imazine

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This issue:

REVIEWS
Delta Green, Warpstone, Ivory,
Peacocks & Apes, Third Eye, FUDGE,
Forgotten Futures, Shadow Bindings

A WRITE COCK-UP!
Can game write-ups be done right?

I MUST BE MAD (WELL, ACTUALLY)
Paul Mason flips his lid with help from
Vaughan Allen

COLLOQUY
Letters to the Editor

ONCE AGAIN, this issue contains no article on *Outlaws of the Water Margin*. Indeed, the very fact that I produced it at all was at the expense of progress with the background of that game, which I had been hoping to do in my summer holiday. It was something of a shock to me to discover that Masters degrees don't seem to have much of a summer holiday (two weeks), and that since that two weeks involves extra work, including two solid days spent coaching kids to pass listening tests, and translating a Shinshiro City guide, I'm once again going to be prevented from my goal of 'finishing the background this summer'.

On the plus side, I am inclining more and more to the idea of pitching *Outlaws* as a 'creative project' for my Masters thesis. I wouldn't be able to do it in the present, complex shape. But that doesn't matter. I would be able to put in a lot of work on the background. At the end of it I should have completed enough to get the game out, with the side effect that I would also have a 'cut-down' version which could be used with FUDGE, or some other dead simple game system. Ain't dreams wonderful things?

For once, I find myself in the middle of the editorial having finished the rest of the zine. Glancing over it, I suspect some readers will find it rather annoying. No rules discussion, no background discussion, just a load of reviews, a bit of waffle that even *interactive fantasy* might regard as pretentious, and a whole bucketload of letters. While I have every sympathy with anyone who feels this way, the bottom line is: *tough!* This is the stuff I happen to have, and so this is what gets published.

In the letters column, Adrian Bolt suggests that I may be the only person involved with the zine who actually still plays games. I know this isn't true, but I am curious. So never mind a full survey, just drop me a line and let me know if you are still playing, if so how regularly, and what. i

Reviews

IT'S STRANGE the way things go. Hogshead, who did a serious *Sound & Fury* job on FRUP (by which I mean over-publicising a yet-to-be published item) look to have published, or be about to publish, a game about Baron Munchausen, which I for one would be very interested to see. What's strange, though, is that while FRUP, which now seems barely likely ever to see the light of day, was splashed all over the place, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* appears to be surrounded in a veil of secrecy. Even an email request has elicited no response from James on this. A teaser campaign? After FRUP, you'd have thought he knew better…

Delta Green

Reviewed by Matthew Pook

Like any subculture, role-playing has its clichés. Take D&D for example. How many times has your game started, 'You're sitting in a tavern when an old man (or whatever) walks up to you and says…'? Then again take *Call of Cthulhu* (CoC). It remains a venerable and popular classic, but how many of its adventures start with some relative or friend you never knew you had, suddenly dropping dead or sending you a letter shortly before their disappearance? The problem with *CoC*, if indeed there is one, is the way in which it is played. Other than your nearest and dearest dropping dead with amazing regularity, there is no real reason for an investigator or group of investigators to actually investigate, logically speaking that is. Which is where *Delta Green* comes in.

Delta Green is one of the latest supplements for *CoC* from Pagan Publishing. They have produced an excellent range of supplements and adventures, with their 'Walker In The Wastes' campaign being particularly good, just as their magazine, *Unspeakable Oath*, always is. With *Delta Green* (DG), they have brought a new and very modern take upon *CoC*, fusing it the current fascination for UFOs, little Grey men and conspiracy theory.

DG is a sturdy 308-page book, jam packed with material. The cover is disturbingly evocative, and this is carried over into the black and white interior. The well-laid out contents cover the history of the Mythos from the 1920s until the 1990s; details of various organisations, both government and civilian, concentrating mostly on US law enforcement and intelligence agencies; guides to creating characters for said agencies; a selection of official US secret documents that are also Mythos tomes; additional skills and weapons for the modern game; and finally two scenarios and a mini-campaign.

So far I have not said what Delta Green is, and there is good reason for this. This supplement is most definitely for the Keeper, and bar choosing their occupation and weapon, the player should not get a peek of the contents. Delta Green is a secret organisation once within the US government, but now an informal organisation long ago officially disbanded. It was created to deal with the information learnt from the infamous raid on Innsmouth in 1928, and later with the occult activities of the Nazis. Charged with the investigation and neutralisation of such threats, it was shut down in 1970, after an operation in Cambodia went wrong and escalated the Vietnam War. Rather than face this, the members of Delta Green continued their work on an illegal ad hoc basis employing government resources where they could get away with it. It continues today, with a loose cellular structure and an intelligence gathering capability, made possible only through modern electronic communications. It is into this organisation that the players, as federal employees, are inducted, usually because of an experience they have had with the occult. They are members of the FBI, DEA, DIA, CIA, Center for Disease Control and Prevention or weirder ones such as the National Park Service or US Postal Inspection Service. The book gives details of each organisation, plus appropriate character templates and a sample NPC. This serves to empower the players with Federal Jurisdiction, but they will need to investigate with care, otherwise their only semi-legal investigations may come to the attention of their bosses. In essence then, what we have in DG is *CoC* meets the *X-Files,* but this simplifies the game too much as there is much more to the game that just that. Though there is room for players to take the traditional occupations of the *CoC* rulebook, it is unlikely that they will be full members of Delta Green.

The brilliance of DG is in what the players know and whom they face. Delta Green may know that something is going on, but their traditional foes, the Deep Ones

and the Nazi occultists have apparently been dealt with. Yet directly opposing Delta Green is a far more secretive government organisation, Majestic-12. This was established to deal with the aliens recovered from the crash at Roswell in 1947. These aliens are the 'Greys' in the traditional mould, which we see in the *X-Files* and other films and books. Majestic-12 has since allied itself with the Greys and in return for their knowledge and technology, have given the aliens virtual *carte blanche* to conduct a range of strange operations and experiments upon the population of the USA. Were Delta Green to get wind of this, and Majestic-12 to learn of their knowledge—which is not much, a covert war would result as Majestic-12 attempts to wipe out Delta Green. They have the complete backing of US government and the power with it, even though the current President does not know of Majestic-12's existence.

In reality, all of this revolves around a half-truth, one that a few within Majestic-12 are only beginning to suspect. The Greys are in reality constructs, created specifically to deal with mankind by the Mi-Go. This allows their plans to come to fruition far easier and far quicker, as they fear a coming cataclysm. To most of Majestic-12, the Greys are extremely beneficial allies.

Nor are the Greys the only problem. An old Delta Green enemy from WWII retains its old knowledge, but is only now beginning to rebuild its power. The Karotechnia hides in South America, headed by ageing Nazi magicians. In New York, Club Apocalypse is the hub of an occult underground, but currently is more a place of note, rather than an enemy or ally, albeit a dangerous one. Also based in the city are the Fate or Network, an occult criminal syndicate. Who is behind Club Apocalypse and the Fate can only be guessed at. Another organisation, the Illuminati-like Cult of Transcendence, based in Stockholm, represents a difficult foe for the players as they will have no jurisdiction outside the USA.

Fortunately Delta Green has an ally, Saucerwatch, a civilian organisation devoted to uncovering the truth behind all the UFO sightings. Unfortunately they have neither love nor trust of the government. Majestic-12 also takes an interest in Saucerwatch because it is well funded. It is also represents a means for the Keeper to bring the players into the DG setting, not as federal employees, but as civilians.

To back all of this up, DG provides lots of support to play the game. This includes a bibliography, a list of modern weapons and US security classification, and three scenarios. 'Puppets Shows And Shadowplays' is the starting DG adventure and has the players as FBI agents investigating a series of disappearances in Arizona. The most cinematic of the three, this can quickly become a series of running gunfights and is very similar to a film called 'The Hidden'. After running 'Puppets Shows And Shadowplays', the players should have been co-opted into Delta Green and can at some point move onto 'Convergence', the second adventure. This involves the effect of an experiment being conducted by the Greys on a small town. It requires far more careful investigation and can be even the deadlier than the first adventure in the book, as Majestic-12 also have black ops soldiers in the area.

Bigger still is the third adventure, 'The New Age', which is actually a two-part mini-campaign. Where 'Convergence' gave hints as to the big picture, 'The New Age' reveals just a little part. Perhaps this little part is too much, too early. Like 'Puppets Shows And Shadowplays', 'The New Age' has a cinematic climax, whereas 'Convergence' is closest to an *X-Files* episode.

DG is not entirely perfect, but what problems it has are minor. Firstly I would like to have seen a list of the firearms issued by each of the agencies given in the book and secondly, the statistics for the Greys should have been placed in their own section and not just in the one of the three scenarios they appear in. Also missing is the Forensics skill from the FBI forensics expert template, and one of the NPCs is given the language skill of Belgian. As I said, these are minor problems, although I would have liked to have seen some suggestions for running a campaign devoted to Majestic-12, rather than just Delta Green.

With *Delta Green* you cannot really escape comparison with the *X-Files,* but if DG provides the framework for this type of campaign, then it is one that many Keepers have been running for a while. This is a world that is dirtier, grittier and far bleaker than the world of the *X-Files*, which befits Lovecraft's portrayal of the universe. Also, in tying the Delta Green background so strongly with our own history, it brings parallels with the other UFO conspiracy show, 'Dark Skies', highlighting the setting's potential for adventures set in the past. Of course, there exists another game similar to *Delta Green, Conspiracy-X*, but DG essentially eschews that game's comic book sensibility and I much prefer it for that.

What *Delta Green* does is to rework how and why *Call of Cthulhu* is played. It provides the players with a reason to conduct their investigations, as well as a means to carry them out. Further, through the *X-Files,* the background of *Delta Green* and how to play within it, comes pre-naturalised to almost any role-player. Pagan Publishing have been very clever in using the whole of the *X-Files* paradigm to do this and combine it with the Cthulhu Mythos, in such a way that clichés of the new genre are avoided. If you are bored with what is still a classic game, then *Delta Green* should re-invigorate the whole of the *Call of Cthulhu* game for the jaded player and Keeper alike. This has to be one of the best supplements I have seen a long time and if you like either the *X-Files* or *Call of Cthulhu,* this is a must buy.

Delta Green *is published by Pagan Publishing.*

Fanzine: Warpstone

Reviewed by Ashley Southcott

I've avoided reviewing issues of *Warpstone* for a long time for fear of being overly praiseworthy. Having hung on as a subscriber for the last seven issues makes it difficult to find fault with it. Now that much of my university work is out of the way, however, I have no excuse, either for a blatant plug or at least to attempt to analyse what does and doesn't work for it.

First, a synopsis. *Warpstone* is a quarterly fanzine dedicated to *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and Messrs Foody and Keane (the editors) have stated up-front that their goal is the enhancement of the Warhammer world. Largely this means the Warhammer world as it was originally published in WFRP in 1986. While Hogshead has to take account of the (seemingly annual) changes that Games Workshop makes to its Warhammer background, *Warpstone* is free to add to the original game without this constraint.

