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I approach my computer with fear and trembling. Too often in past months it has crashed at the last moment, with the Interregnum deadline ominously close. Technology, it seems, is a two-edged sword.

TOPIC #4: TECHNOLOGY

One aspect of technology which is often downplayed in roleplaying games is its unreliability. In most roleplaying games technological objects work as they are supposed to; the chances of failure are low, if they are considered at all. Yet the fact remains that machinery does fail, in some cases very frequently. Car, computers, copy machines; all break down, often at the most inopportune moment. And that's just the C's.

Service and repair are a major part of modern industrial economy. Yet game designers almost always eliminate these elements from their game worlds and systems. Why?

Perhaps technology maintenance is simply not a very interesting subject for a roleplaying game. I can believe that, but must admit that I'd like to see someone attempt to include maintenance and repair in a RPG. Though now that I think of it, **Paranoia** does feature unreliable

technology—in a starring role, no less. Still, a serious treatment would be most interesting.

Of course, issues of reliability aren't limited to science fiction settings. Low-tech games possess technology as well, though not in as pivotal a role as (for example) Traveller. In skill-based games such as RuneQuest some notice is taken of these possibilities; swords can break, armor can fail. Most level-based systems ignore the issue of technology failure, however.

SHATTERED BITS AND PIECES

About ten years ago I was persuaded to enter a Generic Dungeon Module Contest that was being held by an unknown company called MattMark. Contestants paid \$5 for a contest booklet which was also an entry form. "Dungeons" could be entered in either of two categories. One category was for out-and-out dungeons, not my primary area of interest. The other category was much more appealing, seemingly slanted towards the "linked scenario pack" style of game supplement. I chose the latter. The prize was to be \$500 and publication of the module.

The Contest rules were quite grueling: an enormous "blueprint" was provided. Twenty-five percent of the



entry score was based on faithfulness to this blueprint. Unfortunately, the MattMark author was less than competent; the blueprint consisted of many pages of poorly-written first-person narrative, both difficult and embarrassing to read. Moreover, the author seemed compelled to overload the blueprint with an abundance of stupid-sounding names, cryptic plot points, irrelevant legends—everything but the kitchen sink. Laid out in manuscript form, the blueprint alone probably ran to more than 25 pages. Yet contestants were allowed only 60 pages per module.

This made designing the module a daunting task indeed, and encouraged poor writing. Since entries were to be judged on faithfulness to the blueprint, it was inevitable that the vast majority of details could at best be listed as boring and irrelevant history. I suspect that the contest designer really wanted to design a module himself rather than hold a contest. He was deeply and humbly in love with his own words. 8^>}

The full story of the MattMark disaster was detailed years ago in [The Wild Hunt APA](#); no point in going over it again. Suffice it to say that when all was said and done the Contest was cancelled due to embezzlement, leaving me with a totally unsalable work. The problem was not that the module was packed with names and details that were copyrighted by MattMark; that could be overcome with some minor rewriting. No, the real problem was that I'd tried to include as much as possible of the blueprint in my work and so had a scenario pack that was warped and twisted, full to bursting with irrelevant details and unnecessary explanation. Worst of all, the overarching plot was forced and awkward. All in all, the module wasn't worth the work it would take to put it into shape.

And there it sat, for many years.

But I prefer not to let anything go to waste. Recently it struck me that there were many elements in the work which were interesting, worth expanding and printing elsewhere. The following scenario hooks are rewritten encounters from the usable remnant. Other sections (slightly rewritten) will appear in forthcoming issues. 



1) The Conjurer. The party encounters a wandering conjuror, driving a small one-horse wagon on the road. Lacking any sort of magical ability, he entertains for a living with clever tricks and snappy patter. In his wagon are a number of odd objects: metal rings, folding boxes, wooden tubes, large square metal blades, collapsible canes, packets of colored powders, hollow tubes, manacles, costume swords and daggers, mirrors, a gaily painted tarpaulin with ropes and hooks, a formal black outfit including a cape, assorted metal trinkets of all kinds, and cages holding snakes, rabbits, and doves.

Hook: Almost no one realizes how extremely useful the contents of a magician's closet can be. Hollow tubes can be used for breathing underwater, or blowing powders or darts. Ropes and hooks can be used to climb walls, or descend into pits. A black outfit is perfect for secret night activities. Weapons and manacles have obvious uses. Any detailed description of the tools of the ninja will reveal many more such devices. An ordinary traveller carrying such goods might be

suspect, subject to interrogation and delay; a conjurer has a perfectly good excuse to carry all sorts of odd items, and is less likely to receive unwelcome attention than a true magic-user.

