost every other page features an illustration of people and places from Rokugan. An index and a photocopyable character sheet are at the end of the book. There are five sections, each named after an element. Section I, the Book of Earth, discusses Rokugan's background and summarises the game mechanics. Section II, the Book of Water, is about character generation. Section III, the Book of Fire, explains game mechanics and the combat system. Section IV, the Book of Air, describes magic, and Section V, the Book of Void, advises the referee on how to run an *L5R* campaign.

The *L5R-RPG* timeline starts four years before that of the card game. At that time, the empire was still relatively peaceful. There were seven major clans bickering among themselves; *Naga* and *Ninja* were rumours to scare children; and the Emperor was alive and well. This setting allows players to create characters and earn plenty of experience for upcoming events.

A word of caution: though *L5R* borrows much of its material from Japanese culture, it is not about Japan, real or mythic. The world of Rokugan is to Japan as Middle Earth is to Europe. Rokugan contains a healthy mixture of both occidental and oriental myth and cultures.

The mechanic

The heart of *L5R-RPG* is the concept of Task Number (TN) and a D10 system. Every action is resolved by rolling a number of D10 against a Task Number of between 5 (*mundane*) and 40 (*never be done again*) in increments of 5. Task Numbers can be fixed or based on an opposing character's trait x 5. When a player tests

his ability against a passive opposition, a fixed TN is used, and has to roll equal or greater than it in order to be successful. A contested TN takes place when there is someone or something actively opposing a player's action. In this case the Task Number is the opposing character's appropriate trait $\times 5$. Any dice lower than the opposing character's trait are ignored. There are three possible outcomes: both can fail their rolls; both can make their rolls, and whoever gets the higher roll is the winner; and one makes his roll while the other fails. In either type of TN determination, a player can temporarily increase his TN, in increments of 5, to attempt to perform impressive stunts or to do more damage.

The number of dice rolled depends on both character traits and skills. Character trait determines both how many dice can be rolled, and how many kept. Skill level indicates how many dice can be rolled. In all cases, there is a maximum of 10 dice per roll. Beside rolling and ignoring dice, *L5R RPG* incorporates the concept of a repeat roll whenever a die comes up a 10.

The magic number in *L5R RPG* is five. A character is made of 5 elemental rings. Five is the maximum number a character can attend in each element. There are 5 ranks of secret techniques taught by every clan's bushi school. Lastly, there are five honour levels for a character to attend.



Characters

In character generation, all characters are assumed to be from the *samurai* caste. In this system, both *samurai* and *ronin* are considered to be social status/caste rather than character class/profession. There are two professions/ character classes: *bushi* (fighter) or *shugenja* (wizard). A player chooses one of seven major clans or becomes a *ronin*. Under each clan, a player decides to belong to one of three major families and attend school for either *bushi* or *shugenja*. A clan offers bonus traits, skills, and/or above average equipment. *Ronin* gain none of the above benefits, instead, they receive more

starting character points. *Ninja* and *Kolat* (*yakuza*) characters are strictly forbidden.

A character is made up of five rings: earth, water, fire, air and void. The first four rings are further divided into 2 character traits. These character traits are pretty much self-explanatory for all experienced gamers. Stamina and Willpower build up the Earth Ring; Strength and Perception flow into Water Ring; Agility and Intelligence fuel the Fire Ring; and Reflexes and Awareness make up the Air Ring. The lower of the two traits determine that ring's rank. A Void Ring is a catch-all type of ring. A character uses a void ring rank to improve his action by adding and keeping additional dice. An exhausted void ring is recovered through a good night's rest, meditation skill, or participating in a tea ceremony. Therefore a character with Void of 2 can use it to improve his roll twice before he has to recover it through rest, meditation or a cup of tea. A ring's rank ranges from 1, the worst, to 5, the best.

Besides basic traits, a character can learn skills. There are four different castes of skills: high, *bugei*, merchant, and low. High skills are honorable for *samurai* to practice in public. These are court-political or literature related. *Bugei* skills are combat related. Merchant skills are neither honourable nor dishonourable for *samurai* to practice. Low skills are dishonourable for *samurai* to practice in public. They are mostly thief-related skills. All these skills add bonus dice roll per skill level to character trait.

There are several more steps to round up a character in the world of Rokugan. A player can choose to purchase advantages or gain disadvantages for more character points. His clan provides starting equipment, arms and/or armour. There are 8 wound levels, with each wound level equal to $2 \times$ character's earth ring. The first five wound levels reduce all character skill rolls by the corresponding number of dice rolls. The next three wound levels can remove the character from active game play.

This game employs the concept of glory. Glory determines a player's recognition in the world of Rokugan. It is very similar to *Outlaws of the Water Margin's* notion *position* [Editor's note: it sounds more like **respect to me**]. Non-*samurai* characters do not have any glory. The Emperor has 10 glory; each of the major clan *daimyo* has a glory of 9; each minor clan *daimyo* has a glory of 6. Player characters have glory ranks equal to their school rank—usually from 1 to 6. It will be difficult for a player character to get glory above 6 as the more glory a character gains, the more reluctant a *daimyo* is to award glory ranks.

Similar to glory is the concept of honour. It measures a character's nobility and purity. Often during play, a character is tempted to do something contrary to his character. If he fails to oppose it, he can ask for a test of honour. A test of honour gives a player a second chance to resist temptation. If successful, the code of *bushido* reminds the character of his integrity. Or the *samurai* succumbs to personal whim. There are six levels of

honour from 0 (*honorless dog*) to 5 (*strength of a thousand ancestors*), though no *samurai* would be caught dead with 0 honour. A player's clan determines the starting honor. It can be increased or decreased for additional character points.

After character rings and skills have been determined, it is time to resolve a character's Insight. It is the sum of total rings rank * 10 plus skills * 1. Insight relates to how well a character understands himself. Experience points, gained through game play, can translate into appropriate skills or traits which lead to recalculated Insight. If he has sufficient Insight, his teacher deems him worthy to advance to the next school rank.

Now a character is ready to adventure in the Rokugan Empire.

Combat

Once you understand how the game mechanic works, the combat system is pretty straightforward. There are three phases in a combat round. First, everyone rolls D10 initiative plus his Reflex. The one with the lowest roll declares his action first and the highest roll gets to act first. Second, players choose one of three basic manoeuvres: standard attack, full attack, or full defence. Third, dice are rolled and dropped. Based on the roll, a character either hits or misses. Damage is based on Strength plus weapon dice bonus, and the weapon determines how many dice are kept. The combat round ends when everyone has resolved their actions.

There are two types of armour in Rokugan: heavy or light. Heavy armour adds +10 to TN for the opponent's strike and +5 to all the owner's physical TN. Light armour adds +5. This rule discourages characters from wearing armour in day-to-day situations. Armour represents bad intentions, which may attract local law enforcement to either confiscate armour or kill the potential trouble-maker. *LSR RPG* scores a positive point because no-other oriental setting rolegames have incorporated this oriental peculiarity.

Another interesting concept is the archery skill. The majority of Rokugan *samurai* are taught to rely on instinct when firing a ranged weapon. This is reflected by using Reflex and the appropriate missile weapon skill. Then there is a certain group of *samurai* who are influenced by occidental barbarian combat styles. They aim their missiles. Agility and the appropriate missile weapon skill are used. There is not much difference in following either style, but this does add additional oriental flavour to the game.