Issue 8 is fairly typical: a total lack of colour art, which would disfigure the zine anyway, and a reasonable profusion of black-and-white illos by Steve Punter, Stephen Jones and John Keane. I think I've mentioned this elsewhere but *Warpstone*'s artwork is really very good: highly suitable for the brooding atmosphere that WFRP attempts to convey. The normally good cover artwork was replaced in this instance by an example of the Chaos spiky-bits era of Warhammer (shame on you, John). The zine carries reviews of new WFRP-relevant material, not just the latest products to emerge from Hogshead: for example this issue praises *The Power*, a newish British independent role-playing magazine, though you have to wonder how long it will last before it goes the way of *arcane*. It doesn't have many rant-zine tendencies; writers wanting to blow off on issues are very much in the minority, perhaps because of its focus on a specific game. Paul Williams contributes a 14-page scenario, 'The Missing Children of Regensdorf', which reminds me of the *White Dwarf* scenarios of old, except that it's better written and better illustrated (John Keane at work again). I'm not entirely convinced that *Warpstone*'s scenarios are meant to be played rather than read, and scenario style veers from tightly-plotted attempts to railroad the PCs to opening up their options to the point of overkill. Nonetheless I should bear in mind that in *WD*'s heyday this, and several previous scenarios, would've been accepted for professional publication, so I shouldn't carp too much: three or four years ago *any* WFRP scenario would've been welcome.

Warpstone makes a good effort at generating the brooding atmosphere inherent to WFRP, although a good many of its articles have been how-to works. I shouldn't complain too much since the usual fiction pages, while varying in quality from passable to very good, tend to the latter on this occasion and combat the prescriptive side of the zine with the atmospheric side.

While *Warpstone*'s attempts to address WFRP's background are largely successful, it has thus far said little about 'the big picture': the overarching political events that shape the Old World. Perhaps this is because they are dictated by GW and *Warpstone* doesn't want to deviate too much from the 'official' game world. In fairness, over the years much of the WFRP background has been inadequately covered; most material assumes the Empire as the setting, rather than the lesser-covered Kislev, Estalia or the Tilean city-states. If we bear in mind that WFRP is a blend of history, horror and fantasy it's unsurprising to see chunks of real-world history being adapted for inclusion. Not all of this is relevant of course and there is an argument that says the more adapted history you throw in, the less pure imagination you're bringing to a game, perhaps to the extent that *Warpstone*'s take on WFRP is moulded more by adaptions of history than by original creations. Hopefully these political interactions, when they finally get around to detailing them, will shy away from a strong basis on real history, because WFRP is loosely *based* on a historical time-period. It is not a historical role-playing game in itself. I don't really want to see *Warpstone* adapt real historical events willy-nilly simply to beef up the background coverage.

Now for the bad news: *Warpstone* costs THREE POUNDS an issue. Barring *The Unspeakable Oath*, I cannot think of any other fanzine that costs that much. It's easy to see what it's gone on, of course: it has a fairly glossy cover, is professionally printed (as opposed to being run off a photocopier in the local library) and its layout was done on PageMaker or somesuch. Mind you, its growth would suggest that three quid an issue isn't too high a price to pay for information about a game that was, frankly, dead in the water as far as publishing was concerned a mere four years ago. Its expansion to 40 pages incorporating decent artwork gives some indication, I think, that *Warpstone* is going from strength to strength. The Chaos spiky bits reminiscent of Warhammer's old days are thankfully few and far between, and it gives more background-related material than a month on the WFRP mailing list supplies. It's practical, readable, and without wanting to sound like a salesman for *Warpstone* Distribution, you could do worse than get hold of a copy. An indication of its quality might be derived from knowing that associate editor Martin Oliver has been signed up to do Hogshead's Elven sourcebook, and that issue 9's guest editor is going to be Anthony Ragan.

Fanzine: Ivory, Peacocks & Apes

Reviewed by Paul Mason
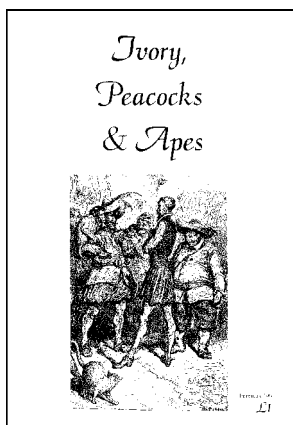
Long, long, ago, in a country far, far, away (Scotland) there was a fanzine called *drunk & disorderly*. It was an APA (amateur press association) like *Alarums & Excursions*, reviewed last issue. It was a very good zine, especially the bits written by the editor, Pete Lindsay, whose New Jerusalem game took the traditional fantasy game and dragged it squealing and wailing into the 17th Century. *d&d* went the way of many zines, sliding slowly into the thick brown pool of non-appearance.

Around the time the abominable idea of bringing back imazine occurred to me, Pete teamed up with Gavin Greig to produce *Ivory, Peacocks & Apes*, a fanzine which only stupidity of the rankest sort has prevented me from bringing to your attention before now.

It's a very good fanzine. Now, don't let the fact that the extreme dearth of fanzines makes any fanzine welcome force you to you leap to the conclusion that such a statement is in any way qualified. No, IPA is a very good fanzine. Indeed, it has only one large flaw. I mentioned that the first issue of IPA came out around the same time as imazine, did I not? I have also noted that it has two editors. I didn't mention that it is around the same length as imazine at 20 pages.

So how is it that while even a useless bugger such as myself has managed to get 10 issues out in 4 years, this pair have only managed two! I ask you.

For this reason, I strongly urge you to send some money for this zine. If enough of you do, the old fanzine editor's guilt trip may spring into action, and they may finally get round to producing issue 3.

Enough carping, what does IPA contain? I'll start with the stuff I like, and go on to other stuff I like. First off, it's good to find a sharp, amusing, incisive, entertaining letters column. Obviously, like imazine and then some, it suffers from the infrequency, but this doesn't devalue what there is. Some of the discussions resemble those clunking around in

imazine (how much is the referee responsible for leading the players?) with a different perspective.

For me the centrepiece of the zine is Gavin Greig's write-up of the Pyrates campaign. It becomes clear that Pete Lindsay has a thing about the 17th Century, and his game in this case is set on the High Seas in the company of a gang of rogues. You can read about it for entertainment, and more—you can read about how it is possible to escape from the tropes of DragonLance fantasy. It takes me back to the flamboyant days of Matt Williams' Rosekrieg, when we traipsed an ice-girt world with rapiers and pistols at the ready, ostensibly to defeat the villainous Queen Nalavres, but usually for some hidden, less laudable purpose.

There are also some valedictory pieces about Pete's old game, New Jerusalem, which are going to be extremely difficult to understand for anyone who has no prior knowledge of the game.

Overall, the zine comes highly recommended, and is very reasonably priced at a mere £1.

Ivory, Peacocks & Apes can be obtained from Gavin Greig, 4 North Carr View, Kingsbarns, by St Andrews, Fife KY16 8SX, UK. No fixed subscription costs so just send them a fiver. You can email Pete at pete@louisxiv.demon.co.uk

Webzine: Third Eye

Reviewed by Paul Mason

What is this prejudice I have against HTML? Is anything more than luddism? Possibly not. All the same, I'll have to put it to one side when looking at *Third Eye*, especially because the zine has only just started, and therefore doesn't have much up yet.

Here, then, is one of the problems with Webzines. The 'zine' part of the name seems rather inappropriate. Webzines are put up in a haphazard way, rather than being divided into discrete 'issues' like a normal magazine. The haphazardness *can* work, in the case of discussions conducted over Web boards or mailing lists. For other material, though, you lose the idea of publication of a magazine as an 'event' which (for me at least) is a disadvantage.

I suspect that here I'm running into another area where I will be considered a luddite. The great wonder of the information super highway is supposed to be that you can get exactly what it is that you want. Leaving aside the fact that the reality doesn't work this way, I don't find this something to cheer about. If you think of the consequences of this approach to obtaining information, it means that you are limited to obtaining stuff you already know about. Where's the pleasure to be gained from stumbling over something new? By way of analogy, if I listened to one of my 440 cable radio channels that is devoted to a particular kind of music, I would never develop

in any way. As it is, I tend to listen to the BBC World Service and as a result am exposed to a fine variety (thanks especially to John Peel).

None of which has very much to do with *Third Eye*. Except that as I noted above, there isn't very much there at the moment. And it did allow me to get some way into the review before moaning about how irritated I was by the little extra window that popped up when I accessed the URL.

What we do have in the *Third Eye* at the moment is a balance between card games and *Call of Cthulhu*. The latter is in the form of material, and links to material, dealing with British *CoC*. The former didn't really interest me very much, but if *Shadowfist's* your bag, you might enjoy the deck design. There is also a brief article about online gaming. I found its discussion of the problems involved with *Ultima Online* useful. Of course, computer 'RPGs' are often cursed by being written by programmers rather than by someone who knows what they are doing. This is why you get all the dumb *D&D* tropes trotted out long after even *D&D* has dumped them. There is also a problem that to make money, the game needs to attract the Beavises and Buttheads of this world, and yet these same people will render the games intolerable for those who actually like role-playing.

So, overall there isn't much up there yet. If you're connected you may like to pop in and have a look. If nothing else you'll bump his counter up a bit.

Third Eye is the work of Mark Slattery, and can be found at http://welcome.to/the_3rd_Eye.

FUDGE

Reviewed by Paul Mason

Building Blocks for Better Role-Playing
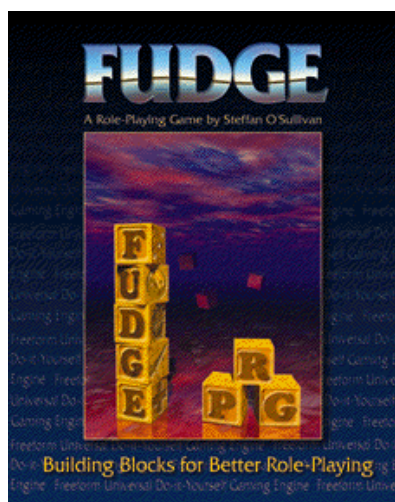
Two issues ago I reviewed *Artificial Reality*, a 'copy-lefted' role-playing game published in a variety of electronic formats, and freely available to those with access to the Internet. It occurred to me that as there were many other games published on similar lines, I should also take a look at them, and FUDGE is probably the most successful of all.

The version of FUDGE that I downloaded was in Acrobat format, and was 831K in size. Within, there were references to the 'standard' format being plain, vanilla ASCII. This is clear from the Acrobat formatting. I don't like to complain too much about such matters, but I would have thought that if they were capable of going to the trouble of producing the colour cover above they might have spent more than 30 seconds 'designing' the game. One of the most basic rules of typography governs the relationship between the width of text (the 'measure') and the point size of the type used. FUDGE shatters this rule into tiny pieces, in a painfully obvious manner. Teeny, tiny ten point text is set to a measure of 7½". It hurts, really it does. Actually, reading the teeny, tiny text on the interminable legal notices page reveals that this is all the fault of Parker Whittle, and even more extraordinarily there is a disclaimer about it on behalf of the author of FUDGE, Steffan O'Sullivan!

So Steffan O'Sullivan can't be blamed for the formatting of the game? I'll have to find something else to blame him for! I guess he can take it as a compliment that the worst I can find is the assertion that 'most English speakers' understand the phrase 'glass jaw'.

