




RACK & RUNE


RACK & RUNE #14: Unicorn Bait

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InterNet address: trystro!rune@think.com or rune@trystro.uucp



They say that the early bird catches the worm; in this case, the early writer is going to catch some extra sleep and peace of mind. I may have held the record so far for procrastination in the Pack, as I generally finish my 'zine the Friday morning before the Sunday of collation. The result, too often, is a first-draft 'zine with lots of typos. Not this time! It is now Monday morning, 3:00 AM, the evening of collation for #178. This time, I'm going to do it right.



And if you believe that, I have some quality T&R stuff I'd like to sell you. 8^>}



TWICE IN A BLUE MOON



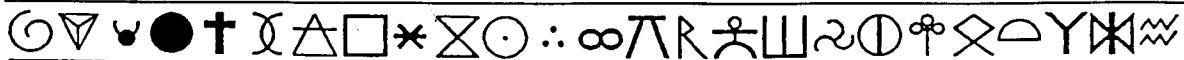
Bob Butler described the recent IFGS game "Once In A Blue Moon" rather completely lastish. There were, however, a few rather amusing points that Bob didn't mention, and are worth passing on.

I hadn't expected the game to be just a party; the preliminary information had implied that some sort of plot would be

involved. As Bob said, however, the 'game' was nothing more than a social gathering in character. This wasn't such a bad thing; it's always fun to play a character in costume, provided that people will talk to you — which is why the NERO game I tried and so many SIL games were such bad experiences for me. Fortunately the New England IFGS has not yet developed a snobbish elite, and with luck never will.

Still, "Blue Moon" was shaping up as a bit of a disappointment. The game had been delayed for about four hours — and that kind of wait does nothing to improve morale. We waited, and waited...of the three groups of player characters, mine was the last to be brought into the game/dining area. Annoying! When we finally got there, the dry ice that was supposed to make a curtain of fog around the door had been exhausted. The sight of two faintly bubbling buckets beside the door was not an impressive one. We were relieved to see that there was still plenty of food left, however.

Some time passed as people circulated, ate, and socialized. After a while, a new figure came into the room: He was magnificently clad in a chrome half-mask, with a high sweeping collar and a very impressive skull staff. As he came in, he flung the body of a small pig (a pig puppet) on a platter on the table. A small apple was in its mouth. The puppet was the one used to represent a friendly forest spirit in an earlier game that had asked riddles and



helped the PCs.

The stranger announced that he'd come across this entree running about in the wood. When it had asked him a riddle, he'd become annoyed and killed it for the feast. There was no doubt that this dead pig had been our friend. People were outraged. There was no way that anyone could harm another under the auspices of the feast, but many hostile words were exchanged. Under the cover of the excitement, I decided to act.

Sidling up to the platter, I blocked it from the sight of the others for a moment with my body. No one was looking. Working quickly, I grabbed the pig puppet and shoved it up my tunic.

The effect was ludicrous. I looked about six month's pregnant. Cupping my hands in front of my hugely bulging midriff (okay, my more-huge-than-usual bulging midriff 8^>}), I walked toward the closet where the cloaks were stored. No one took a second look at me. I stepped half into the closet, grabbed my cloak, and quickly transferred the body into its deepest folds. Wrapping the cloak into a tight bundle, I tossed it as far back into the closet as I could.

I decided to spend the rest of the evening making my own fun. A shooting contest with a Nerf bow was held. I have a fairly low ability with such things, but watched everyone who shot before me very carefully. Every one of them tended to pull up on the arrow as they pulled it back, causing it to 'swoop' slightly. I was care-

ful to pull straight back, and hit the target near the center. Another character did better than I (he shot from one knee, after a long sighting), so I amused myself by claiming the First Prize in the Mages Class (due to some oversight, no such class had been arranged). 8^>}

In the meantime, the disappearance of the pig body had been discovered. What had happened to it? Many wondered. I wondered myself, aloud — but not so frequently or vehemently as to attract suspicion (though I thought I might have overplayed my hand to Bob). The tentative consensus was that chrome-mask had stolen it. The hostess was asked, too, and claimed not to know. This was amusing, as the hostess was supposed to be a mighty Seer, omniscient within the dining hall. The issue was not pushed, however.

