

* * * * * RACK & RUNE * * * * *

RACK & RUNE #4: I GO BERSERK

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APOLOGIA

THE AUTHOR WOULD LIKE TO DISCLAIM ANY CONNECTION WITH RACK & RUNE #3. He'd like to, but he can't, since he wrote every word of it. At 3AM the morning it was due. When he was very short of sleep. Yeah, that's it. I was unconscious. Delirious. Whatever. Anyway, just in case it wasn't obvious, let me say that the Runequest MP Regeneration Table simply shows how long in hours and minutes it takes for a entity of whatever POWer to recover a single magic point. I realize that this is not complex stuff, but as a math idiot this qualified for me as a Real Big Idea.

IF I WERE RUNEQUEST CZAR!?!

...and it was written that when the Red Moon stood in the Tenth House in the Season of the Storm, and the Shadow of the Sword of Death fell across the Land, a Question would be asked...

Ah. If I were Runequest Czar... Believe me, I've thought about that one. Oh yes. Were it not for Runequest, I might not be gaming today. My real involvement with gaming began with RQII, years after an unpleasant experiment with AD&D. It was a revelation. *Skills* that one could create a truly individual character with! A percentile system that is still one of the most elegantly simple and realistic mathematical simulations I know! Magic and combat systems that, uniquely, made sense and didn't require massive rationalizations to function! And, best of all, a rich, original, and cohesive world background which actually helped incorporate PCs into a campaign without rehashing the same tired old myths!

That Chaosium put out the best supplements in the business was just the icing on the cake. If only I had bought my own copies of Pavis, The Big Rubble, and Borderlands then! Unfortunately I didn't, and am still trying to acquire them today.

Mechanically, RQIII was a definite improvement on the original. The separation of Runequest from the Glorantha background was largely redundant;

we regularly used the RQIII system with whatever game background was being run at the time. Time and again, however, we came back to Glorantha.

We all know what happened to RQ after that. By the time I felt ready to write and submit a Runequest scenario pack, I was convinced that it would be useless to try—that Runequest was already effectively dead. Still, I used the RQIII system almost exclusively, and found to my interest that newcomers to Runequest were almost always “converted” within a few sessions. Glorantha, too, proved more than effective at capturing the imagination and loyalty of new players. This, combined with the appearance of the outstanding *Tales of the Reaching Moon*, convinced me that here was a system that could survive neglect and even seeming abuse by its controllers (the abysmally bad City of Eldad had just been released).

I still believe that. Issue #6 of *Tales* lists seven *European* Runequest-related zines, and does not pretend that that is a complete list. Surely many more are unreported from Australia, Canada, the U.S., and elsewhere.

Runequest can and should be saved. But how?

The first step is to repair the damage of the past few years. To do this, I would take the following four steps:

1) Keep Runequest Runequest (not AD&D). One key to Runequest's popularity was, I believe, the fact that it did not patronize players. It is primarily a game for mature, intelligent adults; adults who recognize and respect quality. This core group of players should be the foundation on which the rebirth of Runequest can be based. An attempt to target sales to the teen market can only alienate older players, and would probably not be successful. Other systems have already saturated the teen/pre-teen age group.

2) Improve Physical Quality: A long time ago I purchased the red hardbound edition of RQII. Despite frequent use, that book is still in the best condition of any hardbound book I own. My copy of RQIII, however, is falling apart. Built-in obsoles-



cence is not a viable sales technique for role-playing games. Runequest players will, I believe, pay more for good quality. A top quality, hard-bound book containing everything needed to play Runequest would probably sell well to those who already play the system. Cheaper (but still good quality) versions should also be available for newcomers.

Likewise, I was surprised and annoyed when Avalon Hill tried to sell packages of character sheets; that Chaosium had always given permission to photocopy was one of the things that I respected them for. I'd leave the hucksterism to TSR.