So, stylistic complaints out of the way, what about FUDGE itself?

It's best billed as a 'toolbox' for role-playing game design rather than a game in its own right. In this respect it resembles *Alternate Realities*, but in its approach it is rather different. Where *AR* plumps for a rationalist view of the process, FUDGE fudges. If the game has a bias it is towards 'cinematic' style gaming.

FUDGE certainly *is* a toolbox, and frequent admonitions to make up your own table confirm this, and will annoy those people who like their games to be 'playable out of the box'. FUDGE may be a toolbox, but it doesn't come in a box. It is so keen to let you do exactly what you want to do that it doesn't even insist on what types of dice you use. I'll return to this in a moment.

One thing I appreciate about FUDGE is that it clearly aims at character design by my preferred method: instead of starting with the rules and fleshing them out into a description, you start with a description which then produces the necessary information for the rules. In the case of this game the transition is remarkably seamless. All abilities are rated on a verbal scale, ranging from Terrible, up through Poor, Mediocre and Fair, to Good, Great and Superb. So you can just scribble down a description of your character and convert it into FUDGE terms pretty rapidly.

There are other possibilities offered, including GURPS-style approaches where you balance your character up in terms of a set number of points. Not being a GURPS freak I can't comment in detail on how well this is implemented.

I should also mention that the particular attributes and abilities available in FUDGE are not predetermined. Long lists are provided, with advice on how to deal with the problem of general/specific categories. In theory, therefore, it would be perfectly possible to play a FUDGE rolegame without any limitations on skills lists: players could simply describe their abilities as they liked (as in Patrick Brady's *Mayhem*, reviewed in imazine 24). FUDGE doesn't explicitly encourage this, though.

Its lists are based on the traditional divides between attributes, skills, 'gifts' and superpowers. One annoyance is that, like many games, FUDGE considers such qualities as honour, humanitarianism and loyalty to be 'faults'. The comment that these 'are not signs of a flawed personality' does not make up for the fact that they sit there under the heading 'faults'.

FUDGE dice are one of the stumbling blocks for many people I know. Statistically and mechanically speaking, the basic system is nice. You roll four special dice (six sided, with two sides marked 0, two +1, and two −1) and add 'em all up to get a result. The result modifies your ability on the scale described above (Terrible to Superb) to describe your result. It's immediately obvious when you've got a positive result, and you could hardly ask for a simpler system. For a lot of people accustomed to other methods, this system seems unaesthetic. Probably just a result of conservatism, but something to consider anyway. FUDGE deals with this by offering other methods of obtaining approximately the same statistical results, including 4D6 and %. As you'd expect, these involve an element of fudge to work properly (in the case of % it's a table of results), but they are serviceable. I would even imagine that a referee might allow players to choose their preferred dice-rolling method. That's what FUDGE encourages: free choices.

Similarly combat introduces an interesting approach to combat rounds. On the one hand you can have good old action-by-action rounds. On the other, you can divide things up into 'story elements', bunches of actions that seem to fit together, and resolve them that way. I find myself drawn towards this method.

The rest of combat follows the familiar pattern of 'You may like to try this way… or this way… or how about this…' After a while I found this a little annoying. I would love to be corrected by someone more familiar with the system, but it looked to me like FUDGE is optimally effective at a pretty abstract, speedy, level of resolution. When you start building in the complexities the system loses its elegance and seems to gain relatively little definition in exchange.

There's more to follow, from character development to sample characters to (in the *Addenda*) a magic system, and optional rules on things like diceless resolution. I was also interested to note that Steffan O'Sullivan is a fan of Robert Van Gulik's Judge Dee books (about which I am about to embark on a self-designed course as part of my Masters) and has provided FUDGE descriptions for Dee and three of his lieutenants, though these do not appear in the basic FUDGE rules.

All in all, if you don't have much experience in rolegame rules design, but would like to put together some rules to suit a particular background, FUDGE comes highly recommended. Even if you don't end up using it (and as I've made clear, it's *highly* customisable) it'll give you some ideas.

For anyone else, I think it really depends on what level of definition you care for in your game. Despite the add-on bells and whistles, FUDGE really functions best at its core level of complexity, best represented by the division of abilities and results into 7 stages. If you find this too grainy, then it won't be for you.

The best place to get hold of FUDGE is from the Web page, http://www.io.com/~sos/fudge.html*. Failing that you can order it from Grey Ghost Games, PO Box 838, Randolph, MA 02368, USA.*

Forgotten Futures

Reviewed by Paul Mason

In stark contrast to FUDGE we turn to *Forgotten Futures*, or more properly, *Forgotten Futures V: Goodbye Piccadilly*. *FF* is the brainchild of Marcus L Rowland, a writer beloved of *White Dwarf* editors across the world, and immortalised in Games Workshop's *Statue of the Sorcerer* adventure for *Call of Cthulhu* as Claud R Worlsman. Anyone familiar with Marcus's *oeuvre* will be aware that he specialises in slightly wacky takes on more modern themes. Thus most of his material has been for *Call of Cthlhu, Space 1889, Judge Dredd* etc. Furthermore, anyone who has ever heard Marcus speaking at a convention, and denouncing his latest publisher for some glaring omission (well, glaring to Marcus at least) will be aware of his painstaking devotion to detail.

The *Forgotten Futures* project is interesting for more than just being a shareware rolegame. Its genre—the 'futuristic' fiction of the Victorians and Edwardians—will be familiar to some through the works of H G Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle and others. Marcus has dug out other stories, however, stories which are out of copyright and which might be destined to disappear, and he includes a selection with each instalment of *Forgotten Futures*. It's a compelling idea, made easier by the medium of electronic distribution.

Thus, this fifth instalment of the game contains not only the rules, and a 'world guide' describing possibilities for games based on a calamity befalling London (the 'theme' this time), it also features two

full adventures, adventure ideas, and ten stories published between 1899 and 1911.

The actual system is just as abstract as basic FUDGE. Indeed, by a peculiar coincidence abilities have seven levels, though these are described numerically. Resolution of skills employs a table reminiscent of the old *RuneQuest* Resistance Table. Unlike FUDGE there is no general provision for quality of result built into the system, though there is a rather clunky table-based mechanic used for combat. When you also allow for the fact that the game features only three attributes (Mind, Body and Soul) and 25 skills, you realise that the rules are being heavily de-emphasised.

One strange thing included as part of the rules is a definition of good and bad role-playing. I can see the point, as Marcus probably assumes that many of his readers will be new to rolegames, but I'm somewhat nervous at the passages which encourage stereotypes and silly accents. In the advice on how to run a game, it isn't very surprising given the background of the author to see pre-planned plots stressed; slightly more unnerving is the advocacy of wordiness as a positive referee trait.

Similar attitudes are to be found in the adventures. To give them credit, they are written in very open ended ways: describing what will happen in the absence of the player characters, with extensive notes on things that might happen to the player characters, and possibilities that might arise, without being restrictive. On the other hand, there are some peculiarities at the end. For example, the first scenario is based on a real incident, the siege of an East End house containing anarchists. In the adventure version, the incident escalates into a full-scale anarchist uprising, and Winston Churchill is captured. Bizarrely, at the end of the adventure player characters will receive 3 Bonus points (used to improve skills) for rescuing Churchill. I don't quite see the connection myself…

The game is offered in HTML, and I have to say that it's quite a clean implementation, which impressed me. Having said that, the failure of the (quite nice) character sheet to print properly on one page demonstrates for me one of the failings of HTML as a medium for this sort of enterprise.

Nevertheless *FF* is a fascinating enterprise, undertaken with evident enthusiasm. Despite the occasional stereotypes, it is perfectly possible to play the game with some seriousness, and we are now sufficiently removed from Victorian times that I would regard it as rather a challenging culture game.

Forgotten Futures, *by Marcus L Rowland, can be obtained from http://www.forgottenfutures.com/ or on disk from Marcus L. Rowland, 22 Westbourne Park Villas, London W2 5EA, England. Heliograph Inc are planning to publish a paper version.*

Shadow Bindings

Reviewed by Paul Mason

The argument about universal systems rages on. While some swear by the likes of GURPS, TWERPS and BURPS, others (such as myself) feel that a system has to match the setting. *Shadow Bindings*, though not presented with a setting, nevertheless follows the latter school of thought rather than the former. Thus we find the extraordinary suggestion that you design your setting in order to reflect the rules.

One positive benefit of this is that from the start your attention is drawn to the necessity of comprehending what kind of reality the game is describing. In this case, it is akin to Moorcock's Eternal Champion series, covering a wide range of cultures and technology levels.

There is nothing startling about the rules themselves. Indeed, I found the rules for character creation somewhat lacking in shape compared with *FF* and even FUDGE. Rules for various things seem to be scattered around with little attempt at organisation.

You have attributes, and your chance of success at a task is your attribute times 4, expressed as a percentage. With opposed rolls you have to roll lower than your opponent. Combat adds a little complexity, and a D100 hit location table with critical hit results!

The rules are presented in HTML with half-hearted hyperlinking (for example, I noticed that there is a hyperlink from GM to the glossary definition: 'Game Manager', but no links between sections, which just end abruptly). There is an 'index' which is an alphabetical list of hyperlinks to things within the set of files. There are a few dubious pieces of artwork (dubious in the sense of topless elves—I would call it 'fanzine artwork' were I not a fanzine editor!).

While you might derive one or two ideas from the game, I'm not sure that it would be very useful to those not planning on running a game with the same sort of multi-planar background. I would like to see a little more thought given to the organisation, also. One thing I should mention, in the light of what I said about *FF*: *Shadow Bindings'* character sheet is supplied in WordPerfect format, and to my great surprise it loaded fine, and was readable, in Word!

Also, in the light of *FF*, it's interesting to note that the first worldbook to be produced for the game is *Victoria Eternal*, set in a magical alternate 1997 with an immortal Victoria still on the throne of the British Empire. It has some extraordinary detail, though unfortunately it cannot rid itself of such Americanisms as the belief that England only has two accents, and that all poor people speak 'Cockney'.

Shadow Bindings *by Joseph Teller and Kiralee McCauley, and associated worldbooks, can be downloaded from http://www.fantasyrealms.simplenet.com/bind.htm*

A write cock-up!

by Paul Mason

What's the point of writing stories based on role-playing games? Are they always destined to be crap?

GAME WRITE-UPS have been with us for almost as long as role-playing. Indeed, if some of the legends surrounding the writing of certain fantasy books are true, they've been around even *longer* than role-playing. I don't think they have a very good reputation, though. I'll go further than this: for many role-players, just as for most non-role-players, they are bloody awful.

There are obviously a number of reasons why write-ups tend to be so bad, chief among which must obviously be the talent deficiencies among those who write them. I decided to write this article, though, in the belief that this is not the only factor, and it might be worth examining some possibilities.

I must also mention that I was inspired to revisit this whole area of game write-ups by the work of Patrick Brady, who has been chronicling events in his Tékumel game, a game I played in briefly many years ago. Exposure to Patrick's write-ups made me realise some of the possibilities of the form.

Since then, I've had a go myself, and read a variety of successes in such places as *Alarums & Excursion* and *Ivory, Peacocks & Apes.* I've also discussed how to go about it with various people, including Patrick, Ian Marsh and Dave Morris, but since there's little chance of persuading them to do me an article on the subject, here we go.