I call what I did in that game 'cracking the system'. It's a technique I've used in some SIL games I've been in, too. The exact action varies from game to game, but the essence of it is to do something that is within the game rules but is so totally unexpected that no one will even *think* that a player has done this — and it must be something that other players must take note of. In this game, I stole the pig's body — the other players immediately assumed that this disappearance was a plot point. It wasn't of course, since there was no real plot. But it did give everyone something to talk about, and it gave me the amusing feeling of walking around and knowing something that would surprise everyone in



the room.

Bob has given the feel of the evening pretty well. There was, however, one more somewhat painful yet amusing point that he neglected to mention — out of kindness, I suspect. During the evening, various player characters got up to tell a story, sing a song, or propose a toast — some were quite good, too. Early on, it was asked by the hosts that each person limit themselves to one story/song/toast/whatever each.

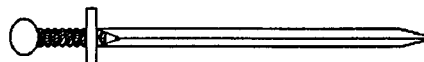
Before I go farther I should mention that my roommate, the unquenchable Scott Ferrier, was playing an NPC in this game: the bodyguard/enforcer, a thief with the usual powers of the class. One useful power is the 'kill dagger': a patch of duct tape which, when slapped on the torso of an opponent, paralyzes them completely for fifteen minutes.

As the others made their presentations, I naturally moved to the back. Zanzibar is, as Bob said, a grouchy guy; and he had already been deeply stressed by an encounter with the backstabbing thief who had helped confirm his (low) opinion of human-kind. So I couldn't see the speaker when someone came out with a toast that made me cringe, as well as being rather, um, out of character: a toast to "the good friends of the IFGS". Am I too cynical? Perhaps. But my tolerance for such sentiments is low to nil.

Later in the evening, the voice that made that saccharine toast spoke up again. Several players had still not had a chance to speak, but this did not dissuade the speaker who was now visible to me: a rather young man who had wanted to bring a real sword and a belt dagger into the game (albeit with dulled edges), and had argued strenuously when this was nixed by the Safety Officer (might this young man have been the passenger Bob described? I

don't know). He began to tell a story: it seemed to be a retelling of some sort of Bugs Bunny cartoon, with different species and some truly painful acting out. Ever watched somebody who thought they were a good actor/singer/dancer/whatever who actually sucked? It's one of the most painful experiences I know. The silly voices that young man used will probably haunt me to my dying day...

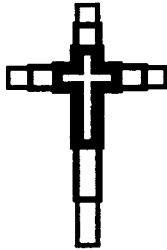
He jumped here, leapt there. Wacky animal voices seared my brain. And then I saw moving toward him an Angel of Mercy: Scott, there to enforce the "one person, one performance" rule. He walked up behind him, to ask him to stop...and the youngster picked that moment in his story to turn toward Scott and issue one of the more annoying and insane animal-laughes imaginable, sort of like Elmer Fudd crossed with Woodey Woodpecker on Quaaludes. He turned away toward the main audience to continue the story. And then Scott kill-daggered him.



It took several minutes to explain to the fellow that he could *not* continue the story — that the paralysis applied to vocal cords, too. But he was finally persuaded, and for the rest of the evening even the stodgiest players came up to thank Scott. 8^>}

The finale was straightforward. The evening was ended; the players took their leave of the hostess and left the magical dining hall. I asked if the evening was indeed over. And when the GM said it was, I produced the body of the pig-spirit from my cloak, holding it above my head, and announced my plan: resurrection, as soon as we could find a cleric capable of

it. There was applause from the crowd, and the game was over.