Magic

In the world of Rokugan, the magic is strongly related to religion. *Shugenja* can be viewed as priests who taught religious practices; remembered names of various Fortunes (both major and minor deities); tracked the passage of time; and are the most literate members of Rokugan society. To them, all natural forces break

down into five basic elements: air, earth, fire, water and void. There are three ways of tapping these encircling forces to do one's bidding. One method is to chant in order to merge one's force with surrounding energies. Another is to petition celestial spirits. Lastly, one can always ask one's ancestors, who often come to the aid of their scions, to protect against evil spectres and oni.

Spells are written down on scrolls. They are encrypted so that only members of the creator's school are able to read and cast from them. Spell casting is based on the appropriate character ring and school ranks. It is possible to perform a ritual spell with a group of *shugenja*. In a group effort, the number of dice is depending on the leading caster's ring rank and total school ranks. An interesting rule is the possibility of gaining spell mastery. Each spell has a mastery level. If you have appropriate element ring and school ranks equal to or greater than mastery level, you can spend 3 experience points to purchase that spell's mastery. Spell mastery means that you understand a spell so perfectly that you no longer need outside cues to cast it.

There are a few limitations on what spells can do. Spells can not be used to resurrect a person. Rokugans believe that when a person dies, the spirit joins its ancestors. To bring it back among the living is to deny that person's right, thus a sacrilegious act. Likewise, spells can not be used to create life, for that is a celestial privilege. Spells cannot go against pre-ordained destiny. Only celestial beings can perform such acts. In most cases, a player cannot use spells to kill off certain major NPCs, because the NPCs play an important role in the development of Rokugan history. To get a similar perk, a player can purchase the *Great Destiny* advantage, making the character partially immune to a killing spell once per story. Again, this is consistent with most Asian concepts of pre-ordained destiny.

Strike

Legend of the Five Ring Role Playing Game provides adequate material for a group of players to start playing. The book is organized in a logical and consistent matter. It has a healthy mix of occidental and oriental themes. The sidebars provide interesting background information on Rokugan. Plenty of characters, equipment, monsters, and settings are illustrated to break the humdrum of extensive reading. The quality of this artwork is consistent with that of the CCG—a big attraction for me. The book gives examples of character generation, combat, and spell casting. There are few typographical errors and inconsistencies. If you have already played the CCG, the cards can provide supporting props during role-play, a perfect solution to make use of excess, common or seemingly useless cards. The book also allows room for further expansion of each major clan and a GM pack which will deal with more advanced combat options.

There are several points in favour of this book. The system mechanic is easily understood. The use of D10

does widen the range of possibility. The concept of dropping and keeping dice is something that I have not seen in any other game system. The idea of continuing to roll whenever a die comes up with 10 is consistent with what I call the third generation of RPG systems (the first generation used polyhedral dice to roll against fixed numbers; the second generation required one type of die to roll against one's skills; the third generation used one type of die to roll against skill with the option to keep on rolling whenever a certain number appeared). It provides rich background material for any existing gaming system. The armour restriction during peace time, and archery skills do not appear in other oriental settings. The idea of being able to master one's spells is another positive point. And the concept of the Void Ring does fit into the oriental *zen/dao* notion.

There are a few pet peeves when I read this book. The mythical creation story is a bit too western for me. I do not think there is any eastern religion that tells a tale of a father god eating his children. Nor about one of the children escaping the father's wrath and returning later to challenge his father. The five elements are more akin to occident culture than oriental culture. There are not enough support materials for *shugenja*. While *samurai* can look forward to their next secret clan fighting technique; spell-casters can only hope to get a new spell or two. Although the clans provide most equipment for player characters, thus doing away with list of costs for items, there is still a need for prices for *ronin* player characters and for bargaining during game play.

Overall, there are more positive points than pet peeves. The book does offer lots of oriental themes through its game mechanic. I would recommend *Legend of the Five Rings Role-Playing Game*.

Published by Five Rings Publishing/Wizards of the Coast

Review by Chuan Lin

Alternate Realities

Know what a 'copylefted' book is? Well, this is one. It's a generic universal role-playing game system which you can download for free off the Web. It should not be confused with the company Alternate Realities which, according to its Web page, was set up to market collectible card games and role-playing games.

Alternate Realities was designed by scientists, and it shows. More than this: it was designed by computer-oriented scientists. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on what you want to use it for, and how you feel about this approach.

I've seen criticism of the game which complains that you need to understand and use calculus in order to play it. This is blatantly not true. The reason for this misunderstanding is that, remarkably, the designers have explained precisely how they derived the

mechanics behind their system. The assumptions are clearly there for inspection and, for the most part, seem to stand up pretty well.

I said that this was a generic, universal system, so you might perhaps expect something like GURPS. Well, yes and no. It is like GURPS in the sense that it isn't *really* universal. It is unlike GURPS in that it comes much closer. I think the reason for this is that it is 'scalable and modular'. The rules are designed in a hierarchy of complexity, and you can pitch the complexity of your game at any level and still have confidence that the mechanics will work.

The core mechanics are pretty simple. Despite the negative propaganda about calculus, the core mechanic is relatively simple. It is:

$$v = 0.31831 \tan^{-1}(0.031831r) + 0.5$$

where v = percentile result and r = rating.

I did say that the game had been designed by scientists, didn't I?

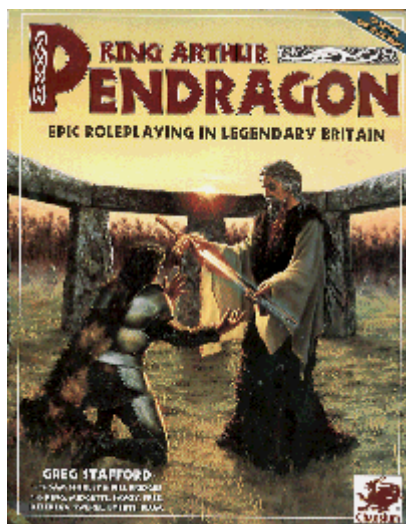
Fear not, for if you get hold of a graph or table of this function, you will not have to concern yourself with the nitty gritty. The rationale behind the function is interesting, by the way. The game is predicated on rated attributes on scales which are, in theory, unlimited; the 'base' value of an attribute (as in *Outlaws*) is zero. This is a fascinating idea which is one means by which the game obtains a universality unobtainable by GURPS. The designers wanted a 'non-linear' system to reflect their philosophy: 'Diminishing returns is the idea that the marginal performance for a given amount of effort decreases as the level approaches its physical maximum; in other words, the closer you get to perfection, the more effort it takes to draw still closer to it.'

The attributes referred to above are rated in a hierarchy. Depending on the level of detail in differentiating different skills, you can choose what level of the hierarchy is your cut-off point. For my tastes, most of the attributes named had a very modern flavour which would interfere with the atmosphere of a historical or fantasy based game.

It has to be said that the game is not an easy read, and the absence of a DRF graph or table from the Primary Reality Guide seems to be something of a serious omission. However, if you have access to the Web you really should download a copy. This is for two reasons. Firstly the game is free; you have very little to lose. Secondly, because the authors have made their design decisions explicit, there are plenty of insights to be gained from reading the rules, even if you can't stand the game as a whole.

Alternate Realities is available on the Web, from <http://son3.mc.duke.edu/~eagle/AR/> in Word 6.0, PostScript and Acrobat formats.