Goals

It's just about the most important thing to consider, and yet there does seem to be confusion about goals in much writing up of rolegames. What is the purpose of writing up a game session? Is it the same as writing a short story or novel?

Obviously it can be. Writers may be inspired to write based on something that happened to them (for example Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*), and I don't see that the 'imaginary' nature of the events in a rolegame makes any difference.

I don't need to say much more if the *only* goal is to write a short story or novel. The problems with which you will be faced are those problems facing any writer: what is your point of view? How do you

select and organise your material? And so on. The answers to these questions will be determined entirely by the artistic effect you want to achieve. There is no need to give any thought to considerations such as accurately representing the game, or providing information.

Most game write-ups do seem to have predominantly literary motives, but the situation is complicated by the obvious presence of other goals. I found this especially true when I thought about the constraints on me when I went about writing the events of my *Outlaws* game in story form.

Although a desire to write something that was entertaining loomed large in my mind, I couldn't deny other imperatives. One of these was that I wanted to represent the player characters as well as possible. In the past I've been frustrated by game write-ups which misrepresent the characters (especially my character). It made me feel the same way I feel when I see anything connected with me in the press. It's *always* distorted.

This does connect with certain problems facing writers of more normal work. Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (filmed by Spielbrat as *Schindler's List*) portrays real people. Even though the form resembles that of a novel, the story is a representation of real events. It's an interesting analogy with role-playing write-ups, and demonstrates some of the same problems. I'll return to this later.

A limiting goal on the write-up is the desire to do so as a 'chronicle'. The write-up becomes a reference by which you can remember what has happened in the game and who is who. This became particularly important in my game, as the number of Zhangs, Wangs and Shangs proliferated.

Another goal for my write-up is to produce something which I can give to prospective players to give them some kind of an introduction to the game. Most of my prospective players have absolutely no experience of rolegaming, so it is very important to give an idea of what sort of events transpire. I've been gaming so long it's easy for me to forget that most beginners suffer anxiety over simple, fundamental points that don't provide a moment's worry once you've played one or two games.

Finally, write-ups can show something about a game. Mainly here I'm talking about the background, but in the sense that the write-up demonstrates the level of activity of the characters, it can also give an indication of certain aspects of the game rules: especially the power level at which they are pitched.

Solutions

I don't think there are any easy solutions to the problems of finding a compromise between various goals. If there were, it probably wouldn't be much worth doing. There are some ideas, however, which we can appropriate from other areas, and apply to our efforts.

One solution to the problem of representing the characters authentically is that you try to limit the extent to which you get inside the characters. Interior monologues are right out. Dialogue has to be handled carefully unless you can remember it perfectly (and even then, most real dialogue doesn't work very effectively as part of a narrative). The problem with these strategies is that they distance the reader. As I found out with my first effort at a write-up, if your characters are portrayed in such a fashion the reader doesn't get drawn into the story, and acquires little interest in its events. This may not be a problem if your goal is to write post-modernist fiction, of course…

The key seems to be point of view. It's a role-playing game, so the obvious point of view to choose for your write-up is that of a role-played character. In most cases, therefore, it is 'better' for a player to write up a game, even if they don't have all the background detail and information that the referee has.

A demonstration of this theory is available in the Pyrates write-ups in *Ivory, Peacocks & Apes*, reviewed earlier this issue.

You might start to ask yourself difficult questions like 'Why is this character telling the story?' but such questions often only suggest interesting solutions. One suggestion by Dave Morris was that an epistolary style was well suited to game write-ups, which could be presented as letters between a character and some other person. This particularly suits the episodic nature of most role-playing narratives.

Ok, but what if none of your players is inspired to write? Use a referee character, of course. The difficulty is often choosing one who is present at sufficient events, or hears enough to be able to construct a narrative. When I was stuck for a way of presenting the second part of my game write-ups, Dave suggested the point of view of a very minor referee character, a character so minor that they hadn't even been noticed by the players ('third water carrier' was Dave's description). Unfortunately there were no such characters for the second write up, though for a later section there are a couple of perfect candidates. Part of the appeal here is to have a perspective on events entirely different to that of the player characters. It also allows the characters to be portrayed in all sorts of amusing ways.

I mentioned that my first attempt at a write-up was very flat. I tried to get round this by stressing the personality of the narrator, and locating the narrative within the game background. Thus the story was being told by Gai Long, the storyteller (a tip of the hat to Ernest Bramah's Kai Lung books), and I was able to inject personality through Gai Long's prejudices and interpretations of the story. This also enabled me to distort some events which I couldn't remember clearly enough to explain properly— storyteller's license.

One of the more successful things in that write-up, however, was when I suddenly switched narrative perspective for one episode to that of the villains of the story, previously only sketchily portrayed. Because they were my characters I was able to portray them much more confidently. This led me to think that a write-up *entirely* from the point of view of the characters' opponent(s) might hold promise.

More importantly, though, is the idea hinted at above of the narrative being somehow located within the game world. My storyteller solution was set at an unspecified remove in time from the actual events, so it was clear that the characters would have no access to it. But that is not necessarily true of the suggestion of telling the story in the form of letters. Here the game write-up can become in itself an artefact of the game, existing within the world of the characters. Following this line makes other possibilities evident. A write-up could consist of the report of some person holding an official position. It could be the lay composed by a character's minstrel ('Brave Sir Robin…' etc). And so on.

Structures

Point of view is not the only decision to be made, of course. It should always be borne in mind that the 'text' of a role-playing session lies in the interactions between players (among whose number I include the referee). It is unusual in that, unlike most forms such as novels or plays, there are parts of the 'text' which will be inaccessible to other players (and it should be remembered that players are simultaneously creators and audience).

It is crazy to imagine that you could simply render this 'text' in written form, and have anything worth looking at. If you've ever taped one of your sessions, imagine writing it down *verbatim*. Again, it might constitute a remarkable work of post-modernist writing, but…

I Must Be Mad! (Well, actually...)

by Paul Mason with Vaughan Allen

愛魔寺院

IN IMAZINE 16 I wrote an article with exactly the same title as this one, about 'Abnormal Psychology In Rolegames'. So why use the title again? I must be mad! (Well, actually…) The original article was a typical fanzine article by a student. You get hold of a new textbook and, in a desperate attempt to derive some use from what you are studying, or perhaps to fire yourself with a semblance of enthusiasm, you pen an article in which you establish some tenuous connection between the contents of that textbook and role-playing games. That was what I did. It was a lot of twaddle in which mental illnesses were naïvely categorised. It had precious little relevance to role-playing games then. Nowadays I *particularly* dislike the approach it stood for: one in which characters are constructed as cynically and soullessly as Japanese pop records.

That, however, is more or less beside the point. In this article I do not propose to wax lyrical about undergraduate approaches to the nomenclature of mental illness, or even post-graduate approaches to language, truth and logic. Rather, I want to examine some ideas about the nature of the individual. The relevance of the title will become apparent in due course.

This article emerged from an email conversation I've been having with Vaughan Allen, and just to confuse things, I will interject elements of that discussion into the article. Before I begin, however, I should point out that Vaughan disagreed with most of my contentions, and it is highly likely that I will be taking his comments out of context and misrepresenting them.

Beneath the pavement, the drains...

It sort of started when we got into discussing role-playing, since Vaughan was someone who did a lot and wrote a lot in the old days (now he does it in the fields of music, journalism, music journalism and international security).

> Just finished reading through the Imazines. How many of the debates sound distressingly familiar from ten years ago. I was interested in some of the stuff you were saying about playing characters that challenge your self-perceptions. I remember going through a long period at the end of my gaming career when I started getting into therapy and stuff,

and looked at ways of combining therapy with rpgs...I definitely believed (especially with the free-form tripped out stuff I was doing right at the end) that it combined gaming with therapy with collaborative theatre (people still believe that reality should/is controlled by the GM? Wow, so much for post-modernism...)

He had to get me started by mentioning post-modernism, didn't he? As I've said so often, most of the attempts at 'post-modernism' in role-playing are crude transplants of the most superficial aspects of the word.

The house that Jacques built

> Well you could say that all rpgs are post-modernist in that they're pastiches of forms of reality. And if you end up with a situation where the GM is controlling narrative flux in order to feel clever, that sort of high auteurism is just High Modernism done badly.

My problem has always been with this term 'post-modernism'. Any movement, or set of ideas which label themselves purely in terms of some other movement strike me as dubious. I have slightly less problem with the term 'post-structuralism', but I prefer a more useful term for a movement, such as 'deconstructionism'. True, the term 'deconstruction' was invented by Derrida, but it has been invented in such a way that it yields insights into the movement simply by inspecting the word.

The opposite of 'construction' is, as we all know, 'destruction'. In creating the term 'deconstruction', Derrida immediately launched a salvo at the binary logic enshrined in language (this drew on the word of the psychoanalyst Lacan) by suggesting that there might be a 'third way,' denied to us only by the hierarchical nature of our language.

So then we got onto the topic of escapism, which I've been hammering in imazine the past couple of issues. I think rolegaming suffers from preconceptions, from the conservative nature of so many of its performers, and equally from the reaction to them. My current bugbear is the idea that in order to 'grow up', rolegaming has to shed its escapist nature. If I had more time I would be doing some reading into 'Escapism', because I find a lot of the connotations of the word quite disturbing.

Yeah, the whole idea of maturing and being less escapist is part of the connection between dominant therapy culture and authoritarianism. I don't really still hold to the sixties notion of 'rediscovering a sense of play', as those who suggest and talk about such ideas are usually doing so in order to reject packaged entertainment (you can't play in that way, you have to play in this way...). I'm always reminded of the debates I have with therapy people when they go, 'men have to get in touch with their emotions', and I explain that men have always been as in touch with their emotions as women, they just happen to be different emotions and ones that are no longer societally acceptable. Robin Cook's wife, when he decided to divorce her, went on radio and said something along the lines of 'women are ten years more mature than men on the whole', which just left me wondering where you could buy a mature-o-meter...What reality are people saying rpgs should engage with? This 'growing up' is surely to engage with a form of consensual reality, and to regard it as the only reality, something that people playing rpgs should know is essentially fallacious...

And that was where we got on to the idea that I want to principally discuss in this article. You will now see where the title comes in. In agreeing with Vaughan's comment above, and proposing that the concept of an objective consensual reality is meaningless at best, fascistic at worst, I open myself up to accusations of being a nutter. It's inevitable, really, when so many people have so much emotional capital invested in the One True Way of life.

This is your life?

In the old fanzine days, the 'One True Way' was a frequent topic of discourse. The term related to the way in which Gary Gygax sought to promulgate a single, official way of role-playing. This reached its nadir in Gygax's book *Role-playing Mastery*, reviewed in imazine 20 (copy supplied on request). The term was used outside of the context of Gygax himself, however. It was applied to anyone who argued that their approach to role-playing was universal. Some of the early pronouncements that attracted this term will seem utterly ridiculous if repeated today. If you don't have character classes in your game, it's not role-playing. Under no circumstances should player characters attack one another. And so on. Nowadays the pronouncements have got a little more sophisticated, and yet to my eyes they are equally ridiculous. Hence we have the Sandy Peterson approach: if it doesn't involve conflict, it isn't a game. We have the various sides of the dice/rules/cards arguments that effectively try to win by saying 'Our way is the One True Way', but in a slightly more convoluted and less honest manner.

