imazine

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

FUNNY, THE WAY things turn out. A long time ago, imazine was a scrappy, anarchic fanzine; so anarchic, in fact, that it didn't even have a fixed title until issue 6, and was referred to by a variety of names, of which *Wotsit* was probably the most common. I wonder how many of my current readers even know the name of the first issue?

As the zine rumbled along, and I learned how to spell and stuff, and demonstrated that I was never going to be able to claim straight lines as a speciality, it featured a lot of material about subjects normally considered peripheral to role-playing games. These included children's TV, postal diplomacy, music (or should I spell that Musiq, Dave?) and politics.

As imazine acquired more readers, especially after the 'sell-out-and-get-a-job-with-Games-Workshop' hiatus around issues 12-13, the 'irrelevant' topics were jettisoned.

I therefore find it ironic that I should be coming full circle. OK, OK, I'm not about to start printing in depth analyses of the Teletubbies, and arguing that society would be far better off if they were decriminalised. However, politics looks to be rearing its ugly head once again.

From my point of view, however, this is inevitable. Infrequent and insubstantial though it may be, imazine champions a certain sort of game: a game for role-players who appreciate just that little bit more depth, just that little bit more thought. In short, role-players who believe rolegames are worth playing. Consideration of culture and alternative societies are an essential component in this, making some examination of politics an absolute necessity.

This is a good thing in itself, of course. My recent exposure to the Usenet has drummed into me the extent to which the Western world is successful in depriving its people of the capacity to examine issues. It does this by framing alternatives for the debate, and denying perspectives outside those alternatives. Rolegames are an excellent way of stepping out of the frame.

Is rolegaming art? Don't know, don't give a toss. What I do know is that it's a hobby that can help you think about things. That's enough for me. i

imazine

Reviews

IT IS INCREASINGLY difficult for me to get excited about new rolegame product releases. Part of this is just me being a cynical old fart. Part of it is also the result of hype. Even though I ended up liking *Feng Shui* a lot more than I expected, the overall 'Ain't we cool?' atmosphere surrounding it left a bad taste in my mouth. I can't say I'm happy that Daedalus have gone bust. From what I heard of the reasons why they went bust, much of it seemed to emerge from the same attitude.

What else is there? Well, I'll confess, I'm out of touch. I can't just waltz into my local game shop and ask them what's new. Every time I do that I encounter the more racist end of Japan, with a shopkeeper who can barely conceal his contempt for *gaijin*, as he tells me about the latest collectible card game (that came out in the US a year previously). So all my information comes from fanzines or the newsgroups on Usenet. Very up-to-date the latter ought to be, I suppose. Rarely seems to have much that I'm interested in. Fanzines I'll discuss a little bit more later.

In the light of such cynicism on my part, I'm very happy to say that I do seem to be attracting reviews by others. So perhaps it's worth explaining here what I attempt to do in my reviews, and what I look for in reviews written by others.

For me, the first question to be answered by any review is that posed by a reader who wonders whether a game (magazine, whatever) is worth getting. That is the fundamental of a review, though it is by no means the sole purpose. In answering this question, a straightforward statement of opinion is one of the least of the tools to be employed. At the same time, I think there is an important place for clearly stated opinion in reviews. It's just that in answering the question of whether a game is worth buying, clear description is of more importance.

Imazine being imazine, certain elements are of relatively minor importance in reviews. Presentation only matters in so far as it affects the usefulness of a game, and the price. Far more important are the essential elements of design, the *ideas* of the game, and here is also where a review can be more than just another piece of commercial junkinformation. If the game involves game mechanics and systems, how do they work? Do they add anything new? Is there anything we can learn from them? If the game involves a background of some sort, what ideas does it express? How are they conveyed? Does it spark off any ideas which can be used in other fields?

For me, these are the questions I want to address in reviews, and they are what I want to be answered when I read reviews. In our product dominated age, there seems to be an increasing fear of criticism. I don't intend to share it. I have received some response to this zine to the effect that I am 'harsh' on some games. Of course I am harsh! I'm not in the advertising industry. I do not receive these games free (not that that would actually make a difference, in my case). I want games taken apart, their viscera sliced out and left pinned to the page in all their bloody glory. Anything else is overly generous to the crap, and disrespectful to the quality.

One final point. I am interested in role-playing because it is something I do. I have been a 'dilettante' at certain points in the past, but I am not one now. That means I play the games I am playing, and I do not 'playtest' the games that I review. You may like to bear that in mind when considering the critical comments I make about games.

Fading Suns

Reviewed by Rob Alexander

Background

Four millennia from now the universe is a dark and hostile place, where arrogant Nobles, extremist Priests and greedy Merchants struggle for control of the Known Worlds. The mighty Second Republic has fallen, and as the light of the galaxy's stars fades, petty conflicts threaten to drive humanity into extinction and oblivion.

Fading Suns claims to emphasise role-playing, storytelling and political gaming over combat and simulation, and this claim is borne out throughout the book. The game's emphasis is very much on spiritual themes, and it professes to explore sin and redemption. Being an atheist, this left me fairly cold,

although of course it is an opportunity for some challenging role-playing. This theme is an ambitious attempt to be a little different from the swarms of competing RPGs, and I think that it is successful, with the theme being clearly present, but not rammed down the reader's throat at every turn.

It would have been easy to make the church simply evil, but Holistic Design didn't take that route. They present quite a balanced picture, with the burnings and purges of the Inquisition balanced by the selfless compassion of the Sanctuary Aeon. The overall impression is one of a church which has many faces, with even the worst more misguided than evil. At least I think they're misguided; little metaphysical information is provided, so the referee will need to create his own. What is obvious is that the metaphysics of the Fading Suns are different from those accepted by modern western society, so applying a modern secular world-view to the game is likely to be unrewarding.

The first (and largest) chapter is devoted to the history and current state of the setting, and although it occasionally slips into a tedious recounting of events it is pretty decent, on the whole. The history is followed by a description of the various factions and political powers, and this section is ripe with ideas. The various descriptions are, however, fairly narrow in scope, which could lead to some predictable characters. The designers were clearly aware of this, so the text is liberally sprinkled with the advice that the descriptions are only guidelines.

Rules

The almost-universal game mechanic manages to be quite straightforward, while not being too grainy or horribly flawed. It also allows for the measurement of degree of success, with a minimum of added fuss. In summary, a D20 is rolled, with success indicated by rolling under a 'goal number' equal to skill (1-10 range) + characteristic (1-10 range) + difficulty modifier (usually zero).

Degree of success is indicated by 'successes' (shades of White Wolf again here), which is equal to the die roll, so therefore success is proportional to the number rolled. If the die roll is equal to the goal number, it is a critical success and worth twice as many successes. The elegant simplicity of this method is rather spoilt by the addition of 'Victory Points' and 'Bonus Effect Dice' which are determined from successes using a table. Some rules use raw successes, some use victory points and still others use effect dice, which could cause some confusion, especially for new players.

The only other problem with the rules is the Combat system. It seems to have been somewhat of an afterthought, with several problems. Although the basic ideas are good, some essential rules have been lost amid the substantial lists of 'special moves'.

These include Damage, which is only described in the 'Combat Summary' box-out, and Armour, which is not completely described at all. There is a large example of a fight, in both story (or rather 'drama') and game rules form, which goes some way towards rescuing the bewildered novice and filling in the gaps.

Another minor gripe with the combat system is the sheer number of dice used: when firearms are involved, expect to roll in the region of 10D20 for damage. In extremis, you could be looking at 20D20 for damage and another 7D20 for armour.

The game postulates a society which has declined sharply in technology (this is largely due to the church proscribing most technology), and actually has a 'tech level' system to help represent this. How a SF RPG of any scope can hope to work without a similar system is beyond me, but so many try. The game has some other Traveller-isms, such as world design guidelines, but like the tech levels they aren't full of intrusive rules, and are very much creative tools. The majority of the rules add something to the game, and there seem to be no rules for the sake of 'realism'. Not everyone will be happy with the fairly vague rules for some things (there are only scanty guidelines about starships and their uses, for example), but those who prefer role-playing and storytelling over simulation gaming rule grinding will appreciate the freedom this gives. The basic necessities are here, giving typical travel times and so on, without getting bogged down in great heaps of numbers.

Presentation

The book bears a strong, if superficial, resemblance to many of the White Wolf games, and I spotted a couple of White Wolf/Black Dog names in the credits. Unfortunately, this includes White Wolf's legendary pretentiousness and love of odd names for ordinary things. Although we get a Gamesmaster, we also get 'dramas' (scenarios or stories), 'epics' (campaigns), psychics struggling with their 'Urge' and Theurgists struggling with their 'Hubris'. The introduction describes FS as 'a futuristic passion play' which is about as pretentious as you can get, really.

Overall, however, it is very readable. The use of pronouns, however, is rather odd. For most of the book, the female pronoun is used almost exclusively, with the main exception being the 'Combat' chapter, which is mostly male. Far be it for me to suspect a cynical ploy, but I can't help wondering why. The artwork is a fair mixture. Some is quite good, some is decent, some is pretty poor. I didn't find anything particularly stunning, though.

Overall

Although I have one or two gripes with the rules and presentation, I can recommend *Fading Suns* to those

of you who are keen on role-playing or politics. Not everyone will be happy with the spiritual themes, but these can reasonably be ignored, although if you do so you will miss out on some potentially excellent role-playing. Fanatic angst-bashers may find its similarity in style to White Wolf games a little close for comfort, though.