The conjurer is a spy. Among his doves are several homing pigeons; he uses these to send reports back to his employers. At night, he puts on his black suit and searches high and low for information. Should he come to suspect that the player characters possess knowledge about something he's interested in, they may find themselves with a new and amusing companion—at least for a little while.



2) The Ice Barbarian. A wandering Ice Barbarian from the frozen North. He is a large, bearded man with a huge ice-axe and armor crafted from white fur. His people are unusual; they are comfortable in extreme cold, but are quickly overcome by temperate-zone heat. Around his neck he wears an amulet which enables him to endure the (to him) intolerable heat of the South. The Ice Amulet is an unusual and powerful magic item: whoever wears it is chilled to a temperature just above freezing. If the amulet is placed in a liquid, that liquid will freeze in a few minutes at most.

The Ice barbarian is a poet; his people, though limited in technology, are gentle and highly civilized. He is travelling in search of his wife, who was captured by a group of hunters who sold her to slavers that he is tracking. He will be most grateful for any help offered, though he has little money. Anyone helping him rescue his wife will be certain to be honored among the Northern tribes, at the least, and poems will certainly be made in their honor.

If hindered, he will try to avoid conflict. He is a strong and sturdy warrior, though not of the first rank of ability. He has no magic, but if attacked and killed he can curse those who slay him. The Curse cannot be avoided, and has the

effect of making the recipient feel a steadily deepening chill which cannot be negated through normal means. The victim eventually becomes almost totally incapacitated, shivering and shaking uncontrollably. The curse can only be abated by travelling north to his tribe (an arduous task in itself) and performing a penance selected by the tribal shaman.



3) The Bears and the Wild Boy. While travelling in a somewhat wild region, the characters hear shrill screams, and animal-like growling. Characters with some knowledge of animals may recognize the growls as those of bears. Over a small hill two brown bears are savaging a small and filthy child, who is the source of the screams.

The child is clothed in scraps of furs, and is mute: he is wild (much like of the Feral Kid in The Road Warrior/Mad Max 2). So far, the bears have only scratched him on the head and chest; if the party does nothing, the bears kill the boy in a few minutes. If the party rescues and heals him, the boy scurries to a nearby cave and brings out a handful of stones. He gratefully gives shiny pebbles to every party member. One of the stones may be recognized (with difficulty) as an ancient and weathered seal. The stone itself is slightly valuable, but to a historian the seal would be worth a considerable amount of money.



When (or if) the party tries to leave, they will find that the boy insists on following them. He is a skilled woodsman; they will find it difficult to get away from him. However, the sight of a feral boy following the party around should certainly cause some interesting reactions in civilized areas...

4) The Duelling Nobles. Two nobles from a neighboring country have marked off a section of the road and are dueling to the death. The party must go off the road to avoid them. They are both furious and do not want to talk to strangers. If the party irritates them (by asking about their dispute, for example), both turn and assault the party. One is in slightly heavier armor than the other, but is slower. Should the party somehow find itself in the position of examining their bodies, they will discover that the more lightly-armored noble has a fairly large sum of money upon him, while the other has none.

5) The Stream. The path is crossed by a rushing stream; the party must jump or get wet crossing it. There are many large purple blossoms floating along in the stream. The flowers signify nothing at all—a flowering bush overhangs the water far upstream, out of sight.



☺ **REVIEW** ☹
DRAGON'S LAIR

A CD-ROM game for IBM-type machines by Readysoft, Inc.

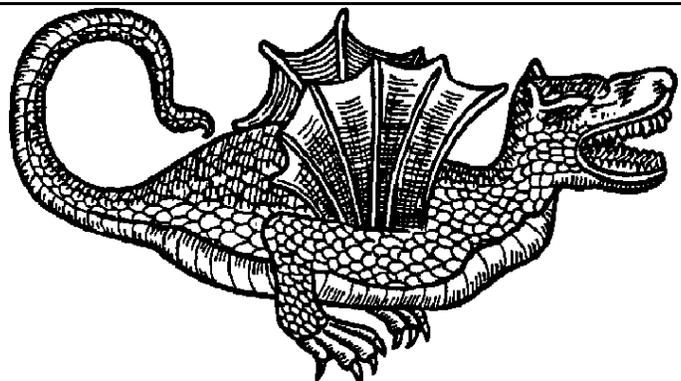
I'm not much for computer games. Most of them seem a waste of time, nothing more than endless dreary variants of the standard

shoot-'em-up paradigm. When I was a kid, games were better.