Review by Paul Mason



King Arthur Pendragon

When I reviewed the first edition of this game many years ago (in *imagine* 15) I didn't praise it unreservedly. In fact I found quite a lot about it to criticise. It was fascinating for me to go back and have a look at those criticisms, now that I consider *Pendragon* to be the best published role-playing game (damn, let it slip—that was supposed to come in at the end).

I complained that it was too expensive (it was), that its simple system was blighted by secondary mechanics and tables (none of them round), that game terms were used before they had been explained, that it felt thrown together, that it contained no introduction to role-playing, and that the writing was lacklustre. My biggest complaint, however, was with the traits and passions system (adopted for *Tékumel* in this issue).

This system, I argued, would encourage inexperienced role-players to turn the game into a 'story-telling boardgame without a board'.

I've tackled this issue more recently in *imagine*, and the discussion rumbles on in the letters column. So I'll go through the other criticisms I had, and see how they relate to this 4th edition.

First edition *Pendragon* was an expensive game. It came in a box, and didn't have very much in it. I complained that it was incomplete: in order to play it you would have to buy one of the supplements. This fault was long ago corrected. Fourth edition goes even further: it expands the 208 pages of the 3rd edition to over 350. It provides comprehensive information about the people and places of legendary Albion. When compared with a game such as *Feng Shui* it represents excellent value for money.

The second accusation, regarding secondary mechanics and the proliferation of tables, is more complex. I'll come back to the mechanics later.

Terms are now defined when they are first used, and more importantly, the game is properly introduced. Both role-playing and general, and the distinctive style of role-playing which *Pendragon* encourages, are explained quite adequately. Is the writing still lacklustre? Well, to

be honest, it doesn't always sparkle. There are now some parts which are well done, but most of it is still quite bland. More importantly, there are still some rather quirky anachronisms in the writing which undermine the effort which has gone in to building up atmosphere. For example, in introducing Cymric names: 'Cymric names look ridiculous and are hard to pronounce in real Welsh'. Look ridiculous to whom? To some xenophobic Californian, perhaps?

Overall, though, it should be obvious that effort has been put in to correct the main flaws of this game, and this effort has led, I feel, to a feeling that *Pendragon* has been refined to such an extent that it now does what it purports to do near-perfectly. Way back when, there was a game called *RuneQuest*, which was widely praised for its game mechanics. They were plundered by other games, and mutated into *Call of Cthulhu*, among others. It is telling, therefore, that the new role-playing game of Glorantha, the world in which *RuneQuest* was set, should adopt *Pendragon* rules.

Mechanics

I no longer feel that *Pendragon*'s secondary mechanics are excessive, though I confess I cannot remember the first edition well enough to be able to say whether this is because they have been slimmed down a bit. I suspect they have. Combat, in particular, is an admirably simple system. There are still quite a lot of tables, but these are now for background purposes. Character creation has been loosened up, with several different methods presented, and this diminishes the feel of a table-dominated game.

One of the things which deeply impressed me about *Pendragon* from the start was the way it explicitly dealt with differing time scales. Many games that I have played in involve a ridiculous level of activity. Just how many adventures *can* an adventurer have per month? In *Pendragon*, time scale became a tool, enabling an extended form of play. It was the first game to explicitly encourage you to think of your character not just as an individual, but as a scion of a family. The integration of the character into society is, for me, the greatest achievement of this game.

I think one of my biggest problems with the *Pendragon* rules, which found initial expression in my resistance to the Traits and Passions system, was the way in which it deprived the players of power. Traits and passions, it seemed to me, *could* be used by players to express the personality of their characters, but were more likely to be used by referees to corral characters into their plots. This latter possibility seemed especially likely when dealing with the Arthurian mythos, and being faced with the likelihood that player characters would encounter episodes from the 'real' story, and want to change the outcome.

After the first edition drew a lot of criticism, however, the traits and passions were made less restrictive. Lip service was even paid to the idea that a

player who didn't want to use the Traits and Passions system could choose not to do so. The system transformed into a more positive one, a carrot rather than a stick.

Traits and passions were not the only way in which player freedom was limited, however. Traditional role-playing games often emphasised referee power by making character improvement entirely dependant on the referee through the medium of awarded experience points. Granted, *D&D* had set experience points for monsters and treasure, but it was clear that these were for the referee to determine, and it was, after all, the referee who decided *how much* treasure was found.

Then along came *RuneQuest* and its successors. Here character advancement was, to a large extent, taken out of the hands of the referee. It depended on the actions of the character. *Pendragon* inherited this legacy: indeed its advancement system is very similar to *RuneQuest*'s, and suffers the same problem (the notorious golf-bag syndrome). It also contains an explicit direction that all experience is gained at the whim of the referee.

In addition, the referee has been given the Glory system to extend his power over the players. Glory is explicitly identified as the 'point' of the game. This is fair enough. It encapsulates the idea of Arthurian chivalry. Unfortunately since Glory is awarded at the whim of the referee it also means that the player can only achieve this ultimate goal of the game by sucking up to the referee and doing what the referee wants.

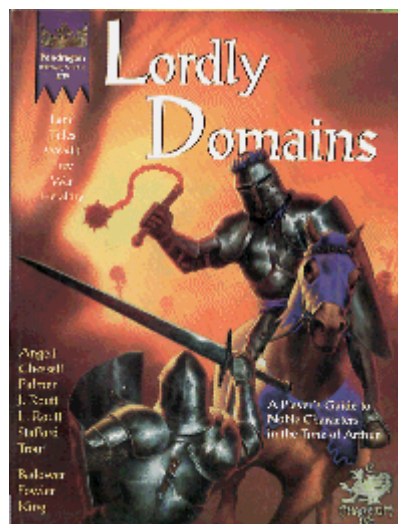
OK, so I'm exaggerating the problem. For most mature groups, this represents no problem at all. It will, however, shape the attitudes of inexperienced players and groups.

New bits

I've already mentioned that the latest edition of this game contains far more information than previous ones. One of the most notable additions is magic. *Pendragon* didn't used to have a magic system, and thus its magic used to be rather magical. This was one of the things I most respected in for. In response to demand, however, there is one now. It has been done very well. I particularly like the way it incorporates the idea of sacrifice, and requires time. To be honest, though, I can't make up my mind whether the game is better for it. I suppose in a way it is—now you have a choice to use it or not, whereas in the past you had no choice.

There is also much ore material about the different peoples, lands, religions etc, formerly covered in separate supplements. This in no way detracts from the presentation of an initial location for the game, casting player characters as knights of Salisbury. The game therefore now combines its introductory, starting role, with enough additional material to allow considerable expansion.

I also have a copy of *Lordly Domains*, one of the supplements of the game predicated on a campaign focusing on Lords rather than questing knights.



In some ways, this book demonstrates how complete the main *Pendragon* rules are. It's full of detail, with rules for castles, harvest etc reminiscent of those in the *Chivalry & Sorcery GM's Handbook* (which I may consider reviewing next issue: for now, though, let's just say it's not especially necessary). I suppose it is a good supplement, but it doesn't inspire me the way that reading *Pendragon* does.

Legacy

Pendragon is a minor interest role-playing game. Within its niche, however, it is a major player, if not *the* major player. The niche it occupies, moreover, is that of culture games. *Pendragon* is all about recapturing the culture of the Arthurian romances. Even the passions and traits systems, which I have criticised, are there to encourage players to step outside their own culture and immerse themselves in Arthurian Albion.