Fading Suns *is published by Holistic Designs.*

Fanzines

Reviewed by Paul Mason

Alarums &Excursions

Yes, the venerable A&E is still going strong. For those of you new to the story, *Alarums & Excursions* is one of the earliest rolegame fanzines, and most probably the oldest still extant. It is a monthly zine, and has reached #273 as I write this, which gives you some idea both of the length of time it has been going, and of the dedication of its editor, Lee Gold. It has just made the switch from being duplicated to being photocopied, but this has not affected the atmosphere much. The way it works, and the aspect that has worried people I know, is as an Amateur Press Association (APA). This means that rather than being a single fanzine with one editorial line, it is better viewed as a collection of small fanzines, each of which has considerable editorial freedom.

The worry about the APA format was always that it would lead to self-indulgence, a preponderance of vanity-publishing style material, and a huge quantity of rubbish to wade through. When I was last seeing the zine regularly, I had found that the proportion of kipple to wade through had reached such an extent that I didn't have time to read it, so I didn't feel too sad that I could no longer afford to get the zine. Coming back to it after an interval of nearly a decade,

I was pleased to find that the zine has stripped down. I suspect the 'vanity publishing' element has found more convenient, flashy outlets for its desires (the Usenet and the Web), and so you're left with the hardcore—people who really do want to discuss role-playing.

Because the zine is monthly, regular as clockwork, discussion is possible at a pace far faster than those zines which stagger along at two issues a year, or similar (mentioning no imazines by name). For me, *A&E* has also been interesting in leading to my re-examination of the game write-up. Too many bad write-ups had led to me dismissing the whole enterprise as mutton dressed as lamb, a misguided attempt to represent one medium in terms of another. Thanks to *A&E* I am now aware of more possibilities. I'm even trying my hand at it. Thus in the pages of the zine you can find write-ups of a variety of games: Tékumel (by Patrick Brady), *Pendragon*, *RuneQuest/Glorantha*, *Legend of the 5 Rings*, and Lee Gold's own Japanese *Lands of Adventure* game.

Apart from that, each issue has a suggested theme which writers may choose to take up. Recent issues have included methods of hiding, plot hooks, and the nature of religious miracles/magic. Other continuing discussions range from the esoteric (Donatism and Latin versions of Pooh) to the literary ('What is a hero?') to the practical (a recent issue carried a game system).

So the zine comes recommended. It has about 100 pages, so it's by no means a slight investment, but for me at least it has many, many times the value of the Usenet.

A&E *costs $2 plus postage (varies depending on where you are and how fast you want to receive it) and is available from: Lee Gold, 3965 Alla Road, Los Angeles CA 90066. Email: leeway@mediaone.net.*

Carnel

There may be some of you out there who regard imazine as being somewhat dislocated in time. I just don't seem to have woken up and recognised the way in which history is moving. If that is true of imazine (and it probably is), and of *A&E*, then I am sure it is also true of *Carnel*.

For a start, *Carnel* is scrappily produced, irregular, and esoteric. Pick up a copy and start reading and you won't have the faintest idea what's going on. Even more than imazine it seems to assume a body of knowledge: in this case knowledge that is not even available to its readers!

The latest issue (I infer that it is issue 10, though in true *Carnel* style it is not stated on the cover) is no exception. It is even worse than imazine in the omphaloskepsis stakes: there are frequent ruminations on the state of the zine, and whether the current issue is any good or not. It also follows the

lead of many fanzines of the 80s in including material irrelevant to games which is nevertheless of interest to the editor: in this case a review of Kenickie live.

Also in this issue, Dave Morris contributes a piece about Vampires, and three stout yeomen (among them one P Mason) shed bitter tears over the tragic death of one of humanity's greatest hopes. No, not Diana, dummy, *arcane* magazine!

Sandwiched in the middle of the zine is a *Warhammer* scenario set in a sort-of Japan. This shouldn't be confused with Dave Morris's *Tetsubo* Japanese *Warhammer* rules (which Robert was serialising for a while), as it retains the Chaos Spiky Death Bits aspects of the game. It's worth a look, certainly, though I was a little disappointed at the way *Shintô* was turned into a rather drab sort of a *D&D* religion.

If *Carnel* came out more often it would be far easier to recommend. A zine of this sort can generate an atmosphere, and even when you don't like some aspect of the content (I was uninterested by the article on *Magic: The Gathering* artist Drew Tucker) you can enjoy the feel. Unfortunately *Carnel* is so irregular that it's hard to get into it. Imitation of imazine? Who knows.

Carnel *can be obtained from Robert Rees, but the address in the current issue is valid only until June, so it seems unwise of me to reproduce it. He can be contacted by email at robert.rees@cbis.com.*

Random Writings

It's a zine, Jim, but not as we know it… Actually I'm wrong, for in this day and age it's very much 'as we know it'. Like imazine, this is a paper fanzine which also enjoys a form of electronic life. Up until issue 4 it has been free, though from issue 5 (which manages to make this issue of imazine look 'on time') it may start to cost.

The zine principally features reviews of a variety of types of product, not just rolegames (*Witchcraft, In Nomine, Fading Suns* and others reviewed this issue) but also computer games. Issue 4 also contained an article about designing your own game.

To a jaded old hack such as myself, much of what is in this zine is typical of fanzines down through the ages. In the modern world, suffering a fanzine drought, that is not a criticism.

Take, for example, the aforementioned article on designing your own game. It is simple, and clearly written, and while it doesn't bring out any new points to send enlightenment rocketing through your brain like one of those missiles in a cool new computer game, it does contain plenty of common sense. What made me happy was the gentle but firm recognition that while some will design rolegames with the intent of selling them, for most the motivation is more likely to be as a means of bringing

a particular self-created background to life. While I would have launched into one of my customary rants, I recognise that the approach taken here is probably more likely to be effective.

So, there we have it. Not a zine that will have me rushing back to the UK in order to save on postage. Then again, the very fact that zines are emerging again, and contain common sense, is probably worth a street party or two. This one is on issue 4, so it has plenty of opportunity to grow and develop.

Random Writings *is available from: Justine Rogers, Ganapati Kumari, Pinmill, Ipswich, IP9 1JW Email:* editor@pepin.demon.co.uk. *Web Page:* http://www.pepin.demon.co.uk/rw

Serendipity's Circle

Yet another 'hybrid' zine, in that like imazine and *Random Writings* they produce a hard copybut put material online. They've got their act together such that they've made it up to issue 13, which provides a certain confidence. To be honest, I haven't seen the hard copy (which runs to 60 pages and contains 3 scenarios) but judging from the material from past issues which is available on their Web site, the zine is well-written and competently produced.

Serendipity's Circle is devoted to horror and 'weird fantasy' games, which is a convenient way of avoiding having anything to do with hack fantasy. It carries reviews, and the fact that these include not just staples like *Call of Cthulhu* supplements and the White Wolf games but *Feng Shui, Over The Edge* and *Macho Women With Guns* gives you some idea of the level of eclecticism.

Apart from reviews, there are also articles, mostly non-game specific, on topics related to role-playing (such as how to play pre-generated characters) as well as reference (for example a description of the Wendigo). As I mentioned earlier, there are scenarios in each issue. I was amused by one quite satirical scenario involving murders committed by the designed of a collectible card game called *Sorcery: The Obsession*, published by a company called Beach Mages, Inc.

It's probably unfair to refer to the magazine as a 'fanzine'. Although it was nominated for an Origins award in the 'amateur' category, I would consider a zine such as this semi-pro. Given that role-playing doesn't seem to be able to sustain a prozine properly, it may be that magazines like *Serendipity's Circle* are our last, best hope.

Serendipity's Circle *is available from Julie Hoverson. Serendipity's Circle, 12345 Lake City Way NE, Suite 147, Seattle, WA 98125. One issue $3, year's subscription (4 issues) $12. Email:* SercCircle@aol.com. *Web page:* http://members.aol.com/serccircle/catacomb.html

On Role Playing, Art, and Social Commentary

by Carter Butts

ONE THING about which I've been thinking recently is really a very old topic; but it has been given new life by recent developments in the area of game design. Though role-playing games have been disparaged for being an adult form of 'childish entertainment,' a new artistic perspective seems to be emerging (perhaps tied to a less sales-oriented distribution medium) which suggests some new directions in the construction and uses of RPGs. In particular, the possibilities for role-playing as social criticism, largely unexplored until now, seem to be widening. The question, and challenge, for the gaming community is one of whether these possibilities will be realized.

The idea of art as social commentary is really so embedded in our culture as to need little comment; the fact that I'm not an art historian is probably all the more reason not to dwell on this. But I do think it's worthwhile to at least pay homage to the importance of art as a means of expressing attitudes towards the prevailing culture… particularly that culture's problems and shortcomings. Although it is pleasant to believe that (in the 'West,' at least) 'freedom of speech' ensures an open dialogue regarding areas of conflict, there seems to be little evidence to support this assertion. Both in these places and in others, where even freedom of speech is openly denied, there is a need to communicate directly about alternative points of view and to examine the prospects for social change. Traditionally, art has played a key role in maintaining such dialogue, cloaking the 'unspeakable' in the guise of the prosaic and delivering messages which are difficult to transmit by other methods.