I think the tendency to do this emerges from a profound level in our experience of the world. In short, we *need* a One True Way, and if we cannot find one ready-packaged, we invent one. This applies far outside the field of role-playing; it applies in life. Role-playing is useful in that it enables us to observe the phenomenon rather clearly. What we see, if we look closely enough, is that at the core of most people there lies a One True Way. It is the internal aspect of the external One True Way that is the consensual reality Vaughan mentioned earlier.

And a lot of what we used to write about, 'character integrity' and 'working on characters' is now something I would probably disagree with (and probably that's why I started to play more with therapy ideas within rpgs, notions of changing characters); I feel the re-iteration of false humanist ideals of a sovereign individual is in itself exceptionally conservative...

There it is: the sovereign individual. The source of our hunt for a One True Way in life is our dogmatic belief in the presence of One True Self within ourselves. It leads to all the other manifestations of the OTW, of which the one which springs to mind most readily is that pile of nonsense, the notion of the sovereignty of the nation state.

Vaughan suggested using rolegames to undermine this notion of the sovereign human individual, to 'start imploding linear conceptions of characters'. Although I go along with this to some extent, I disagreed with many of his proposed methods which, as he said, drew on therapy ideas. What I am after, instead, is to examine the malleability of identity in relation to the social environment and other people. I'm also interested in the relation between culture and identity.

In a sense here, you're talking about me using therapeutic forms, and you 'doing therapy'...I was challenging (so was rather more limited) notions within game space itself, whereas you are suggesting challenging/mutating character in consensual space.

While Vaughan focuses on the malleability of character, I believe that malleability of character is an intrinsic part of role-playing, and doesn't need to be identified or encouraged. Instead, by attempting to create an 'authentic' environment, which nevertheless differs from the environment we inhabit, it is possible to detach yourself from the Form into which your Life is poured (concepts from Pirandello). The environment has to feel authentic because otherwise it is far more difficult to invest any emotional capital in it. I think there is also a sense in which it is a construction of a consensual reality, and the more authentically it is created, the more it undermines the notion Vaughan mentioned above,

that maturity consists of getting in touch with the One True Consensual Reality.

I broadly agree with this. I think this is one of the reasons why people have been so threatened by deconstruction and po-mo as a whole. The notion that there can be a continual process of analysis and interrogation, that nothing is fixed or stable, and that nothing is ever quite what it seems, or without prejudice or bias is soul-destroying eventually. One of the most interesting and rpg-relevant points here is where we came into this argument/discussion. That I would broadly argue (though with caveat as I've pointed out) that it is the search for the OTW and for an externalised and controllable form of reality (the game world) that allows rpg game worlds to be constructed. In some sense they give nerdy but intelligent individuals (;-)) the feeling of control in an uncertain universe...that allow some outlet for that fascistic impulse. That it is this feeling/tendency that drives the desire to make the game world self-consistent rather than random or surrealistic. I'm not particularly talking about the point at which we came into agreement here because I think you'd have felt as home in my surreal/dream state games as I would in your exquisitely fashioned creations...at the end it all comes down to playability....Certainly the number of arguments I got into about 'but why is this happening...that doesn't make sense???' was extraordinary...Which strikes me as a search for a defined and controllable universe in game-space...

The one point I would make here is that this may in itself be reactionary. If there is an attempt to exchange our fractured ego for a firmly held one, isn't that an attempt to re-introduce the false human sovereign individual idea? If only in play...I can see that this can be a challenging experience if done well, but do you see my point that it can be reduced to a futile concentration on the pursuit of consistent character in the game world? Which is something that I think many of us (myself fully included) were too stuck on years ago...that we could argue about whether such-and-such an action was consistent with a character, and that even when one thought a lot about motivations and setting up a character, the character stopped developing at the point of entry to a game.

I can see the point. But maybe my immersion in role-playing has decreased over the years, or maybe I was lying about the Emperor's New Clothes in the old days.

I think the mistake I used to make (and probably still do out of habit), which is perhaps what you are referring to above, was in insisting that the role in a role-playing game should be a 'different person'. As soon as you make a comment like this, you've

established a false distinction, and upheld the 'human individual' idea (cf Daodejing). However I've been through enough discussions since about inspiration behind characters to realise that *every* character comes from within, but that this 'within' is no different to without (the microcosm is in the macrocosm, and vice versa). The more characters you 'bring to life', who are recognised as distinct 'human sovereign individuals' by other players, the more you are demonstrating that we contain within us all the elements, and the more you undermine the whole idea of human sovereign individuality. There is a contradiction in this, of course, that Vaughan is identifying as a reactionary possibility. My resolution of this (or 'excuse' if you'd rather call it that) is that it is necessary to strive towards making your character an individual because only by doing so can you make clear the universality of human beings. Does that make any sense?

For what it's worth when I look back on many of the characters I have played I now regard them as fully authentic versions of 'me', whatever that is. The more I have succeeded in developing them as individuals, the more I have obtained total identification with them, and thus the more I have undermined the whole idea of my 'identity'. I find it easier to develop characters as individuals in 'authentic' environments, and I'd even say that some of our speculations years ago about how to play a character were also valid. Personally, though, I don't care to analyse character actions nowadays, I feel this creates distance, and emphasises the artificiality—the constructed nature—of the character, which also reinforces the myth of 'not me'.

Hmm, my point about you 'doing therapy' seems to be coming back to haunt again...I guess my material criticising the adoption of Strong DC (different character) is relevant, but only in criticism of what we used to talk about. I think your analysis has changed a lot (as has mine). Your analysis could lead to a similar position to mine...where a player is not secure in their insecurity and thus adopts a separate sovereign individual and tries to secure that in a rationalistic context in game-space as psychic protection against themselves...whereas both you and I are suggesting an active interrogation with the notion of sovereign individuality by adoption and absorption of fractures within personality itself, and the adaption of those personal fractures into self-consistent and developing (self-organised?) game personalities as weak DCs. Sort of schiz-gaming (especially with the phrasing of your bit about 'the more characters you bring to life...') reminds me a little of Deleuze's ideas of the rhizome....

Once again, I guess, it's a matter of thinking and interacting properly and not doing things by rote.

I still think that, paradoxically, creating an authentic-feeling background challenges and subverts reality far more than most of the gimmicks I've yet seen. That was what I learned from EPT. The world of Tékumel exists, in a similar way to Middle-earth, but with rather more complexity. This is partly because of the way that Barker (who made the world) overtly acknowledges the relationship between the Tékumels of players around the world and his own. In a sense, the game (viewed as a set of gaming groups) tackles the relative, rather than consensual, nature of experience, and I think it is so successful because the world is so well-realised and complex, yet also so alien.

Stop making sense

This is how I can go really over the edge and say that I regard the characters I have role-played as real people. I will qualify that statement: I regard them as just as real as the 'me' that other people regard as real. In other words, they are aspects of the dynamic operations of the biological entity I suppose myself to be, and they have just as much 'reality' about them as the roles I spend rather more of my life playing. This is because, although they are constructed identities, I have realised that the same is true of all of my interaction with the world. A constructed identity is not inferior to a 'real' identity for the simple reason that there is no difference between the two. There are qualitative differences between different identities, certainly, but these are related to how the constructed identity relates to the environment around it.

> Hmm, I think we're approaching the same point from two different directions. When I spent a lot of time studying post-modernism I was interested in the writers who stepped beyond that thing you referred to as the 'architectural' definition of po-mo, in which the term basically becomes applied to pastiche and reference and a certain sense of camp. There is within this school a notion of the end of history that sees us just playing with the pieces. There is, however, another school that sees an end of history in the sublimation or supercession of the sovereign individual and ego. Much of this work comes out of feminist writers (Kristeva and Irigaray), some of whom associated the ego with patriarchy and the flow of emotions (the primal chora from which we are separated during the 'mirror' stage of our upbringing—that 'moment' when the child sees itself in the mirror and recognises itself as a being, individual and independent from other humans and cut out in shape from the world—obviously this is heuristic and not an actual 'moment') suppressed by the ego as feminine. This work has been adapted in the work of cyber-feminists who look at the complete interaction of the human body, mind and spirit

with the technological universe, and declare the ego dying...

The ego assassin

This was the point when I found myself agreeing with Vaughan, even though we had come, as he says, from different directions, and even though Lacan's post-Freudian analysis of the 'mirror stage' has been criticised by many feminists including Irigaray herself.

> That's why I tend to use the 'mirror stage' as only heuristic and not fixed. I think there is something in it, but am not convinced by the whole clanking mechanism of Freud's analysis of the mind/brain/personality.
>
> One of the points I'd make about po-mo fiction is that it doesn't have to be cock-sure and self-aware to be po-mo, it could also sink you so completely into another world that you are alienated from your self as individual ego… and this is something I look for in fiction and film, and I guess you're talking about in rpgs…The construction of this world/experience can be so dense that it by-passes what passes for human ego, effectively setting up something akin to a dream state (?)

Without getting too hippy-dippy about things, it's also what Joseph Campbell was on about, especially in *Hero With A Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth*, when he talked about 'epiphanies' and 'following your bliss'. I should state straight off that I disagree with a lot of Campbell's attitude—especially his wholehearted endorsement of the classical aesthetic theory advocated by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (I hesitate to ascribe the theory, as Campbell does, to James Joyce, the author of the novel, because I am by no means certain that Joyce believed it fully himself).

Nevertheless, I find myself brought back to a theme ineptly approached by 'Dave Stone' (ie me) in imazine 13: namely the relation between role-playing and myth. Vaughan's invocation of the 'dream state' points directly at myth, in the Jungian sense of pre-verbal archetypal patterns lurking in the collective unconscious, and given verbal expression in a variety of forms (including myth, literature, and dreams recalled).

> I would probably disagree with this. Only cause the whole clanking metaphor of the collective unconscious is even worse than the whole clanking metaphor of the Freudian personality. Still can't bring myself to accept archetypes…too American I think…

Now don't imagine that I'm suggesting that myths have some form of primal, structured existence. Maybe they are better understood in terms of being a part of the wet meat, the 'hardware' of our minds,

which enables us to deal with certain psychological processes. Like most hardware, they change over time and can even be upgraded.

Now does this mean that I'm going to start advocating a self-conscious structuring of games based on mythic patterns, especially Campbell's *monomyth*? Am I hell! It's precisely this kind of self-conscious approach to role-playing that seems to me to be the obstacle towards the 'epiphany', the transcendent experience.

No, what I'm actually advocating is an unselfconscious, escapist attitude to games, combined with the densely constructed world alluded to by Vaughan, above (this is what I have referred to in the past as 'Culture Games').

> In some senses I guess this could also be seen as replacing the fractured and self-reflexive ego of the po-mo human (us lot I mean) with a solid and understandable one...(which, I would say might be a clue towards the attractiveness of the escapist notion of rpgs...)...and the threats and procedures that that ego undergoes in the course of game time do reflect some of the battles we as individuals keep going through in 'consensual reality', namely the attempt to keep a grip on who and what we are...
>
> And I suppose, the better the world is, the more threats and shocks the characters suffer.