When I was reading through the fourth edition, I repeatedly found myself thinking two things: firstly, that I really wanted to play in a *Pendragon* game, and secondly, that maybe I ought to modify *Outlaws* to take account of the neat idea I had just encounter.

It is because of this that I regard *Pendragon* as the best published role-playing game, even though it is a decade since I played it. It employed a number of ideas with admirable aplomb, ranging from the simple mechanics, the flexible time scales, to the rules for integrating player characters into society and making them feel a part of the background.

The news that the *Pendragon* rules will henceforth be applied to Glorantha is, I believe, to be applauded. Their application to other fields is also overdue (China has already benefitted, of course, from Eric Yin's *Once Upon A Time In China* variant). If you don't own an edition of *Pendragon*, I strongly recommend you get one now.

Published by Chaosium. Many thanks to Matthijs Holter for the copy.

Review by Paul Mason

I Tékumel that emotion

by Ray Gilham

Using Pendragon's Traits and Passions system in Tsolyánu

In adapting the Traits and Passions mechanics from Chaosium's *Pendragon* rules, I am aware that the dominant Tsolyáni characteristic is fatalism, and that these rules perhaps go against the grain of the Tsolyáni mind-set. However, as a role-playing tool I think they can be useful to encourage the right kind of attitude in players, helping them 'get in character' just as the original was intended to do with *Pendragon's* Christian knights.

Personality traits

Chaste	...	Lustful	
Energetic	...	Lazy	*
Forgiving	...	Vengeful	
Generous	...	Selfish	*
Honest	...	Deceitful	*
Honourable	...	Duplicitous	*
Proud	...	Modest	
Pious	...	Worldly	
Prudent	...	Reckless	
Temperate	...	Indulgent	
Trusting	...	Suspicious	
Valorous	...	Cowardly	*

As can be seen the traits above consist of twelve opposed pairs. *Pendragon's* Merciful/Cruel trait has been omitted as not relevant to the Tsolyáni world-view, Modest/Proud has been reversed, and Honourable/Duplicitous has been added. The total of the two sides must equal 20. The traits denoted by an asterisk are considered important by the Tsolyáni, and should have a starting value of 2d6+6 in the left hand column. Any value of 16 or more means that the character is known for that trait and associated behaviour.

Other traits can be influenced by disposition of clan, profession, and religion. In the absence of these indicators, assign an initial value of 10, modified as follows: throw two d6, one to be 'negative' and one to be 'positive'. Modify the 10 by the lowest of the two dice. For example, assessing the value of Hénrisu's Chaste/Lustful trait, his player throws a 2 on the negative die and a 4 on the positive; Hénrisu gets Chaste reduced by 2, giving him Chaste 8/Lustful 12. If

the dice show the same number then there is no modifier, with the exception of 'snake eyes' (two ones) and 'boxcars' (two sixes).

Snake eyes indicates a hidden element to the trait connected to the right hand column (which will be assigned a value of 15). This will indicate a Passion with a value of 2d6. For example, Ajuro's player rolls snake-eyes for his Prudent/Reckless trait, giving him a 15 in Reckless and an associated Passion. The GM rules that since Ajuro is a member of the Legion of Red Devastation he will have a Passion for looting and burning. Ajuro's player rolls 2d6—getting a 9—and the group has a potential problem on its hands!

Boxcars indicates a hidden element to the trait on the left hand column (which will be assigned a value of 15). This will indicate a Passion with a value of 2d6. For example, Tsokalon's player rolls boxcars for Pious/Wordly, and thus has a Pious value of 15. Tsokalon is a Hirihayal follower, and the GM rules he has a Passion for orgies. His player rolls a 12 and makes a mental note that such possibilities are likely to inflame his passion.

The 15 score reflects a strong indicator of behaviour but it is not yet a hallmark of the character. If the character increases a snake eyes or boxcar trait to 16 during play his passion will be revealed and he must deal with the consequences (if any). As mentioned above, traits can be influenced by environmental factors. Moreover, certain factions may require their followers to have certain traits. In game terms, that may mean that entrance to a particular temple, legion, or clan may not be possible without requisite traits. For example, Dilinála's virgins would need a high Chaste score, and some of the traditional legions might prefer recruits to have a high Vengeful trait.

Using Traits

Traits can measure a character's reputation, and gain him favour or disfavour amongst Tsolyánu's factions. No trait can exceed 19 or be lower than 1, except in unusual circumstances (and such individuals may be famous in Tsolyáni history). Any trait in the 5-15 range is considered normal. When the GM challenges the behaviour of a character, the player may roll against a trait to determine the outcome of the character's actions. A roll is not necessary in all situations of course, but should come at dramatic moments. The dice roll is D20, with the following effects:

Critical Success: A roll exactly equal to the character's score in the trait. Character acts strongly in accordance with the trait and gains an experience check (explained below).

Ordinary Success: A roll below the character's score in the trait. The character should take action in accordance with the trait, and receives an experience check if that action is particularly appropriate or dramatic.

Ordinary Failure: A roll above the character's score in the trait. Roll against the opposed trait, with a success indicating that the character acts in accordance with the opposed trait. Failure at this second roll means the player has free choice. No experience check.

Critical Failure: A roll of 20 on the dice. The opposed trait gets an experience check, and the character immediately acts in accordance with the opposed trait.

Experience Checks

Roll a D20 for each check, if the number rolled is greater than the current value of the trait then the character rises one point in that trait. Experience checks should be made once per game month, regardless of how many experience checks in a month that trait may have.

Passions

	<i>starting value</i>
Love (family)	2d6 + 6
Love (lineage)	2d6 + 5
Loyalty (clan)	2d6 + 2
Love (deity)	1d6 + (Pious/4)
Loyalty (Imperium)	1d6
Fear (Ssu)	1d6 + 1
Fear (Hluss)	1d6

Passions are extremely strong emotions within an individual, and the above values are suggestions only. Passions—like traits—change over time, and they can be acquired during play. You may disagree with some; perhaps Fear Deity is a more likely Passion than Love! Like traits, certain occupations and religious orders will encourage or even engender certain Passions. It's likely that as a character rises in priestly Circle, his Love/Fear of Deity will increase, say by 1 for each Circle attained. Similarly, a character on the border with Yán Kór could quickly come to Hate the Yán Koryáni; Baron Ald evidently has a high Hate Tsolyáni at any rate. Passions may help a character perform heroically and with a greater likelihood of success, but can also lead to great frustration and even madness.

Using Passions

Passions are rolled against just as traits are, but doing so can be a risky business as the results can vary. Either the GM or the player can request a roll against a Passion, with the following results:

Critical Success: Character is Inspired and doubles the value of one skill of the player's choice. Passion gains a point and experience check is gained.

Ordinary Success: Character is Inspired temporarily, and gains a positive modifier (determined by the GM) to one skill of the player's choice. Effect lasts until action is over, and an experience check is gained.

Ordinary Failure: Character is Disheartened and all skill rolls are halved for the duration of the situation that invoked the Passion. Character loses a point of passion and becomes Fatalistic after the event is over. Fatalistic characters become listless and resign all responsibility to the Weaver of Skeins; they cannot be roused to action unless medically or magically treated. The effects of Fatalism usually last one day.