3) I'd dump Fantasy Europe, or reduce it to minor status. Medieval Europe is a major source for almost every fantasy RPG background there is; one of the reasons for Glorantha's popularity is that it is different. Also, the volume of Gloranthan material written is a more useful game resource than history can provide. I don't know anyone who uses the Fantasy Europe background. While the RQIII system itself can remain divorced from Glorantha, Glorantha is still a main strength of the system.

4) Use Reprints! In regard to the above, I would make use of the incredible volume of pre-published Gloranthan material. RQII to RQIII conversion is certainly a hell of a lot easier than writing new material, and I for one don't have all the old supplements, Wyrms' Footnotes, etc.. Although it might seem otherwise, I don't think the sales of converted/reprinted material would suffer because of the previous edition: even though I have the old Trollpak, I still bought the various RQIII Troll books.

On the other hand, reissuing the same Uz material in three different books is the kind of move that can hurt a game company's reputation badly. People know when they're being ripped off, and they don't like it.

All of the above could be summarized as follows: If I had the power, I'd take the high road with Runequest and support it to the hilt. Though it would certainly take time, I believe that eventually the outstanding qualities of the system and background—properly promoted!—would win through in the end.



WHITHER RUNEQUEST?

With Runequest reestablished as a major RPG, the next step would be to broaden its base of consumers. The first question is, therefore, "What makes a game system increase in sales & popularity?" Recent game sales may give some indication (needless to say, this is based upon my personal knowledge of gamers, rather than any statistical knowledge). From this I would divide game sales into two groups. The first is that of the fad system/background. These are systems which are closely tied to an unusual, trendy genre. Most new Cyberpunk and HorrorPunk games probably fall into this category. Such systems generally enjoy a temporary vogue and then fall by the wayside, their best elements incorporated into more established RPG systems. Perhaps these should be differentiated from specific-author/background games, such as Call of Cthulhu; but how many even of those have been successful?

As to the second category: there is little doubt as to what has been the great gaming success story of the past decade. There is a system which has sold supplements to every gamer I know, as well as to some non-gamers—even though no one I know actually plays the system itself. I am referring, of course, to GURPS. I myself have purchased the Wild Cards, The Prisoner, Fantasy, and Uplift supplements, have been given several others, and expect to purchase more. The logic is obvious: by tying in to different pre-established markets, Steve Jackson has increased his sales and almost certainly brought many people into gaming who might otherwise never have tried it. Chaosium had the same basic idea with their Basic Role Playing systems, but failed to carry it through. The systems in question were just a little too different for easy transposing, and the different backgrounds were often not author-specific. I would repair that error now, though I'm sure it would take careful negotiating between Chaosium and Avalon Hill. The number of popular settings which are "RPGable" is near infinite. How about Casablanca? Shakespeare for the educational set? Aliens or The Terminator? Personally, I'd love to see something based on Cordwainer Smith's Instrumentality. E. E. "Doc" Smith, Asimov's Foundation, Herbert's Dune; all are still untouched, as far as I know.



It would be imperative that all of this be done well. As Runequest czar, I'd spend about 2-3 years building up Glorantha, and then simulta-

neously release three major tie-in supplements, with major publicity of course. From then on, I'd try to keep the balance of new Runequest releases at about 50-50 between Glorantha material and tie-ins.

My suspicion is that many of those who try the game based on The Terminator or whatever would eventually migrate into the Glorantha setting.

Virgil Greene, a friend of mine, reminds me of an excellent point: HeroQuest is ten years overdue. I'd release HeroQuest, even if it was just reworked Ki rules from the Land of Ninja supplement and some more background.

Another thing that I'd investigate (as a tertiary project), would be pushing the bounds of role-playing in several directions. Much work has already been done in this area: live role-playing, role-playing boardgames, card-driven RPGs, etc.. So far, this has been done haphazardly by different companies. I'm sure that much more is possible. Let RuneQuest lead the way.