GOSPEL CORNER

In the Beginning there was Nothing.

But then the Lord said "Let There Be Light."

And after that, there was still Nothing.

But you could see it.

(from the Gospel according to SCTV)

FAVORITE SON

A while ago the question was raised of which of the characters I've played was my favorite. It's a strange question, on the face of it; a bit like being asked to chose between your children, I suspect (I have none, myself). They're *different* — how can I pick one as a favorite?

It's not that difficult, actually. Most of the characters I've played have been flat, two-dimensional — hardly worth remembering. Only two have really come to life for me: Izraith the cursed mage, and Wolfgang Von Drachenvald (Wyrm) of the Drachenvald campaign I've mentioned before. Oddly enough, neither of these characters were very happy people! Izraith was a bitter old man who lost almost all of his power in the first month of play by accidentally asking for Divine Intervention (a long story), and was so devastated by the loss that he changed his name to Bleak.

Wolfgang was a sickly little boy who continued to feel inadequate and unworthy, even after his curse was lifted and he was revealed as the mighty scion of a noble house. Neither of them ever fully overcame his own inner conflicts, but...ah, there's an idea. These characters shared one point that none of my others did: they changed *unexpectedly*. Their personalities developed in such a way that they seemed to be self-directed — I played them, and yet I was sometimes surprised by what they felt and did. Hmm. Sounds a little insane, doesn't it?

That's not to say that there haven't been other characters that didn't have the *potential* to gain that sort of pseudo-life. But the campaigns they were in never lasted long enough for their personalities to be fully realized. Will I ever get to play such a character again? I don't know...but I certainly hope so.



RANDOM RUNEQUEST

The Daily Digest

The RuneQuest Digest that I wrote of a while ago has undergone a few changes in the last few months; the old editor, Andrew Bell, has resigned. The new editor is Henk Langeveld, at: RuneQuest.request@glorantha.holland.sun.COM . One very cheering development is Henk's creation of the Daily Digest. It actually comes out about four or five times a week, and is a continuing discussion of matters RuneQuest; chattier and more casual than the regular monthly Digest, it has a huge volume of traffic. I've introduced a few

notions myself in that forum; one of them is the question of whether or not RuneQuest ought to be exclusively devoted to Glorantha or not. Most (though not all) seem to feel that RuneQuest is well suited to be used in other world-settings, but that Avalon Hill would be making a serious mistake if it attempted to support any other world-setting for the next few years.

Personally, I love Glorantha. It's a world I return to again and again, and have

enjoyed introducing others to. But more than half my gaming has been in unique worlds, either of my own design or others; and in most cases, the system we've used with such games has been RuneQuest. The

most common area of modification is the magic system, but that has generally been a simple matter — the logical and modular nature of RQ makes the addition of "snap-in" systems exceedingly simple. I'm not really interested in seeing Avalon Hill publish non-Gloranthan world settings in the near future; time enough for that when RQ is firmly re-established as a leading system. But I would like to see materials published of a more general nature: campaign ideas, scenario hooks, personality profiles, alternate systems of magic, psionics, and unusual mechanics and adaptations. I see such general supplements as being a sort of tool kit for the mature gamemaster, who would be able to use whatever elements s/he needed for his/her campaign. For example, a short description of a gas-torus game world similar to Larry Niven's *Smoke Ring* would be highly interesting...and some alternate mechanics would be necessary,

too. Maneuvering in zero-G, for one thing. This world description wouldn't be complete by any means, but rather a short sketch among a hodge-podge of other ideas. I know that I would find such a supplement useful, but would it be a financial success? Probably not. Perhaps...come to think of it, the daily Digest could fill the same role.

My Mistake (Runic Sorcery)

Some readers may have noticed that the Runic Sorcery supplement I published in the supplement last issue was less than complete. In fact, it cut off in mid-paragraph. Mea culpa! I expanded the text size, and neglected to check that

page to see that the document still fit into the space provided.