Unlike art as a whole, however, it's not clear to me that role-playing games have had a strong critical tradition. The 'big name' games, such as (historically) *AD&D, GURPS, Shadowrun,* and the like have tended to focus on the somewhat simpler task of modelling a genre, and have avoided substantial social commentary. There are exceptions to this, of course: some *GURPS* supplements (*Voodoo* and *Cyberpunk* come to mind) have contained significant critical content, and White Wolf has included some (from my perspective, very simplistic) environmentalist perspectives in *Werewolf*. In the former cases, the expression of alternative perspectives proved to be an integral (and successful, I think) part of the game environment… I am less sure about the utility of the latter. In some respects, another

category of exceptions may be found in games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade* or *Call of Cthulhu,* which deal quite intimately with the human condition. Insofar as this can be thought of as exploring alternative conceptions of (or perspectives on) the social environment, I think that it is fair to recognize these works as social commentary; on the other hand, I do see something of a distinction between what I mean by 'critical content' and what is supplied by these game systems. Without in any way subtracting from what these games do accomplish, I think that it is also sensible to recognize that they are limited in the alternatives they offer to present social realities; a lack of consideration which is not unexpected, considering the tradition from which they derive.

It seems to me that this lack of social commentary in the role-playing world indicates a real underutilization of a very powerful communicative tool. Unlike many other art forms, which must go to great lengths to produce audience empathy, role-playing games are designed around the premise of taking an *alter*'s place; whether that means exploring a different role, a different environment, or some combination of the two, the participant in a role-playing scenario is already sensitized to the idea of diverse perspectives. Of course, it might be asserted that this is only the case for some types of games—that role playing games which are more strategic lack the opportunity for real role exploration. I find this argument unsatisfying, if only because taking the strategic position of an *alter* can in and of itself facilitate critical communication. (A non-role-playing example of such an artistic mode might be a documentary such as *Hoop Dreams,* which demonstrated the ways in which the actions of two inner city youth were shaped by their strategic possibilities and by the harsh realities of ghetto life.) Regardless of the specific degree or type of empathy involved, however, it seems clear that RPGs as a group are well-equipped to deal with the imagination of social alternatives; perhaps better than other (more well established) art forms.

One thing which I feel that I should emphasize at this point is that I am definitely not arguing that all RPGs should contain trenchant social commentary. I don't see anything wrong with old-style dungeon walks, or with any other sort of gaming. People should do what they like, and should participate in crafting game worlds which they will enjoy. What I do believe, however, is

that there exists a wide, largely untapped, population of potential game worlds which are structured around (or which prominently include) critical content. To some degree, I see these worlds as attractive in and of themselves: the very things which make them critical allow them to tap into an entire world of human experience! But beyond this, I believe that (for those of us who are unsatisfied with the status quo, or who simply wish to explore alternatives) role-playing 'games' can offer a wide range of options for opening a new discourse on social change. While it is not clear that the development of RPGs which comment significantly (and, perhaps, negatively) on the state of the world will increase the industry's cash flow, I fail to see why this should serve as a barrier to work in this area. As has been demonstrated by the proliferation of copylefted RPGs online, the 'industrial model' of role-playing game as commercial product may be giving way to a new, more cooperative mode; certainly we can hope that this will create new options for those who wish to enhance the games' artistic content.

Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether the role-playing community will take seriously the idea of RPGs as vehicles for critical analysis. Certainly, such a bold new direction is more likely to be tried out by independent designers (who have little financial stake in the matter) than by struggling publishers who are already desperate to make ends meet. In my opinion, this is all the more reason for those of us who are online, and who are able to take advantage of what are (at the moment) nearly costless distribution methods, to begin a serious examination of the possibilities of role-playing as social commentary. By extending the boundaries of our subject matter, and by linking our stories with the real-life dramas which surround us, we can give new force to an already powerful medium. **i**

Carter Butts is one of the authors of Alternate Realities, *reviewed last issue, and has been active in attempting to find alternative models for the distribution of games. One of the main goals of the* AR *project is to help generate a community of those interested in rolegames, linked bot by commercial interests but by a shared sense of creative possibilities. See the letters column for more details.*

Zen in the Art of Refereeing

by Paul Mason

THE TITLE, in case you didn't realise straight away, is a wind up. And then again it isn't. I was recently given the opportunity to study a little Zen, and finally got round to reading Eugen Herrigel's seminal text on archery, and the Zen method. The most striking thing about it is the realisation of how much this allegedly 'mystical' philosophy is rooted in practicality. It is this characteristic of Zen which underlies many of the gnomic utterances which have enhanced its reputation in the West. What those Zen masters were really saying was: 'You can fart around and intellectualise all you like, but it has nothing to do with Zen. Zen is *doing,* not *thinking*.'

That, then, is what I'd like to try to write about here. *Doing*, not *thinking*. I want to write about refereeing a game from two perspectives. One is that of a referee who runs a game (soon to be two games) every week. The second is that of a frustrated player, who would far rather be playing than running.

I once said that the job of a referee was 'To fetch the beer' and very little has happened to make me regret saying so. The point I was trying to make was that a game which revolved around the referee was missing out on much of what role-playing could be. At the same time I have to recognise, as Dave Morris pointed out in the latest issue of *Carnel*, that a very large proportion of players view the referee's job as that of the provider of entertainment.

At the same time I have been forced recently to think a lot harder about certain approaches to fiction in literature, and some of it has spilled over into the way I do my refereeing.

I've seen it many times before. A student studies something, whether it be Lee Strasberg's Method, William Burroughs's cut-ups, or Joseph Campbell's archetypes, and immediately thinks that this is the great new idea that is going to revolutionise rolegaming. Of course, it isn't. All three ideas, and many more, can

inform the way you role-play, but take it any further and you end up with a wallpapered igloo.

That's why I *won't* be writing about how Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* provides a radical model with which we can explore the nature of the masks we wear, and the way in which we 'take the stage' in our own lives. Part of the reason for this, and why I am so unimpressed by most 'post-modern' experiments in role-playing, is that the very nature of role-playing *already* brings these elements to the fore. Theatre and literature may be involving, but they are vicarious activities. Role-playing is about *doing*, not *watching*.

In my game, I have therefore been striving towards more and more simplicity and naturalness in the way I run the game. The traditional model referee is a conductor/performer/presenter. The referee constantly calls attention to his or her own roles as 'God', as the creator and narrator of the story, as arbiter of events, as focus of the game.

To me, the focus of the game should be the game.

How is this to be achieved? There have been many suggestions in the past, among which those that interest me most involve empowering the players. The idea that players should be able to seize some of the traditional functions of the referee is not a new one. It is interesting to note, however, that it so often smacks of tokenism.

We've had this arising in my game. Most of my players are beginners or relative beginners. Thus they go through that weird initial period where you don't quite know where the boundaries lie. Two of them in particular, on several occasions, took to describing events beyond their player character.

This is a 'good' thing, isn't it? Isn't it? Well, maybe. In this case, it had unfortunate ramifications which ended up producing the opposite effect to what you'd expect. One of the players, for example, liked to describe what was happening around his character. Clearly he put some imagination into it, more, indeed, than he put into any other part of the game. The problem was that it became evident that he would do this when his character was confronting another. He would just launch in and start describing exactly how he had beaten the crap out of his enemy, as if it was a *fait accompli*. In short, he was a power gamer. Well, that was his kick, and so to a certain extent I let him get away with it, avoiding direct contradiction of what he was saying. Now and then, though, I had to step in. For example, when he tried his method on other player characters. Or similar. It is on this sort of occasion that I feel rules and dice can be good: they can de-emphasise the referee's 'Godlike' status by providing some form of 'impartial authority'. To an extent this worked, but fairly soon my little Nietzschean decided he didn't like this either. After his first complaint because something didn't go the way he wanted it to, I printed out the rules and gave him a copy. He clearly found reading them too much effort, and instead decided to accuse me of 'cheating' whenever I attempted to arbitrate.

Sure, he was 'just' a problem player. In the end, after repeatedly claiming that it was all 'just words', interrupting everyone else's focus, getting drunk and breaking stuff, he gave up on the game. Problem player or not, he did highlight rather clearly one of the problems with a naïve implementation of 'player power'. If players can arbitrarily hijack the game reality, then you are brought face-to-face yet again with one of the perennial problems of role-playing games: reality clash.

Reality Clash

In its most common manifestation, reality clash works like this: Eric the Fighter's player says 'But you can't do that, you're behind the pillar', while Leiter the Cleric's player says 'No I'm not, I'm next to the altar'.

A large proportion of the props, rules, and gimmicks (not to mention copious quantities of published articles) have been, at heart, strategies for dealing with reality clash in one of its many forms. Why did toy soldiers remain an important part of so many peoples' games, long after rolegaming had virtually severed its umbilical connection to wargames? Because they provided a means of reducing reality clash in the oh-so-common combats, that's why. Unfortunately, they did so at the cost of the player's *subjective* experience of the character's point of view: they encouraged a 'bird's eye view' attitude that could spread to other aspects of the game. But that was another problem.

I suppose part of my espousal of 'authentic' backgrounds also arises from a desire to reduce another manifestation of reality clash. When players' conceptions of the world in which their characters exist differ radically, it can have unpleasant effects on the game.

I know some people who would regard reality clash as a good thing. It brings you face-to-face with something that also exists outside of games. It enables you to grasp the fractured, self-constructed nature of reality. Well, yes, sure. But it gets a bit tedious the second, third and fourth times… You don't have to have your face rubbed in it to allow role-playing games to give you an understanding of the fractured, self-constructed nature of reality.

Up to a point, players' differing understandings of the game background, and the environment in which their characters move, add interest to the game. Beyond that point, and it's just a recipe for argument.