Whether the 'ego' that is created in the course of a game, even a culture game, is 'solid and understandable', is a matter for debate. I don't believe so. A character who is completely understandable is flat, uninteresting, and not 'solid'. Interesting characters, in my experience, are those with some complexity: those that most closely resemble the poor, fractured, self-reflexive egos of us poor dwellers in the Real World™. It is for this reason that I advocate rich, complex worlds and unselfconscious characterisation. It is also, I have realised, why I dislike so much those games which have been labelled 'post-modernist'. They belong to the first strain of post-modernism identified by Vaughan, above: a strain of pastiche, self-reference and camp; a strain in which we are just playing with the pieces. They are disengaged, but this is not the disengagement of creative escapism. It is a disengagement which protects the fragile ego from any threats and shocks it might experience if it actually let go and started role-playing. It's a deeply reactionary disengagement. It dips a cautious toe into the water with a superior look on its face.

Me? I want to follow Orpheus, dive in to the pool, and see what I find. **i**

Zhao Yu and flower girl, from Outlaws and Moonlight. *Art by Keiko Kito*

Once you accept that the role-played 'text' has to be interpreted into a different structure, there are some other things you have to think about, which will also depend on the way your game is structured. Do you just present events as a continuous, soap opera-style sequence? Or do you attempt to find narrative patterns within the run of adventures which can be presented as complete structures? (This is particularly easy in those games that focus on discrete scenarios).

Do you concentrate on one character at the expense of others? In Patrick Brady's Hall of Stone write-ups, for example, Ian Marsh's Orun has emerged as a sort of *de facto* hero of the write-ups, even though some of the other players probably wouldn't regard him as the 'hero' of the game in play. In my own write-ups, the first two stories clearly represent the old merchant Zhao Yu as the hero, even though the narrative contains other figures who might make more traditional hero figures.

It might also be worth considering how Thomas Keneally approached writing *Schindler's Ark,* to which I alluded earlier. There, it is clear that he had a tremendous amount of material to work from, and the trick was to *select* what was necessary. Unfortunately this option isn't always available to role-gamers, in that the game text itself represents a form of selection: we don't play every moment in the lives of our characters.

Nevertheless, the message is clear. Much can be achieved by careful selection of details, and the omission of that which is unnecessary or redundant. (What a shame I can't always follow my own advice!)

I've tried to provisionally outline a few possibilities on this subject. I'd welcome contributions and comments, both from those who have attempted write-ups themselves, and from those who have read them. **i**

COLLOQUY

Letters to the editor

AFTER my feeling for the last couple of issues that I haven't been receiving much response, the last issue prompted a sudden deluge of letters very soon after its publication. Moreover, I'm considering establishing a special separate letters section for people called 'Robert'. As ever, thanks to everyone who commented. Comments by me are indented and preceded by 明尊.

Reactions

Robert Irwin
Finally bought a printer so can now read Imazine from the comfort of my bed as opposed to burning my eyes out on the screen.

> 明尊 That's how it's meant to be read. I always put any adverse criticism down to the fact that the poor reader must have been staring at a screen rather than lying in bed drinking a cup of cocoa.

Phil Nicholls
I enjoyed the fanzine reviews, it is just a shame that of the four covered, two needed US funds and one had no fixed abode. Does this mean that there simply are fewer UK zines around?

> 明尊 Don't ask me, governor—I live in Japan! As for the no fixed abode, *Carnel* is available from: Robert Rees, Flat 2A, 34A Kingsdown Parade, Cotham, Bristol BS6 5UF. Until October, anyway.

Rob Alexander
Regarding file size, I think that there was quite enough artwork in #29. Burn the pictures, I say.

> 明尊 Ever the advocate of choice, I am including pictures in this issue to allow you the pleasure of burning them yourself. Whaddayamean that's not what you meant?

Ashley Southcott
I wonder whether it would be worth allowing book reviews into the reviews section. Much of published (or unpublished, for that matter) rolegaming material is derived from fictional works so their inclusion could be used to explore their possibilities for gaming, as well as recommending a good book or two. On the downside the inclusion of book reviews might be seen to pad out the zine to the detriment of the game design element. And there are plenty of other zines that incorporate book reviews.

Adrian Bolt
Since 'when I get time to play' is typical of Imazine readers (I'm in the Oxford/Reading/Swindon area—anyone nearby?) you ought to do a survey—you're probably the only one still gaming! Have you got new readers since publishing an online version?

> 明尊 Yes I have.

Critical comment

Phil Nicholls
Can role-playing involve critical comment? Undoubtedly role-playing games can cover a very broad range of topics. The medium is really only limited by the imagination of the GM and players. Yet, most people play rolegames as entertainment, so are likely to prefer a style where they can have fun. The counselling course at a local college uses role-playing to teach counselling techniques. Few gamers, however, are likely to enjoy playing a team of workers at a Citizens' Advice Bureau. Despite the levels of personal interaction and conflict between clients involved, CAB: The RPG will entice few gamers. Such gamers may be missing the chance to explore complex human relationships, but will still want more exciting, more escapist forms of role-playing.

> 明尊 One thing I've realised from reading a little 'serious literature' is that one of the most important justifications for including a little substance in one's games in that it is more entertaining. Pure fantasy unrelieved by moral dilemmas or anything else that ties the game to the participants' experience of life becomes deeply tedious after a while. I feel this is one of the critical unspoken reasons why rolegaming has such a dropout rate.

Bill Hoad
I have decided that we are fooling ourselves when we say how positive RPGs are because, in practice, they do tend to produce some rather blinkered individuals. There's a contentious statement. It certainly doesn't apply to all refs/players and many of my friends are RPG fans. But as a whole, RPG enthusiasts tend to be worse than trainspotters.

You speak of RPGs' potential to allow players to 'step out of the frame'; I think this is rare. In fact RPG Universes are very good at denying alternative perspectives. This could apply to anything, but as an

example, if the referee believes that women should stay in the house and that non-white races are unable to develop civilisations, this will probably be reflected in their fantasy world, where it becomes 'The Truth'. Such assumptions may go unnoticed but serve to reinforce players' prejudices.

Now RPGs are neutral, they can equally be used to break down prejudices. A 'right on' ref could create a politically correct world to challenge players' prejudices, but it is rare for refs to take on this education role. Usually refs and players are of very similar age, background and interests, so players and refs tend to reinforce their viewpoints.

But I suppose the most obvious example does undermine my argument. You can divide RPG refs/players into those who believe that high calibre weapons can solve most problems, and the rest. Now some games are deliberately designed to be gun-orientated worlds, which is fair enough. But some groups will reach for their guns be it *Judge Dredd, Call of Cthulhu* or *Bunnies and Burrows.* Occasionally there is some crossover, a player of gun wielding maniac characters joins a thoughtful group of players. All the cases I have seen, the player cannot understand why blasting away seems to cause his character great problems with the authorities and why no other character likes or trusts his character. But I don't think I have ever seen a player learn from this. So maybe we are all pretty resistant to positive or negative learning processes.

明尊 [Puts on university lecturer's hat] Darn tootin'! [Takes off university lecturer's hat] I can only speak for myself, but I found that playing a character deliberately modelled on the mentality of an SS officer was a learning process. Which leads neatly on to…

Robert Rees
Robert [Irwin] seems to imply that the Germans feel sorry about the Jews but still see them as different from the rest of humanity and that the other 'races' are still inferior. I am glad that a gaming supplement can lead to such a deep debate. That is after all its purpose. I am extremely saddened that Robert has decided to lump *Charnel Houses* together with the satirical *Better Dead than Red.* The only thing they have in common is that Robert dislikes them. Like the new game *Extreme Violence* there are 'fuck 'em' elements in doing something that is so outrageously outré and reactionary. *Charnel Houses* is in a different league, it presents historical facts not a political fantasy.

I would like to hear what Robert finds distasteful in *Charnel Houses,* beyond the mirror that it holds to the human soul. If he can separate his personal feelings from his intellectual comprehension of the Holocaust then he will find a game that is difficult, upsetting, moving but overall one that is very important, not just to role-players but to all of us.

Wolf whistles

Ashley Southcott
Robert Irwin's comment about White Wolf games being 'crippled by sad gits' brought a smile to my face; since we are all probably viewed as 'sad gits' by everyone outside the hobby, you might wonder what proportion of all gamers are therefore crippled... All right, his moan was about the encyclopaedic exhibitions that WW players tend to put on, but surely we all rely to an extent on published materials, whether gaming-related or not (how far would you have got with *Outlaws*, without videos of *A Chinese Ghost Story* or *The Water Margin?*). Imagination needs something to chew on if genuinely great, innovative games are to be created. This is supposedly what the gaming press gives us: grist for the imagination mill.

Rob Nott
Apparently we're now very 'unhip'—case in point the sarcastic asides directed against White Wolf games. They seem to be the new Games Workshop... I have to admit that I'm a great admirer of the *Mage* magic system (I don't think the D10 system works well for combat, but the magic system lends itself well to it and it's perfect if, like me, you want to run games à la John Constantine and/or Clive Barker); what I've seen of *Wraith* looks interesting, and *Vampire* was at least original for its time. True, they are embarrassingly pretentious at times but let's be honest Paul, we've both supped from that cup in the past...

明尊 In the past…?

Rob Nott
Personally I was delighted to see the trend towards 'dark' games in the late eighties/early nineties. I'm sure you'll remember me championing dark campaigns of the Alan Moore ilk long before they became popular, back when 'dark' meant Dragon-Lance supplements.

And yes, I was surprised to detect a general feeling amongst your readers that dark games are somewhat passé. I suppose this is a reaction to the cliché of too many goths playing angst-ridden campaigns of *Vampire* with the Sisters of Mercy on the hi-fi, and the generally pretentious sixth form nature of much of the White Wolf background, but even so I would have thought its cult fiction roots would lend it street cred (by which I'm thinking *A Clockwork Orange, The Magus, American Psycho, John Constantine* etc and not Anne bloody Rice). I must admit I like game settings that are built around blood and snot. A dark game provides the kind of dramatic conflict I enjoy.

Now and Zen

Maurice Thomas

For me, the best games are the ones where you laugh more than you argue, people die due to stupidity rather than stats, and the referee has a surprised smile on his/her face the whole time.

Ashley Southcott

I think 'Zen in the Art of Refereeing' was one of your traditional rants; I think back to it and wonder what it was all about. I was gobsmacked to see that you write no plots, which puts the onus very much on the players to contribute to their games. A good thing, perhaps, but how many players used to having the GM act as entertainer will put up with this? And how, in the absence of a plot, do you stop PC parties from deviating from a conventional scenario's plot? I don't see how plotted scenarios can work if the GM doesn't enforce those plots. Unless you write absolutely all gaming material—which, okay, you do for *Outlaws*.