Critical Failure: Character is crushed by negative thoughts. He loses one point from the Passion and immediately goes Insane. Insane characters usually run from the scene that evoked the passion and will not return. The duration and extent of the Insanity is left to the GM's discretion, and often results in some kind of permanent change in the individual concerned.

Doubt

If a player requests a Passion roll and fails to win his goal then the character suffers Doubt. The Passion is reduced by one and the character cannot roll a Critical Success on another Passion roll for at least one game month.

Reducing a Passion

A Passion can be voluntarily reduced by loudly and publicly renouncing the Passion over a period of time, letting it be known that one no longer espouses a certain cause. The Passion is reduced by one for six months, after which the character must repeat the process and another point is deducted.

Fear

Fear is an irrational state of panic, most often associated with the Enemies of Man and other fearsome foes, especially those of a magical nature. There are no benefits for Fear, but the GM may allow a character an opportunity to overcome it. If the character succeeds he may conquer his Fear or eradicate it entirely. Of course, a character could also pick up a Fear during play, especially if that character has suffered greatly at the hands of another race being, or entity.

Final Note

A player may wish to keep his exact values for traits and passions a secret from other players unless a trait or passion is 16 or more when such a predilection will be general knowledge. The GM should rule on whether this will or will not be allowed in his campaign. **i**

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA



Going beyond the game rules...

and finding more game rules

WHAT I'VE DISCUSSED up to now about this game has mainly been concerned with the game mechanics. I'd say I've gone over the essential points, and any further general discussion is better suited to the letters column. There are enough rules to run the game. I know this because I've been running the game for some while now.

What I'd like to turn my attention to now are the other elements that make a game. For this issue, I don't propose to delve too deeply. Mainly I'd like to solicit your opinions on two points: Firstly, what kinds of background do you feel you need to play a game such as *Outlaws*, *Tékumel* or *Pendragon*? And secondly, how should that background be presented?

By the second question, what I am trying to get at are the various ways in which games introduce their worlds. At one extreme, we have the 'slab of information' format. The prime exponent of this was Gamescience's *Swords & Glory*, which has recently become available again thanks to the efforts of Carl Brodt (CarlBrodt@aol.com). The first volume of *Swords & Glory* was the *Tékumel* sourcebook, and it contained no mechanics whatsoever. It was simply a detailed examination of the history, culture, life etc of the people of one chunk of *Tékumel*.

Other games, such as *Pendragon*, opt for a mixed approach. Explicit background description is mixed with quotations from 'primary' sources, and mechanics. The latter represent a rather non-obvious way of introducing background, but I think it is worth careful consideration.

I've gone for a fairly mixed approach in *Outlaws*, as I think previous articles should have made clear. Rules for face and favours model society in game mechanics terms. Rules for motivation, despite their extreme looseness, model personality, and encourage characters appropriate to the background. Rules for bad joss attempt to help players cultivate the superstitious attitude common in China to this day.

Some may resent this approach. Experience has shown me, however, that a carefully designed mechanic

can be far more effective than an essay, no matter how brilliantly written the latter may be.

In short, the argument for allowing rules to protrude into the background is the same as that for employing rules at all: they enable you to gain the desired effect simply, without extensive exposition and description.

You may have noticed that I've been promising this game for months and not delivering. The hold-up is in completing the background sections. Partly this is because of my restless quest for accurate information. I'm still waiting for the Amazon bookshop to lay its hands on an out-of-print book which will finally allow me to include authentic official titles in the game. Does this really matter? Well, it matters to me, and I'm afraid that's enough.

Another hold-up is caused by my dissatisfaction with what I've written so far. Too much of it, it seems to me, consists of essays about the subject matter. A certain amount of this is necessary, of course. When I'm writing about the gods, I have to describe them. Too much of it sets off alarm bells in my mind, however.

Lee Brimmicombe-Wood suggested that fiction could be used to convey background detail in an easily digested form. I think it's a good idea, but my worry is that you get very little background per page. I'm already worrying about the total length of the thing (12 chapters for a total of 250-300 pages, a pretty significant amount when you consider that each chapter will be a file of over half a megabyte. And that the purchasers of the game will have to print it out on their own.

Next issue, I'll go into a bit more detail on this aspect of the game, and consider some ways of conveying background and encouraging players to get into being Chinese, without requiring them to wade through as many books as I have.

I'll also deal with a few points that have come up as a result of the game I am now running every Friday. It has been particularly helpful to be running the game for a group of players who are new to role-gaming, and this has inspired a number of thoughts. ♪

COLLOQUY

Letters to the editor

YEAH, I KNOW: how can you have a proper discussion in a magazine that only comes out a couple of times a year? It's true, I guess. The zine is just too infrequent. Still, as long as people keep sending in their comments, I'll continue to print them. Comments by me are indented and preceded by 明尊.

Snippets

Phil Nicholls

While the presence of other contributors adds to the variety within imazine, I trust that each issue will still contain your own work too.

明尊 Not much option there, he observed, ruefully.

Phil Nicholls

In many ways, imazine acts as an extended designer's notes for your *Water Margin* RPG. The interactive nature of the letters pages allow for even greater insight into the problems of game design, as well as discussion of those ideas which did not make the grade.

明尊 I regard the latter as particularly important. Very often they are the ideas which can be taken, put in a new context and made to work very well indeed. That's one reason I don't want the zine to be 'just' a *Water Margin* 'house organ'. I think the ideas we are exploring can be relevant to plenty of games, whether they be set in China, Japan, Tsolyánu, Napoleonic France or wherever.

Ashley Southcott

Is it just me, or is SF roleplaying stuck in some mid-nineties menopausal stagnation period? *Traveller*: rehashed, republished and, judging by 'net reaction rejected; most SF RPGs of the eighties are either out of print or have sufficiently few players that products for them are thin on the ground.

Originally I thought this might be a good thing: a dearth of products might stimulate enough of these players into writing their own stuff—until I thought about it and realised this was being naively unrealistic. Television and cinema and computer games (in the West anyway) have in my opinion ceased to become real bases for role-playing adventures even though these are some of the ripest areas for theft of scenario ideas. Creativity is work in comparison with lying on the settee watching a couple of video'd episodes of DS9; if we were all that creative we'd have been playing our own house versions of the Babylon Project for two or

three years instead of waiting for the professionals to write it for us.

The only star among SF roleplaying games in the last five years is *Fading Suns*, of which I've yet to even see a copy (though apparently it sold out of a good many stores in the States). The soon-to-arrive *Babylon Project* and *Blue Planet* from Biohazard look promising, but the total number of SF games in print is hardly diverse.

My moan at the scarcity of SF roleplay products is probably symptomatic of a lack of ability to create my own. But I'm hardly alone in this. It also strikes me that the sheer number of role-playing products on the market for established systems smacks of oversupply: are there really enough hardened role-players still in the world to make an acceptable number of these profitable?

明尊 Although I've heard of SF games that have worked, I nevertheless have doubts about the medium as a whole. I know the only campaign I've ever proposed starting which players refused to play in was the only one which was out-and-out SF (not spaceships and blasters fantasy, mind you, but influenced by LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Day of the Triffids*). I wonder why this is?

Matthew Pook

You are correct to say that the fanzine is in something of a perilous state. Certainly the three devoted to cultural games have either folded or are resting between issues - *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder* an example of the former, and both *Borkelby's Folly* and *Sholari*, the two Jorune fanzines, examples of the latter.