The same is true for players hijacking the game reality. If you abolish the referee entirely, the result is quite interesting, but has a tremendous potential for argument. To forestall it, you have to establish a *modus operandi*. For example: no previously uttered statement about the world can be flatly contradicted. You can add extra information that redefines the significance of a previous statement, but you can't deny it. This comes from Improvisational Acting, where it is referred to as 'No Blocking'. We aren't acting improvisations, of course, we are role-playing.

If you have players who are highly flexible, and who can respect the contributions of others, then of course the above problems won't arise. I don't necessarily consider this the ideal state of affairs. Being consciously aware of the story requires distance. When I'm playing a character immersively, I don't want to constantly have to be worrying about how my appropriation of the narrative is going to cut in to that of other players. I just want to play my character.

Sometimes having players with a will to power can be a dynamo that drives the game along. It is instructive to note that the 'problem player' I described earlier was without a doubt someone who 'made things happen' in the game. His character was undoubtedly more interesting in our imaginations than his, but a strong character he certainly was. Another reason why I was upset by his abuse of player empowerment for mere ego-gratification was that it ended up meaning I had to limit the creativity of the other player who tended to describe events beyond her character, even though she did so in a far less power-grabbing manner.

Minimalism

In practice, therefore, my solutions to the above problems all involve a minimalist approach. I use rules, but I don't use them too much. As referee I reserve the right to overrule players' assertions regarding the world, but I don't do it much. I do a little description, but not much. I fetch the beer, but not too much…

To my mind, the best way to encourage the players to get into their characters, and concentrate on experiencing the game at a *character* level, rather than at a distance, is to do the same yourself. Thus, whenever I can, I participate in my game as one or more characters. This has the welcome effect that it staves off the pangs of wanting to be a player myself.

The result of this approach is that my games move along pretty slowly. Without a schoolmasterly referee to chivvy the players into action, they spend a long time deliberating, discussing, arguing, and insulting each other. For a very long time I have regarded this as something of a problem. I even dub it 'The Road to Usenánu' style of gaming, after the interminable journey of a Tékumel game I ran (followed by the interminable journey of a Water Margin game I ran). On the other hand, what we *do* in my game is role-playing. We sit around being our characters, and the characters happen to be quite argumentative. Is it not just a guilt trip arising from my background in the early days of role-playing that makes me worry that a game without an action sequence involving the rules is somehow incomplete? Perhaps one advantage of my ineptness in administering rules in the game (and/or my ineptness in writing them) is that it is guiding me away from gratuitous action sequences.

More and more, I've found that the only action sequences that really 'work' in my game are the ones that I'd call 'natural'. On at least two occasions I've thought things like 'Hmm, we haven't had a fight for a while, I'd better put one in', or 'I'll put in an encounter with some bandits so Sun gets a chance to prove himself', and had occasion to rue it afterwards. On the other hand, those fights which arose because a player character provoked them, whether directly or indirectly, were far more exciting, and ultimately more satisfying.

Results

The main problem facing my game is that of getting the players together. We are all of us involved in the English language 'education' industry in Japan in one form or another. Much of this takes place in the evening, and this makes it very difficult to find a common evening. Thus our Friday *Outlaws* game can only really get under way around 9.30pm, and since I have a morning class on Saturdays, we have to finish around midnight. Perhaps the fact that we only play for two and a half hours at a time is another reason why we don't get much done in the average session!

One of the results of my minimalist direction has been that the players are much more inclined to create the impetus behind events themselves. When I think back to the games I've played over the years, I lose count of the number in which the player characters were essentially passive, sitting around waiting for the (metaphorical or otherwise) dwarf to run into the tavern and shout 'There's some monsters living in a dungeon up in the mountains!' This is a self-perpetuating tendency. As long as players are force-fed, they will continue to sit back passively waiting to be entertained. My experience with relatively 'untainted' players is that in the absence of such training they will take a very active role in establishing their character's goals, or at the very least, contributing to the group goals.

Perhaps I was helped by my insistence that the characters they created be potential outlaws. This may seem like heavy-handed forcing, but in the end it seems to have the opposite result. Having obtained group assent to everybody being outlaws (which provides an accessible rationale for why they might hang out together) the players are then free to develop the precise nature of their character's revolt against society.

The current course of the game, a caravan mission designed to establish a new trade route, and coincidentally off a couple of assassins being escorted to a penal colony, and maybe establish contacts with other outlaws, is entirely a product of the players. My part of the creative process ends up far more interesting, and less Thatcheresque. I simply have to be other people in the world, doing whatever they are doing. When I plan sessions, I simply concentrate on the people and places the characters are likely to encounter. I write no plots.

As a result, the game is more fulfilling for me. At the start of a session, my pleasure does not derive from wondering how the players will respond to the plot I impose on them. I genuinely have no more idea of the plot than the players. That's something I like. **i**

Living In Interesting Times

by Paul Mason

愛魔寺院

Role-playing in the Chinese Empire: an article accepted by *arcane* shortly before it died

CHINA is a mystery. It has always been there, lurking on the edge of our perceptions of fantasy, occasionally providing a morsel of excitement to be tasted elsewhere, but never quite coming into full view. First edition *AD&D* did this most obviously. A 'Monk' was a bizarre character class that had many players completely baffled. These hard-fighting Trappists specialised in unarmed combat and falling down cliffs, and could aspire to titles like 'Grand Master of Flowers'. What was all that about, then?

The answer is simple: *Shaolin!* But because these kung fu clerics were ripped bodily from their origins, they lost all meaning, and not surprisingly were cut from the game's next edition.

The story has been repeated elsewhere. Little snippets of Chinese myth or legend have been plundered and used in role-playing games for years. Unfortunately they rarely seem to 'take' when torn from their homes and cruelly exposed on the unforgiving slopes of sub-Tolkien Fantasy.

Mystery though it may be, China is ripe for role-playing. In its legend of the Water Margin, we see an oriental Robin Hood—or rather, 108 oriental Robin Hoods—for this band of brothers of the greenwood has nine dozen leaders, each one of them a potential player character!

China remained stable for a long time. It was the greatest civilisation on Earth for much of history, and although it went through drastic changes, its fundamental ideas remained relatively unchanged. Most of what I describe in this article applies to the Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties—a span of over 1000 years! This period is bookended by the Han and Three Kingdoms at one end, and the Qing at the other, and these periods have their own peculiarities, but for the rest you can do what most Chinese adventure fiction does: imagine a nebulous period of history in which China is an unchanging leviathan, the living definition of civilisation and culture.

Chinese Society

As everybody knows, China lives under the shadow of Confucius. The ideas of this irritable old failure (real name Kong Qiu) shaped the nation's culture for centuries to come, and spread out to many other countries, too. Confucius's ideas on society can be boiled down to this: 'Know your place!'.

During the past couple of millennia, China has been a nation with very strictly defined social roles. Everybody had to follow a character class. The basic categories into which people fitted were simple: from the top down, *shi* (gentry or scholar-officials), *nong* (farmers), *gong* (artisans) and *shang* (merchant). There were a few others who were considered in some way beyond the pale: monks, soldiers, charcoal-burners, beggars and so on, but the four classes remained an enduring concept; if you like, the four pillars of Chinese society.

The ordering of the four also tells us about Chinese priorities. At the top were the scholar-officials, who obtained their positions of power by passing the notoriously difficult Imperial Examinations. They were assigned as rulers of areas distant from their home, and given a limited term of office in each region, to minimise corruption. They were rigorously checked by the Censors, officials dedicated to rooting out bribery and favouritism. They were encouraged to cultivate their literary skills, as this was felt to be a way of ensuring harmony in the nation as a whole.

The merchants were at the bottom of the social ladder. While it was possible for a rich man to buy a tremendous amount of power and prestige, he'd have to work very hard to rid himself of the stigma of being a merchant. For the mandarins at the top of the tree, the humble farmer was worth more to the Empire than some profiteering middleman.

Imperial Examinations

'Anyone with ability may vault the Dragon Gate'

To get anywhere as an official, you had to take the exams ('Vault the Dragon Gate'). There were three levels: local, metropolitan and palace. There was even a National University to prepare candidates for these fearsome tests of memory.

imazine

The only people disliked more than the merchants were the soldiers and (by some) the monks. These were social parasites, unproductive exploiters of the farmer's toil. The soldiers were generally rowdy, undisciplined, and inclined to run rackets of various sorts. Many of them were actually convicted criminals. Most monks, if popular fiction is to be believed, spent their days engaging in orgies, and leading good folk astray...

Just to emphasise the Gygaxian nature of Chinese society, the particular social world you belonged to, and sometimes even your precise position within it, determined your clothing. In the upper echelons this was taken to extremes: ranks of mandarin were clearly differentiated by types of hat, as well as the colour and trim of their ceremonial robes. A good Confucian not only knew his place, but displayed it clearly and unambiguously for all to see.

When it came to law, China was a sophisticated place. Its penal code was a long, carefully planned set of regulations designed to maintain social order and stability. Although there was no provision of 'innocent until proven guilty', an accused could not be sentenced unless they had confessed. Torture was therefore often necessary in order to obtain a conviction...

Penalties were severe. The death penalty was common, in three forms: strangulation, beheading, and the death of a thousand cuts (in order of severity). Most forms of manslaughter would receive a death penalty. Other crimes might be punished by exile—involuntary conscription into a penal army unit, which during peacetime performed duties such as building roads and bridges, firefighting, and even working in a State Wine Factory!

All of this made for a strong contrast between the towns, with their patrolling constables and stern magistrates, and the wilds of the country, which provided the only sanctuary for those who wanted freedom: Taoist hermits, disgraced officials, hunters, and, of course, bandits. Rip-roaring fantasy adventure can be had among the remote mountains and forests, while fans of *Paranoia* can add a surprise twist to a fantasy game by setting it in a Chinese town ('The Magistrate is your Father and Mother! Trust the Magistrate!').