However, this turns out to be a cloud with at least a thread of silver lining. I'd published the system because I'd run dry on it; it had been sitting around for weeks with no progress. Having shown it around, I became re-inspired. Within a few days I rewrote it several times, expanding it to nearly three times its original size. I've numbered the sections, and begun numbering each version to keep track of revisions. At this point it's been a few days since I last worked on it...I may be going stagnant again. If anyone out there has any ideas or questions, won't you help me out by letting me hear them?

There is one odd coincidence to report: a few days after I dispatched version 1.1 of the Runic system to be included in the next



monthly RQ Digest (and to the RQ4 play-test authors, incidentally), another alternate system of Sorcery rules appeared in a daily Digest. It's derived from the *Ars Magica* magic system, and only about half the length of my system, but it has some interesting points of similarity with my own system: spells are constructed by the Sorcerer from certain basic concepts, and Sorcerers may use both formal spells and 'off-the-cuff' magic, for example. Peculiar, no?

I should make it clear that my Runic Sorcery system is intended to *replace* Sorcery as it now exists in RuneQuest 3. The system may be found in the supplement at the end of this zine...and this time I'll make sure that it's complete. 8^>}

Philosophy Corner

PHILOSOPHY CORNER

The Good, the Bad, and the Irrelevant

There's been quite a bit of talk in these pages lately about what exactly is 'good' or 'bad' in a game, GM, or player. Some have said that this is a subjective decision, that it is not valid to criticize a GM (for example) because that GM's style may be enjoyed by other players. I can't buy this. It's true that on a basic level all decisions are subjective: no one can escape the peculiar viewpoint from within their skull. But to say that no judgement of worth can be made is facile, as I've said before. It's simply a matter of picking your postulates.

What is *bad* in a game? There are

many possible answers, of course. I lean toward a definition that may be unusual: a game or GM is bad if it hurts the hobby as a whole. Games (and by *game* I mean both a commercial system of rules and a campaign designed and run by a GM), can harm gaming by being uninteresting, shallow, or exploitative. This is, I think, a good argument against "hack & slash" games. Players of such games typically give up gaming entirely as soon as another major interest arises: the opposite sex, for example, or a career. The long view is necessary; I suspect that those who've been involved with deeper styles of gaming stay with and contribute to the hobby throughout their lives — or certainly for much longer than the mayflies who experience nothing but the pap put out by at least one major company for the early-teen market.

But I don't know! To the best of my knowledge, no real studies of the gaming population have been made. Commercial surveys perhaps, and limited questionnaires put out by students, but no real scientific study of the gaming population to find out what keeps people coming back. This is unfortunate...but seems unlikely to change. It would take major resources to fund such a study, probably more than any game company could afford. Even if it wanted to.

Why Can't Johnny Game?

A strange chain of logic crossed my mind recently. It's so peculiar that I thought I'd throw it out to the Pack, if only to see what will be made of it.

Literacy seems to be on a continuing downward trend, at least in the US. Even more precipitous than the decline in simple reading skills is the decline in imagination and a sense of wonder that is essential to reading for enjoyment (rather than to pass the driver's license exam or hold a job,

say). I have no statistics to back up either of these claims, but if any of the Hunt can disprove them I shall be greatly surprised...and relieved.

So what? Simply this: Gaming is a literate hobby. It's imaginable that an illiterate could manage to learn the basic skills necessary to game. It would be difficult and unlikely, but possible with much help. This in itself limits the pool of potential gamers. But someone who has never read a book will have experienced only visual and audio entertainment for their entire life — and these are passive media. They offer no practice in using imagination to visualize and develop a world, character, or plot. This threatens to eliminate as potential gamers not only the large number of illiterates, but the far greater population who rely upon television and movies for virtually all of their entertainment.

And without new gamers...where will we be in twenty years?