I shall certainly miss *Eye*. The last issue was very good. In particular, the articles about the worship of Sarku were extremely evocative, such that I would more than consider the playing of a worshipper of the Lords of Change. This would be at odds with my natural inclination towards Thumis. Yet all of this is hypothetical, because as Ray says in issue #27, actually finding an established game is impossible. But then, it is only slightly more difficult than finding a game of anything at college except those damned card games.

Matthew Pook

I applaud the direction in which you are taking imazine. The more people exposed to the academic side of gaming, the better, as far as I am concerned. After all, the hobby is as much an intellectual pursuit as it is a cultural and artistic one, making it as suitable for academic study as any other aspect of the social sphere. I echo Ray's comments about Andrew Rilstone. I only

hope that imazine is not the successor to *Interactive Fantasy*, not to denigrate imazine, but more for what it says about the state of *Interactive Fantasy*. Anyway, now that *Arcane* is no longer going, he has more time to devote to it . . . As to the idea of my contributing to the ‘Send Andrew Rilstone to the Kalahari’ fund—no mate! You can bugger off! He already has my subscription fee and that must make *Interactive Fantasy* something special as I rarely subscribe at all . . .

明尊 *Mea culpa*. I will remove my tongue from my cheek when discussing *Interactive Fantasy* in future.

Arcane

Ray Gillham

I heard in the last week that *Arcane* folded. Poor sales? *Valkyrie*'s website has disappeared as well, even though there was an issue fairly recently. There's a magazine called *The Power* that is trying to mix pop culture and RPGs. It's backed by Hobby Games. Issue 1 was a bit messy and the reviews are simply press releases for upcoming products.

明尊 Damned if you do... damned if you don't. It's not possible to produce commercially viable role-playing magazine without advertising. Games companies are pretty reluctant advertisers, however (especially if their games get poor reviews), and bad payers to boot—witness *Daedalus Games*' failure to pay *interactive fantasy* the money owed for a back cover ad.

Matthew Pook

I'm not so sure that I was 'bollocking' *Arcane* in my last letter (as printed in issue #25). Strong criticism perhaps. Of course, it has now been cancelled—no surprises there, but I kept reading it until the end. That said, what choice did I have, especially as *Dragon* has not appeared on our shelves in some months? My attitude to *Arcane* did soften towards its end, most particularly because it began to offer material aimed at specific rules systems. It meant that the magazine was no longer just about games, but actually for, and supportive of games. Since I had been pointing this out to them since day one, it is nice to have been listened to, or at least just right for a change. Apart from dropping the dreadful cartoon strip at the end, my remaining criticism was the lack of journalistic skills applied to the news coverage. A steady diet of rehashed press releases is fine, but I would have liked to have seen some accompanying analysis and comment. How independent is a magazine if it only prints press releases?

Then there was the difference of opinion over the use of the word 'bonkers' in their description of 'Jorune'. *Arcane* saw it as anything other than derogatory and was surprised when I actually complained at its use in issue #14. Perhaps I over-reacted, but then they refused to see my point of view and I dropped the

matter. Then I had some condescending person tell me, "It's only a game." And this person actually liked the game as well . . . As I said, perhaps I took too much umbrage, but if they saw Jorune as 'bonkers', what would they make of a setting such as *Tékumel*?

Tékumel/Gardásiyal

Robert Irwin

Can you help me out on what to buy as a good introductory culture book on *Tékumel*? I spotted your reference to the *Swords and Glory* *Tékumel* sourcebook in the last issue, then got in touch with some specialist shop in the states. They promptly sent back a sprawling list of *Tékumel* titles, including 3 S&G 'sourcebooks' (sic). Are they all background?

明尊 Yes. Why do you think *Tékumel* has the reputation it does? The background doesn't end with the sourcebooks, either. Real addicts hunt out the various magazines and mailing lists that have published, or continue to publish material.

Paul Snow

Actually, I have a question. If you imagine a Tsolyáni analysing another Tsolyáni and evaluating their *Bákte/body*. What do you think they would be thinking of (looking at)? As a designer I split the *Stability/Change Hard/Soft* components of *Body* down into *Toughness* and *Grace* but I now think that it might be more useful in some ways and more in genre to have *Bákte* components of *Comeliness* and *Charisma*.

明尊 I should point out that Paul is here discussing a system combining Dave Morris's idea of using Tsolyáni concepts to describe a Tsolyáni character, combined with Leonard Hung's *Cathay Arts* approach of rating each characteristic in *yin* (soft) and *yang* (hard) aspects. This seemed to fit well with the Tsolyáni *Stability/Change Dualism*.

Ray Gillham

You've said in previous communication that the RQ conversion was one of the worst. I agree about that in respect of character generation, but I disagree when that's applied to magic. I mention this because your *Outlaws* magic system seems to stress that sorcerers with the same 'spell' may still cast it differently and with varying effect. This is exactly what Petersen's rules do, dumping the 'save or die' quality that has stayed with *Tékumel* since the days of *D&D*.

明尊 And that's exactly why I object to Petersen's rules, because he displays such slight regard for *Tékumel* (or is it just that he doesn't know much about *Tékumel*, in which case why doesn't he get someone who does to do the RQ conversion). Whether you like it from a system point of view or not, Barker has clearly explained that spells on *Tékumel* are discrete

packages. While it may theoretically be possible to improvise stuff, *that's not what Tsolyáni sorcerers do*. To a certain extent the *Tirikéku* rules also allow magic to be flexible, and this is probably why I'm a little suspicious of them, although I guess they are better in play. Coincidentally, I originally playtested the *Outlaws* rules on a *Tékumel* game, and developed the magic system with that in mind (hence the, ah, similarities to the *Tirikélu* system). In several respects my attempts to do a 'good' *Tékumel* magic system failed at the intended goal, but were more successful at developing stuff for China.

Water Margin

Ray Gillham

In drawing on so many disparate sources for your magic system aren't you risking being overrun by the Strawberry Jam Principle (the more you spread it, the thinner it gets)?

明尊 There is that risk, certainly. However, I feel that the variety of sources do represent the fact that there are different types of magic in China. As it is, my worry is more that I have made magic too uniform. I'm not sure whether I have devoted sufficient space to emphasising that different sorcerers do things very differently. One, for example, may erect an altar like the duelling mages in *Close Encounters of the Spooky Kind*, while another may cast his spells by improvising a Talisman in blood on his palm, as in *A Chinese Ghost Story*.

Campaign settings

Matthew Pook

So it appears that both immersive, culture based RPGs are dead, bar their continued marginalisation in our hearts and memories. For EPT, *Gardásiyal* appears to the final nail in the coffin, or if you are of low status, stitch in the shroud. One idea I did have after reading through the *RuneQuest* rules for EPT by Sandy Petersen, and after hearing the news about *RuneQuest*'s future, was to do as Chaosium plan to do with *Glorantha*, that is, adapt the *Pendragon* rules to the setting. I wondered just how easy it would be to use the Personality traits from *Pendragon* to provide guidelines on how to play a worshipper of . . . This makes sense to me, especially in an ongoing campaign and where the traits are defined for each God. Admittedly, this would be something of a mammoth task.

明尊 Well, there's a start this issue.