Technology

Sometimes it's easy to come to the conclusion that the Chinese invented everything: from printing and paper money, to gunpowder weapons and compass-equipped sailing vessels, clockwork, silk, porcelain, kites, umbrellas and wheelbarrows. Although Chinese inventiveness stagnated during the Ming period (1368-1644), it was ahead of Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

For gaming purposes, perhaps gunpowder is the most significant invention. Many gamers don't like to

F o o t   B i n d i n g

'Every bound foot conceals a jar of tears'

During the Song Dynasty, Chinese men's penchant for women with small feet led to the practice of foot binding, in which girls were deliberately crippled. The custom was continued until the 20th century, and is one good reason for drawing on earlier rather than later periods of Chinese history.

mix swords and guns. In China, gunpowder has been a feature of war since the end of the first millennium. Luckily, metallurgy wasn't up to making firearms until the Ming, so most gunpowder weapons were incendiaries, signal rockets and the like. A very high level of manufacturing skill is necessary before gunpowder weapons become effective *personal* weapons. At the siege of Kaifeng in 1127, the advancing Jin Tartars were faced with flamethrowers and armoured cars, as well as fire rockets and the fearsome Chinese crossbow, the mainstay of its military might for a thousand years. None of these (except perhaps a well-aimed crossbow bolt) are going to put the heroic swordsman out of a job. Or, come to that, the barbarian horseman (the Jin won, by the way).

I find ideas emerge from the strangest sources. Units of the Chinese army were for a long time decked out in armour made from paper (more like *papier mâché*, actually). It was cheap, light and reasonably strong. What would happen, I reasoned, if you made such a suit of armour from a printed copy of the Buddhist sutras? Armour proof against evil spirits, that's what!

Games can even draw on some of the consequences of issuing paper money when reserves of copper run out. Some of the pronouncements from Song Dynasty mandarins on the subject of inflation sound uncannily modern...

Beliefs

'The DAO that can be DAOed is not the true DAO.' So starts the *Dao De Jing* (probably more familiar in the West under the old spelling of 'Tao Te Ching'), one of the most influential, and short, books of philosophy ever written. Contrary to popular belief, Lao Zi's gnomic little book was not the origin of the religion of Taoism. The concept of Tao which it contains is just as important to Confucians as to Taoists. So what is the Tao? Over the centuries, plenty of Chinese scholars proposed plenty of opinions about that. Probably the main disagreement between the Taoist and Confucian philosophers was that the former considered the Tao to be the expression of existence arising in Nature, the pure course, while the Confucians regarded the Tao as a social 'Way'—to live in accord with the principles of the ancient Sage-Kings.

Social Bonds

'If you are going to war or hunting a tiger, take some relatives'

The family is the core of China, and most relationships are expressed in family terms. No man is an island, but must shoulder the responsibility for the actions of his relatives. This makes for a strong sense of co-operation, but also a tendency to be defensive in protecting one's 'face'. Anyone you become close to is called a 'brother' or 'sister'.

Confucianism is often described as a religion without gods. Actually it's not so much that it doesn't have gods, as that it isn't really concerned with them. Confucius he say (couldn't resist that): 'Worship the gods, but keep them at a distance.'

In a culture as superstitious as China, as preoccupied with the significance of omens and portents, that probably just amounted to sound advice.

Taoism, the religion, had its origins in the chaos that followed the collapse of the Han dynasty (in the third century). A bandit leader called Zhang Daoling was successful at the old healing the sick schtick, and mixed a bit of Taoist philosophy with the folk deities farmers had been worshipping for years. He drew on a long tradition of 'holy men' and soon established a sort of Taoist 'papacy' which has even continued to the present. Sectarianism and disputes prevented the Celestial Master from wielding anything like the secular, or even religious, power of the Catholic Pope, but he is the closest thing religious Taoism has to a centre.

The biggest boost Taoism got was when Buddhism arrived from India. This 'foreign' religion (a stigma it never quite managed to shake) introduced the idea of monasteries and monks, which Taoism rapidly copied.

These three religions—Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism—started to be referred to as the 'Three-That-Are-One'. Although there was strife between

them at various times, very few ordinary Chinese would go so far as to identify themselves with only one. Instead they took the same pragmatic line they had always taken: worship all the gods that seem to give results, especially one's own ancestors.

The most important beliefs are all pragmatic. In particular, the Chinese believe in the enormous influence that the Other Realms—Heaven, Hell, the Land of Faerie and so on—have on our own world. Contact with the spirits of the dead, or a misaligned house or ancestral grave, will lead to bad joss. To get rid of it you'll need to call in an expert, whether a Buddhist priest or a Taoist Feng Shui man.

The idea of Yin and Yang is another fundamental. These represent dark and light, female and male, and many other dualisms, but don't fall into the trap of thinking that all Chinese suffer from bipolar logic. By reminding us that all Yang contains Yin, and all Yin contains Yang, this philosophy makes it clear that the world is far from being a simple collection of opposites.

Chinese medicine, magic, and much else also make use of the idea of Five Elements: fire, water, wood, metal and earth. Although we use the word 'element', the Chinese original translates better as 'process'. The elements interact, opposing and creating each other in a fixed sequence. Their influence is widespread, and they have even inspired entire styles of kung fu.

The Martial Arts

Kung Fu is probably the first thing that springs to most gamers' minds when they think of China. The origins of martial arts as organised systems probably date back to the sword dances performed by warriors (including warrior women) seeking to impress their lords, but the most important landmark has to be the arrival at the Shaolin Temple of a strange Indian fellow called Bodhidharma, whom the Chinese called Da Mo. He introduced a new method of meditation which caught on so fast that it spawned a major Buddhist sect called Chan (better known by the name given to it by the Japanese: Zen). Unfortunately this meditation method was too tiring for the weedy old monks of Shaolin, and to tone them up a bit Da Mo introduced a series of exercises which also happened to be pretty useful in a fight.

It was the beginning of a legend.

For centuries, martial arts in China were either based on a particular teacher, or Shaolin-derived. The great proliferation of martial arts styles only really started in the late Ming. So a game featuring styles such as Wing Chun, Xing Yi, Tiger & Crane or Drunken Fist should really be set in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), when the Chinese were being ruled by the foreign Manchus, and forced to wear a silly hairstyle as a symbol of their subjugation.

So there's no need to go to town researching martial arts in order to run a Chinese kung fu-based game set in

*'Diseased hands and diseased feet
are the result of evil habits'*

The Chinese were as superstitious as any nation on earth. They were acutely aware of the influences of supernatural forces on their lives, whether those forces be the spirits of the dead, demons, or simply the lines of force cris-crossing the land, which are 'read' by a *Feng Shui* practitioner. Bad joss from any source means bad luck in this world... or the next.

a period prior to pigtails and handguns. As all the styles are modern anyway, you can just make your own up, and they'll have just as much historical authenticity! Take names from Chinese styles by all means, but don't let any pedant who has done a year of Stripy Dragon Kung Fu down Chinatown try to tell you you're doing it wrong.

Martial arts styles offer more to games than just combat: in later periods the styles had formal organisations, and their secrets were jealously guarded by practitioners. Rivalries between schools led to violent flare-ups, and sometimes suppression by the authorities. Some martial arts schools mutated into secret societies, semi-religious groups, and even underground revolutionary groups.

Characters & Settings

In a Chinese game, the types of characters you play are mainly determined by the particular background you choose. My own favourite, stemming from a misspent youth watching *The Water Margin* on TV, casts the player-characters as outlaws, heroes fighting against a corrupt government. This allows probably the greatest range of characters.

Warriors come in a variety of types. In much Chinese fiction the warriors are soldiers; perhaps Weapons Instructors to the Mighty Imperial Guards, or commanding officers. In later, more settled, periods, caravan bodyguards and martial arts proponents become more common. Archetypes that crop up in outlaw fiction include the rigorously honourable officer, as well as the dim-but-his-heart-is-in-the-right-place strongman. Although I'd be the first to admit that China was a long way from sexual equality, it also had an established niche for the woman warrior, who would be accepted on more-or-less equal terms as the men.

Scholars may not immediately seem like a very promising type, but China did follow a fairly rigorous division of labour. Confucian scholars might have studied Sun Zi for strategy, and have any number of unusual skills. Although exam-orientated scholars looked down on anything military, and many magistrates would studiously fail to take up their privilege of bearing arms in town (not permitted, openly at least, for most

citizens), there were also scholars who took a hobbyist's interest in swordplay. And then of course there were those who studied the occult arts...

Taoists generally seem to be sorcerers and priests rolled into one. As dispensers of talismans to protect from bad joss, mediums, exorcists and manipulators of the elements, they are the masters of the arcane.

Buddhists on the other hand, are more passive manipulators of the spirit world. More religious than Taoists, with a stricter moral code, they have a better feel for karma. They are also the only type of Chinese who shave their heads and do not wear hats!

Other outlaws come from a variety of walks of life, from burglars to innkeepers (watch out for their poisoned dumplings), pedlars to veterinarians.

There's quite a wide range of adventure possibilities to be found in an outlaw game. From the more disreputable such as highway robbery and burglary, to the more socially responsible like righting wrongs and defending the weak, there's plenty for an outlaw to do. The classic adventure finds the heroes in a tavern, overhearing crying from the room next door (Chinese taverns aren't often communal). A poor singing girl has been forced into marriage by a rich landlord, who has now spurned her, and is demanding the return of a dowry he never paid. The magistrate is in his pocket; it's up to you to do something.