And Now for Something Completely the Same

I've been wondering (surprise!)...a GM needs a lot of skills. Quick thinking, creativity, consistency, authority, some basic acting skills, in most cases at least a basic ability with numbers...throw in some practical psychology too, at least for good games. I'm sure others could come up with more skills to add to the list (in fact, here's another: cartographer).

Anyway, I can't help but wonder where good new GMs will come from. It's a very haphazard process; most people get started because they're the only

ones who can or will do it for their group. Often the result is less than adequate. Yet GMs are absolutely necessary for gaming as a hobby to continue.

It seems to me that major game companies and organizations such as GAMA should pay some attention to this. I'm not suggesting any sort of 'licensing' or rating system such as that used by TSR's godawful RPGA, but perhaps some sort of education programs would be a good idea. Not to inculcate people to a particular style of gaming, but at least to encourage the development of those basic skills that make a person a better GM.

THOSE WHO READ

For some time now I've been wondering about those who read *The Wild Hunt*, but don't contribute to it. Who are you? What do you do? What do you get out of all this? Questions like that come pouring through my fevered brain...no, not really, but I am curious.

Some, I know, are former contributors — in fact, I suspect that the majority are. But what do you oldtimers 8^>} think of the Hunt these days? Is it different from the days of yore? Better? Worse?

Some copies go out to game companies, of course. I've seen the mailing labels. But who reads them there? One person? More than one? How many? What do you read for? Does the company deduct the cost of the subscription as a business expense? 8^>}

And is that everybody? Is there anybody out there who never contributed, doesn't work in the business, but simply reads the



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Hunt for itself? If so, what do you think of what you read? Are there things you'd like to see more of, or less of (I know, less of sections like this. Don't worry, I probably won't do this again — soon. 8^> })?

One suggestion I've heard is that all comments should be put at the back (presumably of each zine). Why? So they'd be easier to cut out and throw away! How many people do read the comments, anyway? I know that I read them, but I have to (though I actually used to read them even when I wasn't a contributor). Certainly I've put some major stuff in some of my comments. Does that mean that some people, for example, missed the whole story of the Foundation & Destiny game in my comment to **Bob Butler** a few issues ago?

How many people *really* read TWH, anyway? About ten other people read my copy, eventually. If each of the other 65 or so readers did the same, we could have a circulation of over 600...and while that doesn't seem likely, I'm willing to bet that more than a hundred people read each issue. How many more than that? I'd like to know.

In any case, whoever you are, I'd really like to hear from you. I love receiving InterNet email, though my system can be a little slow and cranky; I'm fortunate in that I don't have to pay for connect time. The message on my answering machine is goofy (actually it's my roommate's answering machine, and his message), but that needn't dissuade anyone from calling — though I should mention that I almost always screen calls, as I hate to deal with phone solicitations. And the mail is cheap. Even a line saying "I saw your piece in *The Wild Hunt*" would give me a pathetic thrill. And if you have any particularly pithy comments, well, I'm always looking for guest columnists.

Oh, I should say that I'm unlikely to accept collect calls.

ARMY OF DARKNESS

The ads for the new movie "Army of Darkness" made it look like a rather low-budget production. Goofy special effects, cheesy graphics, bad music...but the premise, that of a twentieth-century man sent back to the middle ages played for laughs, seemed promising. And some of the commercials were definitely funny. With nothing else to do, I joined a bunch of people who went to see it Saturday night.

It's a very funny movie! I hadn't realized that it's actually the third in a series — sequel to "Evil Dead" and "Evil Dead 2", which I haven't seen. Those who have seen them tell me that they were pretty much played for fear, with a leavening of humor — in "Army" the leavening takes over the mix. When the hero defeats an enraged knight with his shotgun and then announces the price of the gun, you have to laugh. And any movie that includes both the Necronomicon and a reference to "The Day the Earth Stood Still" is worth seeing. It's not a laugh-til-you-fall-down movie, but it's definitely got some good laughs in it. It does have a low-budget feel, with lots of fake-looking Harryhausen effects, but it's well written. And well acted, too. The lead plays the part of a lantern-jawed heroic idiot to perfection. I only hope that "Army of Darkness 2" will be as good.