> 明尊 It all depends on the way you use those conventional scenarios. If you are a slave to them, then yes, you will have to 'enforce' the plots. If you take my approach, you don't worry at the prospect of player characters deviating from the plot. If the conventional plotted scenario is even halfway decent, it will be able to stand being severely warped. If it is so limited that it simply fails to function without the players' co-operation ('If the players do not halt the villain, the world is destroyed' or more sophisticated versions of the same), then I'd consider it crap even judged by the standards of conventional plotted scenarios.
>
> Some of my favourite moments in games have come when players went in an entirely different direction to that envisaged in the original scenario. If you're prepared to let this happen, then it is perfectly possible to play a Thatcheresque scenario in a Proudhonesque manner.

Phil Nicholls

I was very interested in your piece on refereeing. After returning to refereeing after a gap of several years, I find that my style is gradually approaching the one that you describe. This was a gradual process as I had to build up my own confidence in my ability to role-play a variety of situations 'off-the-cuff'. Also, I believe that a Zen referee needs an instinctive feeling for the rule system in use. This is not to be a rules lawyer, but to be able to smoothly guide players through the situations they encounter, ie social intercourse, chases, combat, dancing, whatever. Such impromptu rulings must be integrated into the rules as a whole. If different mechanisms are used in the same situations, then players may become disillusioned. As you wrote your own rules you should be able to do this naturally (明尊 If only!). The rest of us must work at this skill.

The use of a regular NPC, or should that be GMC, can only help the atmosphere of the game. The GMC brings guidance and atmosphere to the players, while allowing the GM to experience parts of the game from a player's perspective.

The Zen referee also needs players who are prepared to participate as required. Many players may not be expecting this type of game, so may have to be guided into their roles. I feel sure, however, that most players would relish the opportunity. I know that I would.

Robert Irwin

Always fascinated by articles on refereeing as it is something I never, ever do. I suspect having read this article that I wouldn't get on too well in your games. Maybe I've played too much *Amber*, but I find the idea of 'impartial authority' from rules highly distasteful. I think referees, especially experienced ones, shouldn't be afraid of using this godlike power. If players get used to this impartial authority (and dice) being the arbiter in decisions, an air of competition develops between what are perceived as the GM's interests and the players'. You (as GM) represent barriers and bad-guys. It leads to the situation where the players will never *trust* you.

> 明尊 Quite the opposite. I, as referee, DO NOT 'represent barriers and bad-guys'. This is an essential corollary to the whole process. As referee I represent *everyone*, including barriers, bad-guys, good-guys and liberal democrats. I do *not* represent Fate, Chance, or the Will of an Absolute God.
>
> This way, the players realise that *I* am not out to get them, or stand in their way: their opponents within the game do that. They trust *me*. They also trust some of the characters I *play*. Others they don't. While I understand how you can derive the above theory, I can assure you that I have observed no such trend in *any* of the games I have played in or refereed. Indeed, I have observed the opposite. In games where the referee's power was unquestioned and absolute, an air of competition developed in which the players attempted to gain some level of control of their characters and their character's actions: the referee therefore ended up as much more of an opponent.

Robert Irwin

In my *Amber* group we'd take the piss if a player disagreed with something so much that the rulebook had to be pulled out.

Maurice Thomas

More recently (last week) I witnessed the difficulty inherent in games based on published rules systems. We were playing *In Nomine,* as part of a group of Angels

tracking down demons. The demons were in the next room, and it was looking to be a very interesting game, until one player started scanning every person he met for traces of evil intent. I pointed out that as Angels it might be a bit dissonant to run around suspecting everyone, but the player insisted. The ref took issue with the player, which resulted in the player thrusting the rules at the ref and saying 'Well, it doesn't say that you can't'. At that point the game dissolved into a lot of people muttering 'Powergaming Arse' and 'The Pubs are Open'.

明尊 Well, OK, it seems there's plenty to take the piss out of. However, very few players I know would take the piss if it was pointed out that a referee was being deliberately and obviously inconsistent in rulings in order to shaft a player character. With rules, at least you have *some* standard of reference. Otherwise, it just turns into one of those arguments based on differing interpretations of reality clash. In other words, our troublesome Angel would be just as much of a pain (if not more so) in the absence of a rule book as with one. Remember, kids: rulebooks don't annoy people, ruleslawyers do. Er…

Robert Rees
Interesting article. I find it hard to comment on it though because I read Imazine: The First Era before I started GM-ing in earnest. Thus the zine and the Masonic School of Thought had a big impact on the way I ran games.

Thus I tend not to worry too much about the detail of the rules or forcing a plot onto the players. I think the GM is not so much 'God' but rather is the world. A kind of invisible shell that contains the characters and reacts to their actions. As a GM I try and create a world as immersive and as interesting (I almost said 'believable') as our own. Frequently my games disintegrate into squabbling and nothing is done. Often there is so much going on that the PCs are swamped by events. I wouldn't see these as problems though. If I am trying to create an immersive world there are going to be times when the characters are finally overwhelmed by events and the path they should take is not clear to them. I also refuse to worry that characters are not following the events that I think are important. When I do my God-thing and decide what the NPCs' objectives are I try and base my decisions on what the NPCs think is important to them. The PCs deserve no less.

As for combat, unless I have been watching too many John Woo films, I tend to use the rule that 'violence breeds violence'. If the PC's are violent and aggressive they will encounter more hostility until ultimately they will be caught up in a vicious spiral of escalating violence usually resulting in their deaths. If they are peaceful and co-operative then people will generally react favourably towards them and they

will find many allies. I think this represents a certain truth of history. I certainly would not force a fight simply because there hasn't been one. To be believable violence has to come from some rational source. Even in *D&D* there was a rationale for all the fighting going on, if nothing else orcs hated humans because the humans always killed the orcs when they met them.

Violence without reason just makes PCs feel victimised.

Rob Nott
I also like finite games. All the games I've run recently (last few years) have had a beginning, a middle and an end. They've been structured to run like a novel or a film, they last between 12-24 sessions and then they're over. And yes, I like games to be tightly plotted. I want to know I'm playing in a game which has plot threads unravelling around me. I want to be the central protagonist in a story. I don't want to create the story as a player, I only GM to shape it. I want to play in a game that will progress to a natural conclusion with or without me, but has the capacity to be changed by my actions.

I don't personally enjoy free form games of the 'so you're all together in Mos Eisly space bar, what do you want to do?' school of thought. You're the GM god dammit, tell me a story—give me NPCs I can converse with; give me complex plots that I can discuss with the other players. All personal taste of course.

Robert Rees
I have played enjoyable games of White Wolf's *Mage* which revolved around drinking orange juice in the kitchen of a communal house and doing DIY. A game like this is not a genre game. The characters drinking juice and playing cards are never going to get the One Ring to Mordor but they are being true to themselves.

Adrian Bolt
The only time I tried minimalist referee direction the players achieved absolutely nothing; split up, dither, duplicate effort—my appreciation for the word 'directionless' knew no bounds. At the other extreme a friend GMed your metaphorical dwarf in the form of a demon geasing us to do a quest or be incinerated. One player refused to start a scenario in this manner even at the cost of a character—sort of preferring to lose a character rather than free will. Odd!

Rob Nott
I also like (and like to run) game sessions that are well paced. Please, please don't give me any more 'one off' games at house cons where someone says 'I can run a game of *Call of Cthulhu/Pendragon/Vampire/Amber/In Nomine'*, you spend 1½ hours designing a character you'll only use once (the GM is half pissed and will never remember to incorporate any of your chosen background into the session) and then

proceed to waste 5 hours of your life in a game that consists of 5 badly mis-matched characters talking about and doing bugger all, with no visible leads forthcoming from the GM (cuz he's pissed, and anyway, it's a free form game). As you can imagine, I don't subscribe to the 'a GM is there to provide the coffee and biscuits' theory. Marc Bragg has just come back from a house con in which Alan Morgan ran a fantasy one off that consisted of Marc and co sailing up and down a coast talking about bugger all, with bugger all happening. As a snapshot of what life's like it's probably very accurate, but I think I'd rather watch paint dry.

Robert Rees

I also recognised the PC's sitting around in the bar waiting for the dwarf situation. However in the gaming groups I have played and GM-ed in we have always decided that these situations are natural. In fact we have sometimes taken them to their extreme opposite. The dwarf runs in and shouts 'There's a dragon in the mountain!'; the adventurers shuffle their feet nervously and say 'So? We've got enough money to move on, and we were planning on starting a family soon and dragons are dangerous etc. etc.'

> 明尊 There seems to be an idea that games run as I was describing them have to be 'directionless' and full of idle chit-chat. It doesn't follow. Remember, the referee is a player too, with characters that can start things happening if the other players don't. What I object to is the privileging of referee characters in the manner so perfectly demonstrated by Adrian's tale of the geasing demon.

Bill Hoad

I think when players start describing their environment, it is no longer role-playing, at least not as we know it. I can not see it ever being compatible with even the most collaborative RPG group. I do have an excellent storytelling card game called *Dark Cults.* In this each player takes it in turn to advance the story, but the characters are common property so you can never 'get at' a player's personal creation and it is storytelling not role-playing.

Robert Irwin

To an extent I agree with the idea of minimalism. I agree that actions that players initiate themselves are by far the more satisfying. In my experience this is true to the extent that players will get their characters to do quite self-destructive things in order to achieve their goals.

What I think we differ on is your statement 'I write no plots'. My idea of a good plot is one where a certain set of events will occur if the players do not intervene. There should ideally be a good reason why the players would *want* to intervene, especially if it a new game. In this way there is a sense of direction,

while the characters do not become mere puppets. A plot which *depends* on the players performing certain tasks rarely works as well. I've found a good combination, especially in shorter campaigns, is where one player is actually a plant with a more rigid set of goals defined by the GM.

> 明尊 It's the plot that *depends* on the player characters doing something that most people seem to mean when they say 'plot'. In my games, things will certainly happen if the player characters don't intervene. I don't call that 'plot' because it isn't. Plot is what happens in the game. It's the story, if you like, but plot implies a little more meaning. In the sense I'm using it, it means predetermined events.

Rob Nott

There are too many free form games that are the equivalent of a triple live ELP album—2½ hours of noodling with no dramatic content. Why can't we have more games that resemble a Clash single (明尊 for those of you with long memories, yes, this is *that* Rob Nott). Games with a bit of punch—well plotted, well paced, where there's plenty of stuff thrown at the players. Games built around adrenaline and speed. Games where you don't have time to sit around in a tavern talking pretentious shite all evening. By all means have calm periods, but try to ensure they're not just sounding boards for one or two extrovert players.

> 明尊 I have to admit, this certainly hits home in my case. On the other hand, I've noticed that my players seem to prefer the emphasis on conversation. The occasional bursts of action are leant more dramatic impact from the contrast.

China

Ashley Southcott

'Living in Interesting Times' gave me the long-needed intro to Chinese gaming I had been lacking. Barring the religious element I was surprised to see the parallels between it and Western fantasy worlds. The trick is obviously to enforce the hierarchical structure of society. My impression is that gamers generally don't enforce the social hierarchies inherent in Western medieval societies (I'm thinking here of Ray Gillham's slave-peasant-soldier-thane-noble hierarchy, at least to begin with) because they don't really think about the society of the time. It's easier for them to impose our own impressions of twentieth-century Western society onto our games, for example our notions of sexual and racial equality. Perhaps this imposition of modern society is simply because gamers don't think too much about what life was really life in medieval times. Same goes for other time-periods the gamers are unfamiliar with. Is that fair to say?