Outlaws who get really successful can even enjoy the pleasures of a military campaign as government soldiers are sent to capture them.

The flip side of a game involving highwaymen is one involving the merchants they prey on. Here there is ample scope for adventure and travel. Many of the stories of Jin Yong, the acknowledged master of Chinese adventure fantasy, involve companies of caravan guards, who offer their services to merchants and maintain strict codes of honour and behaviour, as well as mastery of kung fu.

Alternative game settings offer strong plot possibilities, but less variety in character types. Detective stories centred on a Magistrate's office have a clear structure, but players have to choose from a relatively narrow range of characters: clerks, constables, informants, the magistrate himself, and perhaps reformed 'brothers of the greenwood'—martial artists who have become the magistrate's personal assistants.

While whodunnits form the staple of this kind of game, the Magistrate's all-embracing responsibility for the administration of a district allows wider options, this time on the right side of the Law Code.

Military campaigns offer a narrower range of plots still, and it would be difficult to justify having too many characters who weren't soldiers. Maybe the odd physician and camp follower... They're best used on the borders of China, where scouts may be required to enter wild and mysterious lands, in which who knows what creatures and barbarians lie waiting?

Court intrigue would play up the social aspects of China, with dagger-sharp intent hidden behind a gauzy

web of flattery and convoluted protocol. Characters could be officials, concubines, courtiers, nobles and members of the Imperial family. You'd need balls to play one of the eunuchs, the Emperor's personal retinue, though! Factionalism is rife, with royalists, officials, representatives of the religious orders, and supporters of conflicting political doctrines all jockeying for position. The best inspiration here is from the life of China's sole female monarch, Empress Wu. In the Taiwanese TV show of her life there was enough adventure to fill ten years of gaming, including the all-important kung fu...

In a supernatural campaign anything goes. At a high power level the distinction between skill and magic blurs, as anyone who has ever watched a Hong Kong action movie will tell you. When that swordsman swoops through the air, is he flying by magic, or is he using extraordinary martial arts skills? The answer is: neither and both. In a supernatural Chinese game you will find one of the closest backgrounds there is to the higher power levels of *D&D*. And by a curious coincidence, the Chinese heroes of such a story will either be Immortals, or those aspiring to such a lofty height.
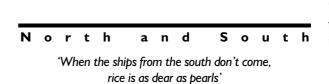
The term *xian*, usually translated Immortal, covers a wide range of character types. It includes the servants of Heaven: animal, bird and flower spirits who might normally be translated 'Fairies'. It also includes those heroes of the past who have been granted demigod or even deity status by the Celestial Bureaucracy. Although the reincarnated spirits of celestial figures will be born as Immortals, anybody has the potential to reach this position, if only by eating the mushrooms or peaches of immortality, or by swallowing an immortality pill prepared by a Taoist Alchemist.

Having become an Immortal, though, the world gets more dangerous. Most Immortals dwell on remote mountain peaks, away from society, and it is in these districts that the most dangerous creatures live...

Myths And Monsters

China has a staggering corpus of legend. It is especially rich in stories dealing with ghosts and the supernatural, as well as the Flying Swordsman and Immortal literature which provides the greatest source of monsters.

For inspiration, hie thee to a video store and get hold of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, probably the best fantasy movie ever made. It's based on an archetypal tale in which a poor scholar has a fateful encounter with a lovely from beyond the grave. This movie will show you pretty well as much as you need to know about the relationship between the Mortal World and the Spirit World, with lashings of Taoist magic and swordplay, and a healthy dose of Chinese society (including a trip to probably the most timorous and incompetent magistrate in China).

'When the ships from the south don't come, rice is as dear as pearls'

Chinese civilisation started in the north, along the banks of the Yellow River, but spread south. Rice, the staple food, was mostly grown in the hotter south, while the northerners did their best with wheat. The southerners were also more excitable, and better merchants than the northerners. Hence they were called 'Monkeys' by their northern relatives, who were in turn referred to as 'Steamed Buns'.

The most well-known monsters from China (apart from the Dragons, who deserve to be treated as deities rather than monsters), are the hopping vampires. I prefer to call them 'stiff corpses', as that's what the Chinese call them. Although they are usually portrayed with round hats and pigtails, they don't have to look that way. That's traditional Manchu clothing, so for games set a little earlier they *shouldn't* be dressed that way. They are the result of the Chinese belief that we have two kinds of soul: spiritual souls and body souls. A stiff corpse is reanimated by its body souls, despite the onset of rigor mortis (which is why stiff corpses tend to hop about rather than walking properly).

In the Flying Swordsman literature and movies the monsters come thick and fast, and look like Harryhausen creations on acid. Blend body parts from any three animals at random and add in flight, plus some form of breath weapon, and you have a typical specimen. These creatures are fine steeds when tamed, and usually supply magical ingredients to pep up the most flaccid potion of longevity.

In short, pretty well whatever monster you can imagine can find a place in a supernatural China game. **i**

Sorry to inflict yet more Chinese waffle on you. In my defence, one of my readers did suggest that I print this article. I might add that at least it will demonstrate to you that there is an alternative style to my usual pompous ranting: I can be full of froth and trivia instead.

COLLOQUY

Letters to the editor

PLEASE accept my apologies once again for the out-of-date nature of the letter column. I believe that the points being raised are still relevant, so I hope correspondents will chastise me suitably if they've changed their opinions in the intervening span of time. Comments by me are indented and preceded by 明尊.

Reviews

Robert Irwin
I have equivocal feelings about the subject matter of the 'game' [*Charnel Houses*—明尊]. Part of me is glad that a role-playing book of any sort tries to do something thoughtful, but my sense of distaste at a game has not been raised this much since *Better Red than Dead*. I must openly confess to never having read either of these books, so I appreciate the accusations I'm laying myself open to. I'm slightly disconcerted about the comments on modern Germany, as you obviously were. As I have a German girlfriend and spend a couple of weeks over there each year, I can assure Robert Rees that he could not be further wrong. German people and culture have been putting themselves through purgatory on the subject for the last fifty years. (If you want an example, go to your local arthouse cinema and watch nearly any Wim Wenders film). What is worrying is that they don't seem to have learned any lessons from all this guilt. You just have to look at how they treat and what they think about the Turkish guest workers to see the point.

> 明尊 True, true, but what is your objection to the supplement itself?

Robert Rees
The reviews section was great. Imazine must be the only publication that I would actually trust to give me a review that will reflect what will actually be under the shrink wrap. The dissection of *Legend of the Five Rings RPG* almost made me think that perhaps the rules were over emphasised at the expense of the setting and the background. However I must admit that when I finished the review I felt as though I knew what the set up of the Five Rings world was and roughly how it worked.

Phil Nicholls
The guest reviews fitted seamlessly into the informed style of imazine. After so many whirlwind reviews in the prozines, it was refreshing and highly informative to be able to savour each review. I would hope that imazine will not become a purely review zine but there should always be a place for pieces of this quality.

> 明尊 I don't think there is much danger of imazine becoming a purely review zine, as this issue demonstrates! I am at the mercy of others.

Game Designs

Carter Butts
I was a little disappointed that when you discussed AR you didn't mention our goal of building a community of production around the game; this has been an important motivating factor for us, and sets the AR project off from some of the other online game efforts.

> 明尊 This was an important omission on my part. AR is clearly inspired by such computer-based projects as Linux and GNU, which attempt to undermine Microsoft's grasping exploitation of most peoples' technological ignorance.

Carter Butts
We've moved the AR web site to http://www1.etymon.com/AR/. The new site has some updates, including a project board, a pre-release archive, and even a (gasp) logo! (It's not the most wonderful logo ever made, mind you, but then I'm no Rembrandt...)

Knut Olav Nortun
I would like to thank you very much for the rules and the description of 'Bad Joss' which were included in the Water Margin. To me it seems a good system, though I was a bit worried at the appearance of yet another table. (Well, having played *Rolemaster*, you can always deal with something like that.) Since you suggested in one earlier issue of Imazine that games designers should make use of all things they found likeable in other games I hereby declare that I will steal your Bad Joss idea and use it in a role-playing game which I am now designing. I have been trying for quite some time to make up game mechanics which would give the players in the game the feeling that 'superstition' is not just superstition, there's something in it and this was just it.

In the game I'm making, which bears the working title of 'Skathur', culture is preoccupied with tradition and with taboos; among these is magic. In my game therefore, one will accumulate Bad Joss just by using magic. Also, different cultures (there are several, more or less different from each other) get Bad Joss from different sources (logically). (In one of the cultures, being out in the moonlight would cause a lot of Bad Joss, in another breaking a promise or an oath would earn you points, in a third, worshipping gods is bad (!) and so on) I will also give out Bad Joss for players who fail to

follow their character's motivations properly, but this will of course only happen when a player acts contrary to what he probably should. As of now, I think I will base this on consent from the player being necessary for such Bad Joss being handed out. The rationale behind this is of course that the character will bring bad luck down on himself when he realizes he did not perform the way he should have. If I ask the player before giving him the points, what he thinks, he can tell me why his character did what he did and he can defend the actions of his character, if able to do so.

明尊 The idea of acquiring bad joss from performing magic is one of the most obvious applications, and you are right in saying that it helps players get into societal taboos without modern Western Rationalism getting in the way. I'm not sure I like the idea about using it to penalise failure to act 'in character', though. Even allowing for player consent turns characterisation into something negotiated between player and referee. Negotiation is all very well in its place, but I think it works about as well in role-playing as it does in what we tend to call 'art'. I'd prefer to read a book by a writer, than one written by committee, anyday.