One of my favorite video games of long ago was an odd one: Dragon's Lair. For those who haven't seen it, imagine a well-animated cartoon about a slightly clutzy fantasy hero named Dirk the Daring, questing through a cursed castle to rescue a beautiful princess. Then imagine the cartoon put on a laser disk and hooked to a joystick and a button. If the proper moves—left, right, up (forward), down (back), or sword—are done in the correct order and at the correct time, the rescue of the princess takes place smoothly. Make the wrong move, or the right move at the wrong time, and a different sequence plays: Dirk's agonizing death. The death scenes are customized to the method of demise, and are themselves quite amusing.

Attach a coin box to the machine, allow players to pay to continue the game when their lives are gone, and you have an instant money-maker. I'd hate to admit how much I spent on that game, but toward the end I could win it without losing a single life—and did, quite a few times.

When I picked up my first PC, one of the first games I bought was Dragon's Lair on floppy disks. It was dirt cheap, and played that way—unbearably crude graphics, terrible sound, and one of the slowest reaction times I've ever seen in a game. To cap it off, the game would freeze the system solid after about a minute of play.



It seemed to be fate when Dragon's Lair came out for CD-ROM soon after I bought a multimedia machine; call me a fool, but I bought the game again. At about \$50, it wasn't cheap. Still, the pictures on the box seemed to promise a game that would be truer to the original.

It is, in spades.

The animation seems to be taken from the original material—if not, it's an indistinguishable reproduction. The quality is excellent, at least on my 15" .28 pitch NI SVGA screen; there's a slight jaggedness, but it's barely noticeable. Speed of play might be actually faster than on the laser disk. The game offers the option to play at 6 or 12 frames per second; on a 486 DX/2 50 mghz machine with a 256k cache and a double-speed CD-ROM 12 frames per second produced very smooth animation.

The sound is excellent too, which is fortunate because the sound was one of the most outstanding features of the original game. On a few occasions the soundtrack does seem a little wrong for the scene, however. Where certain action scenes were shortened, the soundtrack sometimes seems to have been left at the original length—so Dirk grunts and groans even when he's just walking. A minor detail.

Another problem with the sound is that when the game is paused and restarted, the picture and sound become rather noticeably out of synch. In fact, pausing seems to be a bit buggy, at least on my system; on several occasions the system would freeze up a few minutes after pausing.



The game itself has been shortened, of course. After all, there's no way that a little CD-ROM can hold as much as a big laser disk (though I suppose that they could have broken the game up onto two CD-ROMs and kept the whole thing—I wish they had). Scenes end quickly, and in long scenes some repetitious actions have been cut down. Though I'm sure that some scenes have been entirely omitted, there's only one that I know is missing: a scene in which Dirk jumps into a circular room, only to have the floor plummet beneath him, elevator-style. If he fails to jump off at the right moment, he falls (screaming, of course) to his death. I know that that scene is missing because it's listed on the CD-ROM label. Must have been a last-minute screwup.

In a way, it's hard for me to judge this game impartially; when the fanfare ending a scene is cut short, it's finished in my memory. The game has been artfully cut in an almost impressionistic way; shortened elements give the impression of the original whole. I suspect that those who played the arcade version might get more out of the CD-ROM game than those who never saw the complete version.

The game plays very smoothly with a keyboard, though there is the option for a joystick. Since only four directions are used, keyboard control is the better choice. Timing is important, but not ridiculously so in most scenes. In some cases the number of moves has been reduced from the arcade version.

One obvious flaw has been necessarily retained from the arcade version: the game is single-track. Dirk makes the correct moves, or he dies; there is no in-between, no alternate choice of actions.

Play the game successfully once, and you've pretty much exhausted the possibilities (unless you decide to sample all the death scenes). Nonetheless, I've played the game a number of times since winning it. It's a very good cartoon, very funny and very well made. Don Bluth (the animator, and producer of such films as The Secret of NIMH and All Dogs Go to Heaven) did an outstanding job of tapping into the archetypal images of fantasy without getting too heavy. The Princess might be the only jarring note: she's definitely not G-rated. That costume! Combined with an almost comically seductive voice, it was a sure-fire supercharger for adolescent hormones. A brilliant way to keep those quarters flowing. 8^>}

There are a few other points worth noting.

The game does not have a "save" feature. It can be paused, but there's no way to store a half-played game. Given the bugs in the Pause feature, this is an unfortunate drawback.

Another odd thing about the game is the "customizing" option. When the game is first played it will offer the option of adapting the setup to your system requirements through some sort of auto-detection; this can take a variable amount of time, but in my case it took about an hour. Annoying, to put it mildly.