Robert Irwin

To quote Phil Nicholls: 'Of course, from a marketing viewpoint the publishers are interested in disposable scenarios!'. I don't find this to be the case: things have moved on in the last five years. Take my pet-hate game

—*Vampire*. There are so many bloody sourcebooks detailing the dreary background of this game that the sessions I've experienced never get beyond the players discussing the background. Probably the pedantic influence of people who have since moved on to *Magic*. Apart from this, I'm not entirely convinced by the necessity of sprawling, intricately detailed backgrounds. If a game is left with 'lifeless locations' once it has been played, then the NPCs which the characters met must have been extremely dull. Tight plotting shouldn't have characters wandering off exploring, they should have something better to do. I'm not against developing certain locations and characters in a game environment, I just think that the focus gets lost when the detail gets in the way.

明尊 Where shall we start with the assumptions? Firstly: that anybody is advocating 'sprawling' backgrounds. Secondly: that detailed backgrounds lead to 'lifeless locations' after play. Thirdly: that the detail of detailed backgrounds does not extend to NPCs. Fourthly: that 'tight plotting' is necessarily desirable. Fifthly: that detail 'gets in the way'.

Ray Gillham

The difficulty with culture games is that they tend to be GM-intensive, keeping a lot of intricate detail from players until they are ready for it. Deluging them with info and/or lectures on the game world's society can put them off. You have to leak details slowly, give it time to swish around the grey matter, and bide your time before unveiling features that hopefully make them enthused and hungry for more. Hang on, I sound like a time-share salesman. I guess GMing is a pretty sneaky business.

明尊 Sure is. Of course, the ideal is to leak key features that intrigue the players so much that they feel motivated to find out much of the rest for themselves. An interesting thing about my current group is that although they're all novices at role-playing, they have pretty good knowledge of China, and often a point about the society gets answers by one of the players, not by me. That, I think, is the ideal state of affairs. (It's also the way that Tupperware and Amway do business...)

A matter of honour

Ray Gillham

Patrick Brady deserves some real kudos for his article on honour, one of the most thoughtful *and* useful gaming articles I've read over the last few years.

Robert Irwin

A lot of interesting points in there. I certainly like the idea of Face, and if I ever actually run a game it will be something I build in. There is however an inherent

conflict between honour (as I see it) and face which I don't think was addressed. Honour is surely a personal code of conduct, as opposed to the external peer-group pressure of face. Not everyone's sense of right is exactly the same as the social norm. I therefore don't think we can escape from the idea of honour being 'a stick to beat players with' so easily. My hope would be that players voluntarily shoulder the responsibility of being true to their personal beliefs.

Nor are social norms all-pervading. The skateboard kid with the £200 trainers may be incredibly cool and have loads of face among his peers, but to the other 95 percent of society he is a total wanker. Or to take the homeless person example. If we redefine 'homeless person' as 'new-age traveller', we suddenly have someone who doesn't gain face through money, and for whom honour and face perhaps involves digging tunnels under the Newbury bypass.

明尊 Patrick addressed the issue that face is a relative concept. As for 'honour' being personal, I'm afraid we'll just have to disagree. Every definition in my dictionary categorises honour as a social concept, or at least a concept involving a relationship. Sure, we do have a term 'personal code of honour', but if that was a general definition of honour then why would we need to attach 'personal' to the front of it?

Phil Nicholls

While Patrick's article focused on the players, it must be remembered that most NPCs must act in the appropriate manner. This will encourage the PCs to conform to the prevalent behaviour patterns, along with providing suitable role-models for those players unsure of how to behave. These NPCs act as the 'carrot' to complement the 'stick' of game mechanics.

明尊 Er, Patrick was making the point that the game mechanics needn't be a 'stick'. You're quite right about the importance of non-player characters, of course. They are the people one can use one's face score to obtain favours from, and they are also the people who may well seek favours from you.

Ashley Southcott

Honour needn't stop at a societal view of honourable behaviour. There's also racial honour: dwarfs place greater emphasis on honour simply because it's in their psychological makeup. Over time dwarven society reflects this greater emphasis so that even a dwarf born and raised outside dwarven society feels instinctively at home in it, even though his knowledge of dwarven society is minimal. Same goes for elves, halflings, or any other demi-human race. Honour is a racial instinct that moulds any society made up primarily of a particular race, e.g. a merman village, or a dwarven city. This applies even to racial enclaves in foreign cities, e.g. the

elven quarter of human cities. Given this, shouldn't certain non-human characters start with higher initial levels of 'face' than their human counterparts?

明尊 I'm afraid I don't understand the logic behind this. Are you arguing that 'non-humans' are genetically predisposed to be more honourable, and if so, on what basis do you suppose this to be the case?

Ashley Southcott

In human society honour is dictated by culture more than by an 'honourable feeling'; thus a Tsolyáni may be more honourable than a westerner because his culture places greater emphasis on personal honour. Individual situations of course modify this—greed, fear, revenge; any other motives, in fact, that mould the individual's views on honour in collaboration with his culture's views on honour.

明尊 I thought Patrick's point was that 'honour' is about the way in which an individual expresses those views. Honour is a social mechanism or, as Patrick rather tellingly put it, a form of social currency.

Ashley Southcott

Patrick left out the fact that certain jobs carry more honour than others: for instance, the office of Member of Parliament traditionally carries the title 'honourable Member' even though MPs themselves may be complete scoundrels. Which is perceived to have more intrinsic honour: a Life Guard in full regalia at Trooping the Colour, or a muddy Territorial on exercise on a Saturday afternoon? Older positions merit more honour than newer ones due to their history lending them a sense of respect. Young Turks are either unlikely to reach such positions at all, or cause considerable upheaval where they do. Candidates seek access to Parliament, seemingly for power and money, but also for the image of superiority that the office of MP gives them (my cynical side refuses to acknowledge that the appeal of 'public service' might come into it; a more socialist society—Tekumel? I don't know—might hold public office in higher esteem).

明尊 I don't think Patrick 'left out' the idea of jobs carrying honour at all. He made it quite clear that what is honourable is determined by society. 20th Century British culture may have that notion, but it is by no means universal. Also, although you use the word 'honour', it is questionable whether what those jobs carry actually is honour in the sense that Patrick was discussing. The example you give of 'the honourable Member' is a polite formulation devised to prevent the person you are addressing losing face. I don't see that it is actually anything to do with the job. It is more a function of the manners observed in that particular milieu.

Ashley Southcott

This idea isn't difficult to translate to a court environment or various civil offices held in high esteem in fantasy, e.g. guildmaster, royal bodyguard, vizier. This implies that the line between famed office and honourable office is pretty blurred (to be fair, Patrick did say that honour loosely equals fame).

明尊 What you are proposing actually de-emphasises the very point Patrick was stressing: namely that honour is all about social *relationships* rather than being a quality which is somehow 'inherent'.

Ashley Southcott

Tradition thus shapes a culture's perceptions of honour, to the extent that anachronistic traditions are still thought honourable long after their original purpose become obsolete. Problems thus arise when PCs enter a foreign environment: how are the PCs to identify what's an 'honourable position' and what isn't? Especially if the country/world they're visiting places greater emphasis on personal honour.

In FRP, visitors to foreign lands are at risk from incurring the locals' wrath simply through innocent social blunders, in the same way that wearing a bikini in Saudi Arabia is asking for a flogging. Doubtless there's plenty of role-playing potential in this. But to my mind there's precious little motivation for PCs to strive towards honourable positions if it's hazy as to what exactly makes those positions honourable.