Robert Irwin

My proviso about success should not be read outside the context of diceless games, which you seemed to be doing. I should have stated my point more clearly. The plot the GM has in mind should not involve taking liberties with their power to decide a player's chance of failure or success at any given point. If the plot of a game has a tragic theme, that is fine, and I would respect the GMs decisions. What I would treat as a violation of trust is if the GM used his/her ability to decide your success at actions against you to obviously push the plot in a certain direction.

明尊 In this context I must say I agree with you, with qualification. I'd missed the 'diceless' context to your comments. Sorry about that.

Phil Nicholl

I would be very interested to read how the rules for *Outlaws* altered in the playtesting stage. We have been treated to your theorising on the rules so the next stage will be seeing how the rules change when played. Does *Outlaws* play how you imagined it would? Has the game taken a different direction or slant?

明尊 It's going to be very tricky to write such an article. Most of the changes that come out in playtesting are of a very fiddly nature. For example, I have recently realised that the game makes it too difficult for unconscious characters to come round. Thus I'll have to fiddle with the value needed to come round. Not exactly riveting material for an

article, eh? Similarly, the mechanic for recovering energy lost to shock in combat has gone through several changes.

There are similar problems with the final points you make. Bear in mind that I have been *running* a Water Margin game for well over ten years. The original rules bear very little resemblance to those currently in use. *Outlaws* does, more or less, play how I imagined it would, simply because I have designed the game in such a way as to bring about the game I imagined! There have been minor directional changes, too, but nothing really fundamental. Substantially, the game that is taking shape now is the game which I would have liked to do 10 years ago. In those days I would have been boggled at the possibility that I might be able to do the thing complete with Chinese (you should see the inept Chinese lettering that appeared in early versions of the game!) and in the detail I'm doing it. On the other hand, I would have been very happy at the prospect.

Other Fields

Rob Alexander

Regarding content, it is perhaps a little too Oriental for my tastes, although your articles on the Water Margin game have inspired me to investigate further, and I like many of your ideas for this (especially the bad joss one). As more material is written by contributors, perhaps the content will be more to my taste.

明尊 The magazine has such a high Oriental content because the game I happen to be running every week is Chinese. I am now *also* running a Tékumel game, so perhaps we'll see a little more about Tékumel. I'd be very happy to see other material on other fields, but it does require someone to write it!

Robert Irwin

Non fantasy/Sci-fi games I'd like to play? (In reply to Matthew Pook) History gives us a good place to start. I know a lot of people who are interested in archaeology and history who sound interested in RPGs, but can't handle the fantasy aspect or rules of current commercial games. I'd love to play a game set in Imperial Rome which plays up the rather stereotyped but still fun debauchery and insanity of the emperors and their associates. It would ideally have the style of Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars* or the poetry of Catullus. Similarly I'd love to play a game based on *The Three Musketeers, Les Liaisons Dangereuses,* and similar source material. Moving away from history, I think there is a lot of potential among teenagers in stuff like *Recon* or *Twilight 2000.* These two games were extremely popular among the kids who didn't normally play RPGs at our school (way back twelve to fifteen years ago now). Probably

the sort of kids who nowadays would get off on playing *Quake, Tomb Raider* or similar.

Computer Gaming, thanks largely to the consoles, has lost the nerdy image and attracted new converts (me included). RPGs need to do the same.

明尊 I completely agree about the historical games. There's no mass market for them, however, and I think it's optimistic to expect that such games would draw people into the hobby. How many pure historical computer games are there? You should see the resistance I get for trying to make *Outlaws* a game with some historical authenticity, rather than just a game about kerayzeee Hong Kong movie mayhem.

Sprawling Backgrounds

Robert Irwin

Sprawling backgrounds. Is anyone advocating sprawling backgrounds you ask? Says the man looking for an out of print book of official titles in ancient China.

明尊 We obviously have a misunderstanding here based on differing definitions of the word 'sprawling'.

Robert Irwin

My objection to White Wolf stuff is that everybody knows everything about the entire world in these games right at the outset. This cripples these games which are played mainly by sad gits, who learn the entire background of every bloody vampire clan in southern Siberia or somesuch off by heart and insist on showing-off their knowledge. I suppose my fundamental objection is to published source material in any form. The more material you've got written in a book which anybody can buy off the shelf, the less room GMs have for creativity.

明尊 Again, I agree with this as far as it goes, but only for fantasy worlds. One reason I like *Pendragon* is because it means I don't *need* to go back to other sources in order to run the game (although I may well be inspired to do so). I can put all my creativity into using the source material to produce a matrix of possibilities in which to enmesh the players.

I suspect that by your definition, most Tékumel aficionados qualify as 'sad gits'. Perhaps it depends on what you mean by 'showing off their knowledge'. In the Roman Empire game you proposed earlier, would somebody who made use of their knowledge of the background to generate plot possibilities count as someone 'showing off' their knowledge?

Matt Johnston

I have also become fascinated with the EPT/Tsolyáni discussions. What would be the best way to get the

basics of material for this background? It seems that in the last ten years I've been bogged down in the exceedingly pedestrian exploits of Mark Rein*Hagen and G.Gary Gygax. While I would usually GM a long-running *Ars Magica* game... sometimes a break is necessary...perhaps even essential.

Brett Slocum

I strongly agree with you on your assessments of *C&S* and *Gardásiyal* from Imazine #27. The problem with *Gardásiyal* is that Neil Cauley is no game designer. Barker was there for consistency with Tékumel, not as a designer (and because no fan would buy a Tékumel game without his name on it). Also, TOME is no RPG publisher. They are a wargame publisher. They are also a tiny outfit. Essentially, they merely printed what was submitted by the Minneapolis team (it was typeset by another Barker friend). Personally, I have abandoned *Gardásiyal*. My GURPS Tékumel translation is where my current energies are going. And it has even been published in Pyramid magazine (with proper permission, of course). And the follow-on pieces (additional races, critters, items, etc.) is being published in All of the Above, the GURPS APA.

明尊 I should point out that Brett's website, http://www.io.com/~slocum/tekumel.html is probably the best place you can visit to get an idea about Tékumel if you have a Web connection (and you do, don't you Matt?). Apart from the GURPS interpretation to which Brett alludes above, you can also download Dave Morris's *Tirikélu* rules, and there are links to other sites. Another beautiful - looking Tékumel site which provides some material with a lot of Java-type stuff (and if you don't know what that means, you aren't missing much) is http://www.magna.com.au/~unihead/tekumel/
If you're a *really* sad case you might even consider getting in touch with me so I can send you the modified version of my *Outlaws* rules I use for Tékumel.

CarlBrodt

Seal of the Imperium needs writers (as well as readers) in order for it to make a 'go' of it, and I encourage you to submit whatever you would like to see in print. I am hoping to issue the first issue on October 31, so the submission deadline for that issue will be June 30 (any materials received after that date will be published in the following issue). At present, please make your submissions in English.

The scope of this journal will be ultimately defined by you. Below are some ideas for features which I thought might appear in its pages:

1) Articles amplifying certain aspects of life on Tékumel. Articles describing incompletely described areas of Tékumel.

2) Articles on how to treat certain aspects of adventures and campaigns in Tékumel from the perspective of game mechanics (by a particular rule system or by rule systems in general).

3) Profiles on the inhabitants and creatures of Tékumel. Clan descriptions and character interviews are also welcome.

4) Advice for gamemasters on how to run a Tékumel campaign, or reflections on your own trials and tribulations as a GM or player.

5) Amplification of the 'deities and demons' of Tékumel, and descriptions of undescribed rituals of the various religious cults.

6) Descriptions of short adventures or overviews of a campaign in Tékumel.

I am, of course, highly interested in any other ideas which you think fellow Tékumel gamers might find interesting. Reprints of hard-to-find but previously published articles to which the authors still hold the copyright will be considered too.

By the by, I would also like to include a small announcement section in the issue in which players can learn of Tékumel-based games at upcoming conventions.

Submissions are welcome in any form (preferably legible), but are easiest to edit when received on diskette. WordPerfect 6.0 is the editing software currently in use, so if there is any question as to the readability of your disk, please save your document in ASCII or text-only format, and include a hard copy. All submitted materials remain the copyright of the author . Send all submissions to Carl Brodt, 1608 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, CA. 94703-1606, USA.

明尊 I'll just add that Carl can be reached at CarlBrodt@aol.com. I wish him well with this, though to be quite honest I would call it a semi-prozine rather than a fanzine.

Phil Nicholls
Ray Gillham's Tékumel piece was my highlight of #28. This type of mix-and-match game design should be recommended to all novice GMs. Your own review of *Pendragon* provided the ideal background to Ray's article. While it is for each GM to make their own choices, I feel that any game set within a highly structured society will benefit from a system similar to the one Ray proposes.

Robert Rees
Ray Gillham's article was superb. It was odd to be agreeing with your comments on the possible restrictions character traits represent in your *Pendragon* review and then approaching the article with some trepidation only to find myself won over. I still think it is better if the players are well-versed in the game's background and they decide on their character's

behaviour within the constraints of the game's background. We get this in *Mage* believe it or not. However what swung it for me was the bitterly galling failure of my Aeon game and also the idea that certain bands within the traits meant certain things within the culture of the character. I can see applying this idea to Dark Ages *Vampire* to try and enforce a certain understanding of the culture. Societal virtues can be respected while the behaviour it generates can be loathed. E.g. the noble can send his common soldiery into a melee to die horribly and still have the respect of his men ('He's so noble!' 'A strong leader in command of things too' 'Aaargh!'). If I give it a go I shall report back.