Overall, though, *Dragon's Lair* is fun, exciting, and plays well. I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone who enjoyed the arcade game, and strongly recommend it for everyone.

Rating: A-



One final note: at the end of the game a commercial plays, announcing the upcoming release of **Space Ace** on CD-ROM. *Space Ace* was also produced by Don Bluth, and was in many ways as good a representation of the science fiction genre as *Dragon's Lair* is of fantasy. It was a most enjoyable game, and I'll certainly pick it up when it becomes available. Look for a review in an upcoming issue. 

COMMENTS #3

Rich Staats: It seems odd to comment on my own guest columnist, but I have to say it: that's some damn funny material. If you ever feel like doing a guest stint again, just say the word. I assume that Old Pete isn't based on anyone real? 8^>}

Curtis Taylor: Thanks for the additional Strangers In Prax errata. Avalon Hill should pay you a royalty! 8^>}

✱ By an odd coincidence, there's a bread factory a few blocks from my home, too. Smells delicious. I've heard that the smell of baking bread is caused by the evaporation of alcohol from the yeast, but I don't know if I believe it—alcohol has always smelled (and tasted) horrible to me.

✱ Regarding the Illusionary Dungeon: a number of folk have made the same point. Yes, according to standard AD&D rules an illusion spell couldn't enable victims to march down into solid rock; even a *Wish* couldn't do it. But I was looking at the question from a dramatic viewpoint rather than a mechanistic one. If illusion (or anything else, for that matter) defined by rules becomes less interesting or dramatic, I feel that the rules should be changed. After all, rules are only necessary to the extent that they improve the roleplaying experience. Many players fail to realize that the rules are secondary to the fun.

Of course, I wasn't seriously proposing the use of the Illusionary Dungeon. Though maybe someday...8^>}

✱ Thanks for the Gloranthan hooks. Good stuff.

Scott Ferrier: The jackalope drawing is...um...pretty whacked. Is it native to South Dakota? 8^>}

✱ I'd forgotten quite a bit of the post-Holocaust campaign. It made interesting (and funny) reading.

✱ Regarding *Highlander*: if anyone ever Quickens Richie I doubt they'll start acting like Beavis and Butthead. It's more likely they'll start whining and being incredibly stupid. Though as I've mentioned, it does seem that the Highlander writers have been giving him better lines lately. What is it about TV that requires so many shows to have one totally loathsome and irritating character? Wesley on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Centauri ambassador on *Babylon 5*, Richie on *Highlander*...there must be a demon in Hollywood, forcing these twerpy characters into the public consciousness. 8^>}



✱ Re "Bar Wars", I'm not sure that a copy of the humorous version can be found. At the least, it's buried deep.



✱ Great Egyptian picture. It's funny (particularly since I gave that file to you), but I never noticed the anachronisms. Are those running shoes beneath the desk?

George Phillies: Good heavens, no Phillies fiction! I hope this isn't the start of a trend. Surely you could write a short story for every issue—how hard can it be? 8^>}

✱ Re *Unchill*, I can admit now that it *is* a bit unfocused—too much so. But the criticism of that writer's group didn't help me to see that. Quite the contrary; by putting me off of writing altogether it delayed my understanding. Truth to tell, I think the best practice I've had as a writer is writing zines for APAs.

✱ Thanks for the reprint of the Canadian Censorship of RPGs announcement. I have to wonder if this is yet another exaggeration, however. Bans and such have been predicted in the US for years, but I haven't heard of any laws being passed. I have a hard time believing that our eminently sane and tolerant neighbors to the North would actually put into practice anything as silly as a ban on games.

David Hoberman: You do a wonderful layout on your zine, David. And I must admit that the contiguous column style is more readable than the "continued on page x" format.



✱ Of course I strongly agree with your preference for systemless game writing. Though I've written my own share of RuneQuest-specific articles I find generic material more useful. After all, I haven't run or played in RuneQuest for a very long time.

✱ Have you given any thought to publishing selections from your PBEM?

✱ Re The Grey Company scenario, possibly my description of the fate of the Elder Members was unclear: their bodies were trapped in amber blocks of force in a deep cavern complex, guarded by an entire race of darkness-dwellers. Embarked on a strange sort of spiritual HeroQuest, they were completely out of the picture—except that once a year they would be able to speak for a short time. They were not willing to leave, even if they could.

Simply killing them and making some of all of them into ghosts was a decent alternative (which is why I listed it), but I used the HeroQuesting scenario to introduce the PCs to the rudiments of HeroQuesting themselves. These were little more than a collection of special combat skills, plus a "Hero Lore" metaskill at a very low percentage. The Hero skills gave them a much-needed edge in dealing with their many problems.