REVIEW: HORROR ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

A Call of Cthulhu Scenario Pack



Authors: Too Many To List

Setting: 1920's Europe

PHYSICAL QUALITY

Outstanding. The cover of this box features a painting by Lee Gibbons which does the impossible: conveying the eldritch horror of the Cthulhu mythos while at the same time being beautiful. The box itself is full of material: four campaign books, the usual players handouts (a whole book of them), a book of incidental NPCs for the Keeper, four facsimile 1921 U.S. passports (with the seal actually stamped into the paper!), maps galore, a poster, luggage stickers that actually stick, a full scale train... OK, no train. However, Chaosium has clearly spared no expense or effort in the preparation of the materials in this package. Even non-gamers were interested.

There is one curious omission: tickets. Unless they were somehow omitted from my copy, there are no tickets for the Orient Express; and given the plot complications possible in the loss or theft of tickets, this lack is rather surprising. Also,

given the tribulations the investigators will endure, I really expected the Simplon-Orient Express Company to reward them with gold-embossed Lifetime tickets. They'll deserve it.

The box itself is somewhat flimsy. It opens only along the top and bottom, making it difficult to put all the material back in without damaging it or the box. Since the contents are likely to see a great deal of use over weeks to months of play, the damage could add up. Still, overall the physical quality of the package meets and surpasses the Chaosium's usual high standards.

CONTENTS: Quantity

The Chaosium bills this as a "massive" adventure, and they aren't kidding. There's almost too much to review. With over 200 pages of text, this package is larger than many entire game systems. Even the quickest Keeper might have trouble finishing off this adventure in less than six long sessions. At a guess the average Keeper would take between ten and twenty sessions to cover most of the adventure, and while the package is complete there is enough to build on to last... well, almost indefinitely. There is certainly enough material here to provide the basis for a long campaign.

CONTENTS: Organization

Is generally well done. The various sub-adventures are neatly divided among the books, and are uniformly presented. "Generic" NPCs (which are still quite individual and interesting) are collected in a separate book for the Keeper's use. This makes reference easy, and it is a pity that the same was not done for the major NPCs and new spells. Instead, such information is repeated as needed through the books. Given the sheer volume of material, it is clear that these few repetitions are supplied as a convenience, rather than as padding.

CONTENTS: Quality

With this volume of material, I expected to be bored before very long. This was not the case. Over and over as I read HOE, I found myself saying "Wow". Not many game supplements have done that; the most recent was the COC supplement The Dreamlands. I was impressed enough to decide to run the pack, which had not originally been my intention. Though we got only half-way through the first segment on the first night of play (breaking at 3AM!), the players all



want to continue playing the scenario.

Kinder, gentler Keepers (if there are any such) should be warned that the Chaosium playtesters experienced a 70% death rate among investigators. Multiple characters for each player are recommended.

Unlike many other COC supplements, HOE is composed of fairly closely related adventures, rather than disassociated scenarios. The whole package is structured around a central McGuffin; it would be awkward, though not impossible, to separate out these adventures for other use. In addition, the Orient Express acts as a central focus, bringing the campaign together. This would make it difficult to change the setting of the campaign to 1890 or 1990. On the other hand, the adventures are not Cthulhu-specific. It would be possible to run the package with some other role-playing system. In fact, given the quality of supplements that I've seen for the many new horror RPGs available, this would be a superior alternative.

Atmosphere, arguably the single most important ingredient of COC, is very strongly present in Horror On the Orient Express. The Orient Express background is interesting and well presented. The various adventures offer a pleasing variety of detective work, diplomacy, human skulduggery, physical combat, and eldritch horror. Perhaps best of all, one of the adventures is what could perhaps be termed a "dream-quest"; this is not connected to the wonderful "Dreamlands" COC supplement, but has much of the same flavor. Parenthetically, I suspect that the dream RPG genre may be the next great leap forward for role-playing: it is certainly the most innovative and exciting concept I've seen for quite some time.