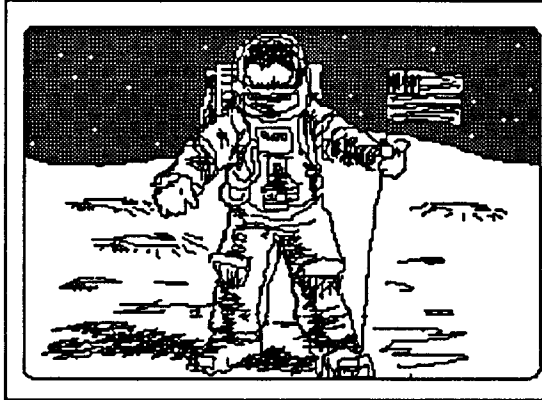
THE BIG GLASS EYE

My Prescience

Well, after a mere four or five episodes my prediction of last issue seems to have been borne out: Space Rangers, *The Show Too Bad To Live*, has been put "on hiatus". RIP and good riddance.

Babble-on 5

I thought I'd steal a march on everyone by reviewing Babylon 5 in this issue...but I'm afraid I won't be able to be very thorough about it. I'd intended to watch the whole premiere on Tuesday night, but it simply wasn't possible — it seems my tolerance for poor science fiction TV has decreased markedly. I did tape it, and I suppose I'll have to watch it someday. But for now, all I can give are a few quick impressions.



First, the effects are beautiful. I've chosen that word carefully: the alien ships and space phenomena range from pretty to stunning, with a fine alien appearance. The artistic conception is excellent, though it seems strange that so many of the ships resemble bugs. On the down side, the effects are clearly computer-generated. They're higher quality than the execrable Space Rangers, but there's never any doubt that you're looking at a computer graphic.

The aliens, too, generally look very good. Some belong to the old familiar rubber-heads-and-gloves tradition, but puppets and such are liberally interspersed (though none of the main characters is a puppet — I think). I was grateful to see that the Great Rubber Shortage hasn't afflicted all of Hollywood — the alien heads were all fulsome and detailed, a refreshing change from Next Gen's dab-of-glop-on-the-forehead school of alien design. One alien was rather human-looking, apart from a really bad haircut; I was

interested to note that he was the actor who played Sid, Detective Buntz's sleazy sidekick on "Hill Street Blues" and "Beverly Hills Buntz". Beyond the masks and the puppets, at least one of the aliens had a truly *alien* look — no face, nothing even close to it. The technology looked like nothing designed by humans, too. Fine work. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Deep Space 9* should hire the people responsible if *Babylon 5* doesn't make it.

It's worth mentioning that the music was by Stewart Copeland, formerly of The Police. Guess Danny Elfman was sick that day! The music isn't bad, though; kind of odd-rock, a little pedestrian sometimes but refreshingly different from *Trek*.

The writing and acting were not promising. The characters were all surprisingly unlikable; some seemed to fit into standard Hollywood roles, which may have been part of the problem. Much of the dialog was banal — the writers clearly hadn't been told that large quantities of exposition just don't work ("I was born on the Omicron colonies...life was hard for a kid in the mines"). Delivery was generally a bit wooden or embarrassingly florid. What I saw of the plot was not inspiring. A blondish...um...woman (bimbo? starlet?) played an old friend of the Commander of the station. Bare minutes after meeting him, they were in bed together. FEH!