✱ Re the character of Sirene in the *Unchill* story, once again I was keeping my imagery vague. A mermaid? A manatee? Something else? I didn't visualize while writing. For that story I was working with words only, not images—it was something of an experiment. Conversely, *The Old Thing* was entirely visual in origin.

✱ See my comment to **Curtis Taylor** re the Illusionary Dungeon. Regarding the PCs disbelief, I think you underestimate the perversity of the human mind. Wouldn't you find it nearly impossible not to at least wonder about the possibility of all the space around you being nothing more than an illusion? It's like picking at a scab, or scratching a mosquito bite—you know you shouldn't, but you can't help yourself.

Virgil Greene: The idea of a campaign in which players create two characters, a "waking self" and a "dream self", is much like several things I've seen done in the past. I have to wonder, however, if it would be a good idea for the players to create both characters. In the Lovecraft story the narrator didn't know of his other nature; likewise, wouldn't

the player lose much of the wonder of his “dream self” if he’d designed it himself? I’d rather see the GM design the alternate characters for each PC secretly. Heck, it would be even more interesting if the players didn’t know that they were double-souled.

✿ Re the movie *Dreamscape*: I always thought that the hero and villain were enormously unimaginative. For one thing, they were always restricted to a flat surface—yet almost everyone has had dreams about flying. Heck, why didn’t they dream up uzis, or FGMPS?

I’m sure that a roleplayer or science-fiction reader would have kicked all their butts. 8^>}

Doug Jorenby: The *Cybergeneration* review was most interesting, though I doubt I’ll ever play it (unless you plan to come to the Boston area and run a campaign). It does sound as if it’s an improvement over the usual cyberpunk.

✿ I’ll look up that Chapin song.

✿ Regarding the writer’s group, the most appropriate image seems to be somewhat Darwinistic: “Nature, red in tooth and claw”. Eliminate any potential competition for your children, your stories. There’s something a touch Monty Pythonesque about it: “Here we see der ferocious Bull Writer engaged in a life-or-death struggle with his mortal enemy, der younger writer.” 8^>}

✿ The idea of everyone on *ST:NG* speaking like Worf had me ROFL. You’re right; the refreshing thing about *Babylon 5* is that they avoid *ST:NG*’s tendencies toward New Age platitudes. Strange—the original *Star Trek* was progressive, but fairly hard-headed. I wonder what caused Roddenberry to change so drastically?

Lois Folstein: Wow! Woo! APPLAUSE! Doppelganger is a truly excellent story. I hope we’ll see more from the Pen of the Chronicler soon.

✿ I have to admit that when the the graphic elements of *TLTF* are apropos, it’s usually coincidence. Every time I look at the finished product I’m amazed at the way so many pictures seem to fit the text. I just look for what fits the hole in the page.

✿ Speaking of graphic elements, I’m very impressed by your zine layout. You have a very good eye for these things—it’s hard to believe that this is your first zine (though I know it is). When I recall how crude my first zine was, I blush. Maybe you can give me some suggestions?

✿ Thanks again for suggesting *IR* as initials for *Interregnum*. It seems obvious now, but everyone else I spoke to beforehand was stumped.

Gil Pili: Welcome to *Interregnum*! I’m glad to have finally dragged you into the clutches of fierce APA addition. ^>}

✿ Your background was very interesting—funny, I had no clue about most of it though I’ve known you for years!

✿ Re *The Crow*: were you aware that a number of shots were digitally created from outtakes after Brandon Lee’s death? The slow-motion closing shot you mentioned was one such.

✿ Having players write down a dark secret of their character is an excellent idea—I’ve used a similar method myself. Lois actually made up a fascinating pregame exercise which included dark secrets, as I recall; I hope that she’ll include it in some forthcoming issue.

✿ I can’t agree that *Alice In Wonderland* is simply a collection of helter-skelter images. Lewis Carroll was a mathematician, and that sensibility underlies his work; the structure is subtle in many ways, but definitely there.

✿ Your layout is very handsome and easy to read.

NEXTISH:

More reviews, more scenario hooks...we’ll see what else turns up. Take care!



COLOPHON

The *Log That Flies #3* was gestated in a *P. Maranci 30.2 brain*. Much of the text was then generated with *PC-Write 2.5*, an ancient but serviceable word processor.

The text was formatted for desktop publication using *Publish-It 4.0 for Windows*, a cranky but cheap DTP program.

The DTPed document was printed at a ruinous cost at a laser printing service, on a 300 dpi laser printer.

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