明尊 The ideas you are suggesting have plenty of merit, but I don't think they are about honour and face. I don't think it's helpful to consider 'positions' honourable. People are honourable. They may gain face from acquiring certain positions, but that's something slightly different. It should be damn clear why one might be motivated to gain a certain position: because it will provide power, wealth, and/or face. In a game in which the value of having face, as well as wealth and power, is clearly demonstrated, then there is clear motivation.

The issue of understanding the social dynamics of a foreign culture is a whole different ballgame. Part of the problem here is whether the player characters could reasonably be expected to know it. That is why the traditional opening for a *Tékumel* game casts the player characters as newly arrived barbarians. That way, they have an excuse for their players' woeful lack of manners.

Control and escapism**Ray Gillham**

Players like rules, they really do. The *Jorune* mailing list is full of game mechanics discussion. Now personally I find this dull, but it has been pointed out to me that it's been so long since I *played* that I've forgotten what it's like to

sweat it out with a pencil, dice and rubber (!); to translate all that brow-furrowing into tangible benefit.

How many groups are really into 'interactive storytelling' or whatever? I suspect a GM who fervently believes in rolegaming as improvisational theatre, etc, runs the risk of being like the University lecturer who thinks s/he's imparting an essential spark of enlightenment to the students, when in fact no one knows what they're talking about.

明尊 Ouch! I, after all, fit into both of those categories. So I'll pick up your university lecturer category and, as a university lecturer, try to defend it. I know that attitudes in the UK towards Further Education have changed drastically over the last twenty years, and that my own university (Warwick) was one of the leaders at kicking out all that fusty old academic nonsense and replacing it with good old sound business sense. Yet let me ask you a question: do you really think our civilisation will lose nothing if instead of having these dumb idealistic ideas, lecturers instead only concern themselves with harsh practicalities? I speak as one who has seen what a hollow charade a university system founded on those principles (the Japanese one) can be. How many Nobel prizes have the Japanese won? How many fine movies have been made by the Japanese? (And once you count out Kurosawa, Mizoguchi and Itami, how many then?) How many profound philosophical ideas have emerged from Japan?

This may sound over the top, but I think the finest achievements of the last few hundred years came about through an idealistic belief in the transforming power of knowledge and understanding. Nowadays that is something in extremely short supply. As a lecturer, I hope beyond hope that I may be imparting a spark of something to my students. They probably don't know what I'm talking about. But I believe I have a duty to make the effort. That and the fact that lecturing would be unutterably tedious otherwise.

Relating this to rolegaming, I don't think there is a cut-and-dried distinction. Most rolegamers play games which could be described as 'interactive storytelling'. Sure, they have fun, kill a lot of baddies, etc, but that's no problem.

As an aside, I'm considering writing a paper about how academic snobbery about escapism is a symptom of a lack of balance within humanism—an excessive concentration on the Self as an isolated, alienated individual.

Ray Gillham

The trouble is that gaming is portrayed as a social activity yet many participants are essentially social outcasts (cue chicken and egg argument). Anyway, what I'm getting at is that escapism for many gamers is actually rather a serious business, which when you think about it is a bit odd.

Escapism? Anyone who has lost a beloved character knows how unpleasant rolegaming can be. At the risk of sounding banal, exactly *why* are we playing these games anyway?

明尊 I'm inclined to suggest that escapism *should* be a serious business. I don't think it's odd. What is more odd is that whingeing self-referential tripe is considered great literature, whereas something that takes you out of yourself and makes you aware of the shared aspects of existence is regarded as 'mere' escapism.

Robert Rees

One thing that struck me in the letters column was the comment that the sort of people who roleplay are the sort of people who prefer structured communication to the vagaries of real-life face to face conversation. (Robert Irwin's letter).

It seems strangely true that despite the fact that roleplaying is an inherently social activity quite often it becomes a very organised type of socialising. Communication between players and the GM occurs through the medium of the rulebook. I have had players complain before that they couldn't see what they had to do in a scenario. They disliked the lack of structure in a game. There are also GM's who lead the PC's by the nose through their games. This is the exact opposite. Imposing order for the sake of the GM who wishes to expound their idea of fun to a captive audience.

In both cases I think that it is Pre-Millennium Tension causing this desire for an organised, structured pastime. A lot of people feel their lives are out of control and in the grip of random, unknowable forces and therefore dislike seeing the echo of this anarchy in their leisuretime.

Perhaps when people are more confident in themselves we can have more freedom in our games.

That aside the fixed plot game is always the sign of the inexperienced GM. Structured communication within subcultures is equally the sign of someone who is just lacking a bit of life experience.

I do think that computer roleplaying, MUSHing and the like are really going to take off. They have loads of potential and providing speed and user numbers can be sorted out they could really go somewhere. While I was at university I really got into *Sanguine Nobilis* a Vampire MUSH. Something like London by Night. The large number of different PC's made the environment exciting while the lack of a GM interpreting gave the game a certain directness. The only problem was the lack of depth in the description of the setting and the lack of user interactive objects in the game 'arena' however I can see it really taking off soon.

Matthew Pook

Robert Irwin's suggestion that RPGs having a more socially acceptable subject, might make them more palatable, is all well and good. Might I ask just what he

has in mind for such a more socially acceptable subject? Further, were such a game to exist, would he want to play it?

Robert Irwin

As someone who never referees but only plays games, I find myself agreeing with Andy McBrien with the idea that the player should only control the character's self-image. I wouldn't want to have to make the decision as to whether I successfully make a difficult climb. And I'd rather have the ref decide than roll some dice. Surely a sensible balance is that the ref never argues with what the player says s/he is attempting to do or say, while the players don't argue with the decision the GM makes about what happens. The one proviso here is that the overall plot the ref has in mind involves the players succeeding (admittedly a vague concept in role-playing), although this should not be obvious. Maybe I've had better refs than most over the years?

明尊 Let me just make sure I understand your 'one proviso'. You are saying that an implicit part of most 'game contracts' is that the player characters should succeed? Or that it *should* be a part of most game contracts? I have to confess, it doesn't form a part of *my* game contract. Players have the freedom to screw things up. As referee, all I promise is that they have a chance of succeeding. Incidentally, some of the best games I've ever played in had fairly tragic overall themes, and it was clear that the referee was perfectly prepared to allow us to fail on a large scale (I know this because we did!).

Matthew Pook

I seem to be alone in actually liking GURPS, yet I understand the problems that those like Ashley Southcott have with it. I have written several items using GURPS. It seemed to both S'ren and I, to be the most obvious rules to use when wanting to spread the word about Jorune. Ashley is correct in saying that the rules should fit the background, and yet . . . Yet should not the main ingredient to the feel of the game come from the GM and his interpretation of the background and rules? For example, I remember that when we first played Jorune, the combat system stuck out like a sore thumb, and it took us a while to get through it. Yet we rapidly got used to the game and the combat rules became part of the game, rather than intruding upon it.

END NOTES

There are several people I owe apologies to this issue, as I promised to plug their magazines, games or whatever. Unfortunately in another of my stupid computer accidents I've managed to lose the appropriate emails. I also promised to send someone the text of the 'Role-playing in China' article I did for the issue of *arcane* that never got published, but their email (and address) got eaten too. ❗