PRICE: \$39.95

Ouch. On first seeing this package, my reaction was: "It's beautiful, but no supplement is worth forty bucks." Since then, I've changed my mind. You could easily spend twice that amount without getting this quality or quantity of material. Many of the ideas within would be useful and applicable to any game system or genre. In other words: if you like horror gaming, have even the slightest inclination to GM, and can afford it, buy this package.

HORROR ON CODEINE

I should mention the most memorable COC experience I ever had: playing with a temperature of 101°, a large quantity of codeine in my veins, and in a mild state of delirium. The Keeper (Geof Dale) was running a one-person scenario of his own design for me late into the night (this was at college, where you can get away with that sort of thing). Rather than telling me "You are now paranoid", as so many Keepers do, he instead presented the world to me as a paranoid would see it. Strange sounds, sinister visions half-glimpsed, and evil undertones in the voices of strangers abounded. Ultimately I shot and killed my own butler, then immediately turned and fired at the suddenly-appearing Nyarlathotep laughing behind me. Unfortunately, I killed him. The sight of his true body drove me into the asylum... in the end I was quite fortunate to be able to blow my brains out before the minions of Cthulhu could reach me. What an experience! What made it great was that the Keeper managed to evoke the feeling and role-playing of madness without ever imparting to me the mechanics of Sanity. A consummate performance.

THE MATTMARK SANCTION

Several (6?) years ago, a company called MATTMARK held a Generic Dungeon Design Contest. Participants paid \$5 for the contest booklet/entry form. The prize was to be \$500 and publication. Two blueprints for scenarios were offered, one a fairly standard dungeon crawl, the other an area campaign package not unlike Griffin Mountain. Both came with incredible amounts of "helpful" guide material—so much that it was virtually impossible to stick to it all and remain within the 60 page maximum limit. Unfortunately, use of given material was one of the points on which entries would be judged.

At the behest of a friend, we (eventually just I) entered the contest. After great effort, my entry was completed and sent in. I sat back and waited. Months passed. Eventually I called them, and was informed after several tries that due to incredible response, the deadline had been extended. I was also told that 27 top entries had been selected for each category from the thousand or so received. Mine was among them.

More months passed. I called again, and was

informed that someone (either MATT or MARK, presumably) had absconded with all Contest funds. The End. I had spent several months of my free time writing a module based, with great difficulty, on an excessive quantity of crap. Crap which was, however, copyrighted: with the Contest gone, my work was totally unpublishable.

"So what," you ask, "what's the point?"

Hmmm. I guess there isn't one. Sorry. Guess I'll have to call this a Gaming Horror Story, of sorts. Did anyone else out there make the same mistake? Is this sort of thing common?

COMMENTREE 167

Swanson: I'm afraid I was unclear; I don't work in my bed. However, now that the computer is next to my bed, I can write late into the night. Also, if I wake suddenly in the middle of the night with an idea, I can work on it right away. I don't get a lot of sleep, though . . .

Derryberry: Welcome to the Hunt! I sympathize with the difficulties of doing a write-up long after the fact. I have four years to do! Read and enjoyed the "Greentech" writeup.

Erlandsen: re Hack: I'm cured now, thanks. Glad you enjoyed the Hall of Shame; I have played with all those GMs, as a matter of fact. I do have another twenty or so in my R&RHOLD file. The article on Romance in RPGs was fascinating. Glad to hear of another countertrend to mindless hack & slash!

Plamondon: Why aren't they called *text anagram* generators? Also, will that work with Q-Basic? I haven't programmed in quite a while...

One question: What do you do with all those names?

Rolston: GW's loss is AH/Runequest's gain. Hope my "Berserk" piece doesn't drive you crazy, but I've been worked up about this for a long time. Actually, a lot of my friends had comments too, but I ran out of space. Guess I'll have to carry them over to nextish...