Knut Olav Nortun
I would have liked your article on ancient China to have been more in depth about one smaller part of Chinese society. I thought it was a bit superficial (I realize, of course, that it has to be, given its scope, but I still think articles such as this one should go into detail about one area instead of being a general introduction. It was interesting, but when I started getting into one part of the description it was suddenly over! (What I'm aiming at here is, of course, to get you to 'publish' the culture part of *Outlaws of the Water Margin*).

明尊 It's a fair accusation to say that the article was superficial. It was originally written for *arcane* magazine. (about which see Adrian Bolt's comment later on). I would have loved to have written in more detail about one period, but unfortunately that wasn't the brief I had. As for the culture section of *Outlaws*, I'll do my best.

Phil Nicholls
Presenting *Outlaws* material as contemporary documentation would provide a vehicle for conveying many of the nuances of the society. A scholarly, historical prose can pass on facts, but is unlikely to explain personal issues. Perhaps you could combine the two. You could have a series of anecdotes from outlawed NPCs which double as adventure seeds. A series of 'Day in the Life' articles could contrast the experiences of individuals from different levels of society.

Ashley Southcott
You also mentioned the possibility of writing imaginary documents for your Outlaws to peruse—I don't suppose this means player handouts? Perhaps handouts in the form of oaths or treaties the PCs have with other characters in the game would let the PCs know roughly where they stand at the outset, or perhaps job adverts denoting the rank of someone senior to seek out.

明尊 I suppose so, though whether they would just be 'player handouts' I'm not sure. I'm just worried about making the material interesting and useful enough. I've got some useful bits and bobs (land purchase contracts etc) that might give valuable clues, but equally might be regarded by readers less obsessed than myself as a load of boring crap.

Adrian Bolt
I'm not convinced that fiction is a good way of presenting background because it's inefficient (it requires more text to convey less information). Presenting background in 'contemporary' form is excellent for atmosphere but it's a slow building process which takes a huge amount of time and paper. If you have limitations such as wanting to get it all in one rule book then write an essay (or rule).

The best way for you to present fiction is obviously a bibliography.

明尊 True. Bear in mind, though, that since the game will eventually be done on CD-ROM (I'll be getting a CD-RW drive as soon as the price drops below £160—I saw one yesterday for £170) I will have plenty of room available for me to provide fiction, etc, as separate files from the main rules. This may also allow me to put in maps and artwork, if I wanted to absolutely guarantee that I wouldn't have time to finish the game before the year 2000…

Rob Nott
The Water Margin: I must put my hand up and freely admit that the one or two episodes I saw in my youth didn't really do much for me. I've never been a fan of cartoon violence (comic books excepted) and consequently I wrote it off as being 'silly and for kids'; one of the most damning comments I can (in my own mind) make. As I've often said, if we're going to have violence in role games, let's make it proper violence...

明尊 Strangely enough, for a lot of my contemporaries the appeal of *The Water Margin* was that, compared to what else was on offer, it *did* have proper violence.

Rob Nott
Having said that I *did* enjoy the ftf Water Margin game you ran for me back when you were living in London. I don't remember a great deal about it—I refrained from beating up some badly armed bandits while the others laid into them, on the grounds that the common scum were beneath my dignity, and their blood would taint the purity of my sword. Then later on Paz Newis pushed my (then) girl friend's character off a sloped pagoda roof (she survived the fall) for no apparent reason, to which I quite naturally drew my sword and duelled him Samurai fashion and, when he eventually lay wounded at my feet, decapitated him with a single slice, much to consternation of the other players who felt it was bad form to kill a PC. I asked Paz afterwards why he pushed Sarah off the pagoda and he said something about suspecting we were traitors because we didn't pile in and kill bandits like everyone else. This was a very early version of TWM and probably bore little resemblance to the campaign you now run. The reason I did like it though was because it didn't have any of those silly dubbed voices and 30' flying kicks that I remember from the TV series. 'Carry on Shogun' we can do without.

明尊 Well that hasn't changed, certainly (apart from the flying kicks, that is: you've obviously forgotten the leaps in that game). Oddly enough, that particular session is one that I remember for

that particular session is one that I remember for the way it influenced me in the direction of last issue's 'Zen…' article. Although I did have a plot and everything, I had a large number of players, and it soon became apparent that the tensions arising between the player characters were far more interesting than any stories I had to offer. I liked the way the group split into factions, and the way the factions then started plotting against each other. I realised at the time that if you're going to run a game for 10 players, that's really the only way to go. And Paz could hardly complain, could he, after what his character did?

Knut Olav Nortun

I feel that *Pendragon* actually has a point using the Personality traits/Passions systems. When Ray Gillham adjusted this system for Tékumel in Imazine #28, I realized that it really helps players play their characters. I think that for beginning players, and even for seasoned players who don't mind acting on dice-rolls, this is very close to perfect. With his article Ray Gillham told me very much about the Tékumelani mindset, a lot of things that just 'Telling' couldn't do. I feel however, that the system is more appropriate for informing players than it is for actually playing the game. I think that one could probably start characters out in Tékumel with the Traits and Passions and act according to the dice-rolls when the players are just starting out. When, after a few sessions, they know more about Tékumel, I think the system could be abandoned.

I would also like to entertain, for a little while, the thought that rolling dice to decide how a character acts is not necessarily a bad thing for seasoned players either. It does place focus on how a player ACTS OUT his player's personality instead of how he interprets it. This may lead to focus being placed on the players' interpretation of the other characters in the group instead of their own when it comes to personality. If you leave it all up to the player's interpretation of his character, some times role-playing becomes an inward-looking activity instead of a social one. Some players tend to sit pondering what their characters would do next instead of keeping the game going. (I admit, this is an experience from *Vampire: The Masquerade* which is so inward-looking it makes players who believe all of Mark Rein-Hagen's pretentious babble totally inactive—they just sit and brood!)

明尊 If you're wondering what connection this has to China, we're considering the idea of presenting background in the form of rules. By a strange coincidence, there has been a big debate on rec.games.frp.advocacy on the pros and cons of using rules to 'help' or 'force' (depending on which side of the argument you happen to be on) players to characterise characters from different cultures. I

was most convinced by the argument that if a person in a culture regards a certain force as being external to them, even if we now regard it as internal, it may be appropriate to represent it as such. This is a defence of the *Pendragon* Traits and Passions systems.

Knut may have a point in suggesting that experienced players may find it interesting to experiment with externalising certain aspects of their characters' personalities. Come to think of it, in a way that's what my bad joss mechanic does.

Face the facts

Paul Watson

I thought that Patrick Brady's article 'A Matter of Honour' in Imazine 27 addressed some very interesting points, and I will certainly be adapting it for my own use.

The one problem I still have with the concept of 'Face' is it relies on the two parties who are interacting to know fairly accurately where the other rates on the 'Face' scale. Obviously this is fine if the characters move within the same social circles or at least have heard of each other, but what is the initial reaction when two persons meet who have never heard of each other? How do they gauge the other's 'Face'? Whilst Face is indirectly related to how in/famous one is, my immediate assumption is that some sort of (stylised?) social banter goes on in which the two persons politely exchange pleasantries which slowly and delicately reveal the respective Face rates of the two parties. During this interaction (since we're dealing with Patrick's 'five trunk' system) Face would not be the only value that the other person tries to gauge—this increasingly intricate social dance would also reveal the relative rank (and perhaps financial level if the society deemed it important, although perhaps this is more evidently visible in a person's clothes) of the other.

During this process it is possible, of course, for one party to lie and pretend to more 'Face' than they are actually perceived as having by someone who knows them, but then that's just part of the (social) game. Presumably in Tékumel being discovered claiming more Face than you actually have would lose you Face? Perhaps Patrick could let us know how he addresses these problems?

Tim Harford

Needless to say, I found Patrick's article excellent: tremendous food for thought.

I was a little worried about the practical application of 'reflected glory'—picking up face by association with the deeds of others. Patrick espoused a multiplier system, which seemed messy.

An alternative system would be to have separate 'sets' of face: for example, personal face, associate face and clan face. Face is simply the sum of the three sets.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that a clear distinction between face resulting from personal deeds, and face by family or association, helps clear up feedback (I gain 50 face, so you gain 25 face, so I gain 12.5 face, so you gain 6.25 face...) I gain Clan face because of the Personal face of the members of the Clan; I gain Associate face because of the Personal face of my Associates. They gain from my personal deeds but not from a change in my Clan face. The trouble with this system is that in some worlds, it's possible to conceive of having high Clan face despite none of the members of the Clan being worthy. It's also nice to be able to model rising on the coat-tails of an associate as he gains face purely through his clan's rise to power.

Nevertheless, simplicity may compensate for loss of resolving power.

The other reason to adopt the system is that it easily allows for unusual reactions to face: snobs (Clan face counts double), inverted snobs (Clan face negative) etc.

I am hoping to introduce Face into my next campaign and thank Patrick for laying it out so splendidly. An extension I hope to put into action is the idea of Face-based magic. Several magic systems rely on negotiation with spirits; once Face and the use of Favours are introduced into such a system it would probably work much more entertainingly.

Adrian Bolt
Patrick Brady's article was good; can we have more on the other parallel social economies? I wish he'd pursued these more, rather than concentrating on honour.

明尊 Well he *was* writing about Tékumel.

Last writes

Rob Nott
Post Modernist rule systems: I was amused by your (previous) comments about new RPGs coming up with ludicrous new systems in an effort to appear original. Well, after a bit of thought here's mine... SAVE POINTS in an RPG. Just like *Tomb Raider*... the players get, say, 2 save points per session. At any time they can save their progress, then, if things go bad (they die, they lose their magic sword, they insult/trust the wrong NPC) they can 'switch off the game and reload it from their last save point and get the GM to carry on from there once again.

Or...

Index Linked Hero Points/Experience points... it takes you 10,000 xps to get to the next level, right?

You're currently accumulating an average 2,000 xps per game which will take you five more sessions. But wait! Those xps accumulated so far are just sitting there doing nothing when they could be earning interest in a savings account. So, at the end of each game the GM allows players to place their xps in an interest bearing account (say 3% per annum) or allow them to invest them in an xp stock market. If the share prices go up the player could double his xp total with shrewd insider dealing. Conversely why wait to go up a level? Why not borrow the 10,000 xps you need for that extra level *right now*. Interest has to be paid of course (19.6% APR) out of the xps you earn in later sessions.

I could be a post modernist RPG designer…

Ashley Southcott
One last thing: purely out of curiosity (and because I'm a 'sad git') I checked imazine's ISSN on the British National Bibliography. Did you know the BNB still thinks you live in Sutton Coldfield?

明尊 I doubt the BNB 'thinks' anything. Still, it's nice to know that the Copyright Receipt Office is unable to pass information on to the British National Bibliography. I think I'd be more worried if they were efficient enough to do so.

Bill Hoad
Your comment about armour made from Buddhist sculptures reminded me of carvings on Angkor Wat. I attach a picture of three Khmer warriors wearing magical harnesses which give them the strength of 100 men, so they are able to defeat the soldiers coming at them from the left.

Photo:Bill Hoad

END NOTES

No room this issue. Never mind. See you next time, whenever that is. **i**