Tight Plotting

Robert Irwin
I suppose tight plotting is a matter of personal preference. Freeform games are good when they work, but the success rate in my experience is low. I'm not on the other hand proposing take-you-by-the-hand games like *Paranoia*. My preference is for games where there is a fairly obvious path to take, but you don't get hammered and pushed back if you deviate from it. Again I'll refer you back to your own article about writing up the background for *Outlaws* to validate my case that detailed background gets in the way. It is fine if it is well controlled and not just dumped on players as a lecture.

明尊 That's an interesting interpretation of what I wrote about background. Aren't writing background to be used in a game, and using background in a game two distinct, different activities? Certainly, using a detailed background makes demands on a referee. It compensates for this, though, by providing other advantages.

I also don't see that detailed background in any way inhibits what you describe as tight plotting. In my experience a background that is well drawn up, with social mechanisms that work, often provide far more natural means of encouraging characters to remain on the 'fairly obvious path', if that's what you want as a referee.

I wouldn't describe my game as 'freeform'. Things happen, and the player characters respond to them, and create their own events. If I predetermined in advance what options available to my players would be successful (in other words, if I decided on a 'fairly obvious path') then the game would be far less interesting for me. Only last night, my players managed to forge a connection between two story strands that hadn't occurred to me at all, but which appears to be an elegant and interesting solution to a problem. Perhaps more importantly from the point of view of the flow of the narrative, it opens up a whole raft of further possibilities.

Background

Robert Irwin

As to how to present the background material for a game, my personal preference is a combination of fiction (proper fiction mind, not just crappy one-page anecdotes) and artwork. Failing that, I'd just say 'go and rent/buy the video' and not even bother.

> 明尊 The fiction option has been suggested to me several times, and I still have profound reservations about it. In the case of my game, what purpose is to be served by filling up many pages ('not just crappy one-page anecdotes') with fiction, when the game is at least in part based on a book?
>
> I don't quite see how artwork and a video are going to be of great help to a referee who wants to convey the way in which non-Western societies view debts and favours, for example.

Robert Rees

I still think the most telling comment on rules enforcing cultural background comes from your example of the Chinese bandits. I think that PC's form these loose, democratic groups lead by more a spokesperson than a leader for practical purposes. There is less chance of desertion, fewer arguments and while decisions might take longer to take, they are usually more determined when being carried out as usually all the characters feel they have a 'stake' in the proceedings. However if the NPC's they meet refuse to deal with them until they 'start acting sensibly' then most players will fall into line, in appearance, even if privately then retain their 'one for all, all for one' grouping.

> 明尊 The idea that I might be able to wean people off 'stakeholder role-playing' has considerable appeal for me.
>
> The issue of 'party leader' is one which could receive further treatment. It can produce very interesting game dynamics. The fact is, despite all our modern rhetoric about 'equality', we still form hierarchies, and games demonstrate this quite well, especially when you set up a situation in which the formal leader of a party of player characters is played by somebody who is not at the head of the hierarchy of players.

Knut Olav Nortun

I agree with your basic assumptions about role-playing games, that they should be set into a framework of culture and social relations and that game rules should reflect that framework. I feel however, that you can never codify into rules all things that are to do with culture, so I would like to argue that a description of cultural mores and social demands make the players able to have their characters act in accordance with these. The amount of rules should not be cumbersome to the Referee, so each Referee should be able to tailor the game so that the rules do not stop him running the game. That again, makes it important to make the rules so that Referees can throw them away when they need to or expand on them when they feel that is needed. The basics of rules must therefore be as easy as possible while still dealing with the needs of the game. This is the main challenge of a games designer when it comes to rules. (The most important thing, however, is to make the world and its characters an environment that makes sense and invokes a sense of wonder to the players).

Roberts Rees

Bizarrely, and probably not to popularly amongst the average Imazine reader, I have been thinking about applying the ideas you are coming up with for China to WW's *Werewolf* game. I have taken a fancy to the *Werewolf: Wild West* game where one of the aspects of the game is the fact that Homid characters come from a comparatively democratic and liberal society straight into a savage, primal, animalistic pack environment. The PC's either refuse to co-operate at all if they are disruptive, hiding behind their Ragabash Lupus characters; the rest form their usual collaborative circle. Here subtle pressure needs to be applied both via NPC Elders and Peers who would consider the situation very odd and via the game mechanics.

Werewolf has Glory, Renown and Wisdom similar to *Pendragon's* Glory. I know in the review that you felt that GM awarded 'points' were a bad idea but I think I disagree. The GM is meant to represent the world the player's characters are living in, even in the 'Tupperware' idea. *Werewolf's* three stats determine your advancement but are also external indicators of what people think of you. In the example above the Lupus character loses Wisdom for not co-operating, the Homid characters lose Glory because of their refusal to appoint a Pack Alpha and the whole Pack loses Renown as they look like they can't decide on anything.

This extends the argument about the difference between Face, Honour and Personal Honour. It is possible to have a high Glory and Renown despite being a despicable individual who pays only lip service to the values of their culture. In such a circumstance their high honour is due to the fact that they are perceived as living up to the values of the Garou.

In the Japanese case a Daimyô may consider himself above petty disputes over Honour because he has weightier matters to consider. However he cannot afford to lose Clan Honour or Face. The Honour of his Clan will reflect in how the Clan is portrayed to history and more importantly how the Clan is perceived outside of its holdings. In addition losing Face in general might appear a sign of weakness. If Face is lost as a result of the actions of a person then it will appear that that individual is contemptuous of the Clan and will make the Clan look weak. Even if they avenge

themselves their reputation is still damaged because the person who caused the Clan to lose face clearly considered them to be without honour. The only answer is to imply some dishonourable aspect in the disrespectful one. In that circumstance it is below the Clan to consider the actions of one lower than them.

This is possibly what all this Face saving is about. Disrespectful behaviour reflects badly on both parties and causes them to lose honour.

明尊 I'm not entirely against 'awarded points'. In so far as points of face or honour reflect the opinion of other characters in the world towards the PCs, I think they are fair enough. The remainder of the examples you give do seem to demonstrate how social mechanics might operate in other settings.

The Future

Rob Alexander

I think that a zine (electronic or otherwise) that could succeed in the face of competition from the wider Internet would have the following qualities and features:

An editor—The internet is generally not edited. At all. Therefore, the junk:gem ratio is very, very high. With a quality zine, you know that you're getting nothing but decent material, and that it's worth printing it out before reading it.

Organised into discrete chronological chunks—ie periodic issues, like a conventional zine. Since I have limited online time (phone bills), I don't want to waste time wandering around a web site to see which bits have changed. This also makes it possible to print it out and read at leisure—a computer screen is far less pleasant to read from than paper.

Actual articles instead of bits. Although I like the USENET method of discussion, it is not suitable for storage for future reference, since the useful material is spread over dozens or hundreds of postings. And, although I realise that magazines have short articles almost by definition, many web articles extract the urine with an industrial-grade pump; 20 lines does not an article make.

Robert Rees

The 'article' on *Outlaws* was really little more than an update. You can still sign me up for a copy when it's done, looking forward to it in fact. As yet I don't know who I'll get to play it but where there's a will... I think the Adobe format is perfect. Especially if it is broken down into separate files for each chapter. Since Netscape comes with an excellent Adobe plug-in it means that background and character generation chapters can be placed in a local Web Page on my new computer and then browsed by players as they need. I think a laptop is going to be an invaluable role-playing tool of the Millennium.

明尊 I wonder about these. Rob's description of how a zine could compete with the Internet simply restates the good qualities of traditional paper zines. I am bound to agree to a large extent, if for no other reason than that this is how I try to do things. I can't help feeling, however, that there may be a third course, whereby people can be distracted away from all the glitz and animated GIFs which they seem to think constitute 'good', 'exciting' design. I don't believe the qualities Rob identifies, on their own, are going to be capable of doing so.

The idea that *Outlaws* rules will be accessed directly via computer had vaguely occurred to me (which was why the final version would have a full search electronic index) but I remain to be convinced that it would necessarily be more convenient. Maybe if I wasted another couple of years ensuring that the whole book is hyperlinked…

Patrick Brady

I recently came across two scientific studies of our uncommon hobby that you may find of interest, if only for the purposes of argument. Abyeta and Forest (1991) found that RPG gamers are less psychotic (surprising, *niet* ?) than non-gamers and have lower overall levels of criminality. Leeds (1995) found that RPG players and people willing to admit to being interested or dabbling in Satanism were measurably, significantly different in all the major personality variables and could be distinguished in blind trials.

Game On!

END NOTES

You may notice that there is rather less artwork in this issue. That's because I'm trying to cut down on the PDF file size. Now admittedly, cut too much out and it reaches the point where the electronic version is better done as plain ASCII. As with everything else, it's finding that middle ground. I'll try to make the gap till the next issue rather less than happened this time, but we'll just have to see. I have a Masters thesis to write at some stage in the next, ah, year.

You may be wondering where all the discussion of the background to *Outlaws* went to. Yeah, me too. Actually I have had no time to work on the background at all, which explains why my ideas haven't progressed very much. One thing I started to consider was to present as much of the background as possible in the form in 'contemporary' form. In other words, write a load of 'mock-Song dynasty' documents covering the various issues. This approach has disadvantages as well as the obvious appeal. It makes information far harder to access for reference purposes, for example. So I'll have to think about it a little more. **i**