The last Dragonewt was played for about a year, which was about average. They generally did remain mysterious, as every player who ran one was quirky as hell. I wouldn't recommend playing a dragonewt to just anyone. Re the Effects Table: thanks. But what's this about WF #14? I don't have any Wyrms' Footnotes, unfortunately. Never

even *seen* one. Sure would like to, though (hint, hint).

Willner: Will I never hear the end of Robin Hood? I haven't seen it myself, but apparently the Friar Tuck actor and I share a close resemblance. I'm thrilled. Not. Particularly considering that he was portrayed by the insipid Dick Van Patten in the otherwise hysterical "When Things Were Rotten" show by Mel Brooks.

Mr. Peabody dead?!? Not *Sherman's* Mr. Peabody, is it? Hmm. Must have set the Wayback Machine for "Big Bang"...

NEREYON AT LAST: RECAPITULATION I

Nereyon is the sheetless campaign which I've been running for the last three years. The starting premise was simple: Two hundred years ago, the land of Nereyon was suddenly conquered and overrun by a mysterious race of immortal non-human warriors: the NeMarren. The old nobility, religious orders, and magic-using elite were systematically exterminated. The rule of the NeMarren is harsh, and little of the lore of humankind has survived. Many humans have been enslaved; the balance live as drudges, to be killed at the whim of the alien overlords. Humans are tolerated because they fulfill three functions:

1) Drudge work. This includes both pure physical labor and trading/ administration. NeMarren consider such work beneath them.

2) Magic. The invaders seemingly cannot use magic, though they possess many artifacts with unnatural properties. About one out of five hundred humans is born with the Talent necessary for magery; they are allowed to practice sorcery for their masters. Sorcery, the only mystic art allowed by NeMarren law, is said to be the most flexible but weakest of magics. Scraps of knowledge of other arts remain, but practitioners are usually punished with death when caught. Alchemy is the only exception; it is not considered to be magic.

3) Art. The invaders all share a great passive artistic appreciation, but seemingly have no ability to create. Human sculptors, singers, painters and others are all exceedingly valued. It is not unknown for a NeMarren lord to amputate the legs of a great singer immediately after a great performance. This signifies that the human will now be the pampered personal property of the

Lord, and is considered by some to be a great honor.

Chaos In Nereyon

For many thousands of years (Nereyon is an ancient world) the land has been troubled with outbreaks of Chaos—the mindless force of change and destruction which emerges out of thin air and wreaks havoc. To most human beings, Chaos is as undetectable as hard radiation: walking through it, they may emerge as a three-headed monster or cloud of dust and not realize the change. One in several thousand humans, however, may both sense and resist the force of Chaos. These are called Watchers. Many Watchers also develop an additional Power. These are generally based upon the basic personality traits of the individual: an inquisitive person might gain incredible sensitivity, a belligerent one would be a natural warrior, etc. The greatest Heroes of legend were often Watchers. Watchers were also often able to master the ultimate magic: Wizardry.

Mechanically, Watcher Powers are completely free-form. Before the game, I worked out the essential “physics” of Watcher Powers: anything the players can think of, they can try. The only limitation is that the effect must be related to their basic Power, and must not contradict it. A healer may manipulate flesh, but may not damage or destroy it with his Power. I have often been surprised by the things they come up with.

The NeMarren, having no resistance to Chaos themselves, also need human Watchers. Recognizing the danger implicit in the potential of Watchers, a rule was made: all Watchers must be brought to the Dark Towers of the NeMarren before reaching their sixteenth birthday. Failure to do so meant death for the Watcher, his or her family, anyone else who knew or could have known about them, and *their* families. This is brutally enforced.

Supposedly, the young Watchers were ‘trained’ in the Towers, by the mysterious Dark Ones who ruled the NeMarren. In fact, the results of such training were to utterly destroy the spirits of these young Watchers; to make them ‘safe’. Details of the process are only whispered of. Certainly modern Watchers seem to be weaker than those of old.

Nereyon In The Beginning

The players began as young unprocessed Watchers in the far West of Nereyon, close to the Eternal Desert. They had been gathered together and illegally trained in secret by a pair of old tutors. The tutors did this because new Watchers were not always returned to the area from which they had been taken; instead, they were often forced into the personal retinue of high-ranking NeMarren, as status symbols. Thus the young PCs began the game already under a sentence of death.

Cast of Characters

Dara: A Sensitive. Able to sense the presence of Chaos at a distance without concentrating. She also possesses some empathic ability. Her penchant for sensing and wanting to help those in trouble has often led to interesting situations. Dara is prone to strange, vivid dreams. 

Robert: An unusual type, his basic quality is stealth and being unseen. This ability is called Kragaring, for some obscure reason. A “city rat”, Robert has picked up many odd scraps of knowledge (including a bit of alchemy and seamanship). He is rather cautious, preferring not to stir up trouble. A pacifist at heart. 

Vlad: A Healer with a difference—he liked to kill and “experiment” on mice and rats. Since this violated his basic nature, there were problems. Deceased. 

Hawk: A enormous Desert Rider warrior, his Power was (not surprisingly) Combat. He had a penchant for carrying a six-foot sword “hidden” within a staff; this staff was larger than many small trees. Since human weapons were strictly licensed, he was born for trouble. Deceased.

Sam: An NPC Sealer. He possesses the Power to seal up the breaches in the continuum through which Chaos comes. Since this requires exposing oneself directly to the Chaos, it is a dangerous profession. Otherwise, he is the youngest of the group, somewhat naive and passive.

Jack: The newest member of the group, his specific power (if any) is unknown. He recently became involved with Robert and Dara in a bizarre accident, of which more will be written later.

Bear: NPC Mentor. Large and gruff as his namesake, the younger of the PCs mentors is an expatriate of the Northern Ice Barbarians. Having

lost an arm through recent misadventure, he now has turned to the secret shamanistic ways of his tribe. He is strong, brave, and the more indulgent of the two tutors.

Coradan: NPC Mentor. A calm, controlled man, Coradan is clearly the more “civilized” of the mentors. He has trained the PCs in the sorcerous arts, and it is his research which produced what lore he has used to train the Watchers in the use of their Powers. This situation is much like that of a blind man teaching the sighted to use their eyes; the level of success he has had is a testament to his skill.

For reasons best not discussed, the Vlad and Hawk players left the game in the first year. Robert, Dara, and Sam continued through the next three years, and were recently joined by Jack. Though there have been slow spots, the game shows no sign of ending soon. The players control the pace of the game to a larger extent than usual; in one case, two four-hour sessions passed while playing out two hours of game time.

Combat is extremely rare, as it attracts dangerous attention. Months of real-time have often gone by between acts of violence.

THE LAST OF FIRST

As a follow-up to my mention lastish of the destruction of four great comic book titles by First Publishing: I am now informed by my dealer that First no longer exists, even in the truncated form of recent times. I was sorry to see it change; I'm not sorry to see it die now. Though it has been pointed out to me that all the changes may have been due to incipient bankruptcy, it would have been more honest (as well as more intelligent) to simply raise their prices and explain to readers that the choice was between higher prices or not publishing at all. As it is, I just hope that the pinheads who made the cutback decision take it on the chin, and that the creators of the various books get to carry on their work elsewhere. I know that a Grimjack boardgame and RPG were due out soon.



ARISIA '92

Is anyone else out there going to attend the Arisia '92 convention? I've gone to the previous Arisias, but always played the SIL game there. As a result, I've never had a chance to really

experience any con I've been to. Having wised up this year, I'll finally get to see the con itself. Should be interesting. I'd be glad to meet any of the Pack who might be there. One thing: **IF YOU'RE PLANNING ON ENTERING THE ARISIA AMATEUR VIDEO CONTEST, READ "A PRIVATE VIDEO HELL (ARISIA STYLE)" IN R&R#2.** Or call me. It's quite a story.

NEXTISH

Damned if I know. Something, though.