It's worth mentioning that the writers seem to have followed the usual TV

assumption that science fiction = magic. Granted, a sufficiently high technology might be indistinguishable from magic (tip o' the hat to Mr. Clarke), but somehow you can tell when you're dealing with stupid fantasy...such as when an alien uses a ring to make another alien suffer "five gravities". Needless to say, the effect upon the alien was to induce bad acting reminiscent of a sudden hernia, rather than to squash him flat!

It may be arrogant to sum up without having even seen the whole thing — but that's me, and the Pack should know what to expect from me by now. 8^>}

This show seems to have one outstanding resource: its visual qualities. These are definitely good enough to carry even a mediocre cast and plot. Unfortunately, while the cast is probably adequate (though not outstanding), the writing is definitely not — and since the producers allowed this flawed script to be shot, they may not be capable of recognizing the difference between good and bad writing. That is, incidentally, one of the more hopeful signs about Deep Space 9: the producers seem to know good writing when they see it, and even the weakest episodes have been very watchable. Can the producers of Babylon 5 wise up in time? They'd have to bring in some good writers and give them, if not carte blanche, as close to it as they possibly could. But will they? My guess would be no. That said, Babylon 5 may be able to scrape along on the basis of its visuals, assuming that the producers decide to go ahead with the series — as it stands, the pilot is actually a made-for-TV movie, with no commitment for a series. I guess time will tell.

Kung Fu: The Legend Goes Lame

It's hard to say if Kung Fu really belongs in this forum — but what the

heck, it's sort of fantasy-oriented (no pun intended).

Let me warn anybody who values their sanity to keep away from this dog! It makes Space Rangers look good. I can't believe that they've changed Cain from a pacifist to a butt-kicking drug-fighting "vanquish your enemy"-type pinhead. And the writing and acting are abysmal.

Come to think of it, one might consider it somewhat racist for an Occidental to be playing a guy who's supposed to be half Chinese. On second thought, it would be just as racist to have a Chinese actor play the part, so we'll let that pass. 8^>}

A GAMING HORROR STORY

It's been a while since I wrote a gaming horror story in these pages. I don't *think* I've told this one before. An acquaintance of mine once told me about a campaign he had played in. He became a 23,000th level everything, killed every being named in the Deities and Demigods book three times over (resurrecting them for the second and third times), and exterminated every race listed in the Monster Manual! Not to mention destroying every God or Demonlord mentioned in any of the supplements, and Bahamut and Tiamat as well. He owned every Artifact and Relic ever made, and at least 100 of every lesser magic item. He owned the *plane* of Greyhawk, and rented it out (though I don't know what for). He also had gone to the galaxy of Star Wars, killed everything there, and taken back 100,000 of those giant elephant-like walker attack things. And 1,000 Death Stars. However, he generally relied upon a simpler weapon — he had something called a photon grenade, which did 1D100 damage. This damage could not be stopped by magic, magic resistance, saving throws, or anything else.

Whenever he was annoyed, an infinite

supply of these would come raining down upon whatever point he wished.

Needless to say, this was AD&D. 8^>}



THE TROUBLE WITH GURPS

There's been something sticking in my craw about GURPS for years — but I never really knew what it was. Recently David Hoberman asked me what I found objectionable about the system, and suddenly things became clear.

My major problem is the 3D6 basis. I think it's completely boneheaded and anti-intuitive. As Mark Willner demonstrated so well last issue, it seems stupid that a -2 penalty makes almost no difference in terms of chance to succeed for a character with low or high skill, but cripples a character with a skill in the medium area.

I also feel that the characteristics are skewed. INT and DEX are worth much more than HLT and STR in almost *any* genre — and at least 90% of the GURPS characters I know have had at least one of those two latter characteristics sold down. What's more, the characteristic range is too narrow — unless you're playing with huge amounts of building points at the start, there's an extremely narrow range of characteristics that can be afforded. There's much less room for difference among characters — not that differences need be delineated by widely different characteristics, of course. I do believe that roleplaying should be by far the most important 'dif-

ferentiator' (is that a word? my spell checker doesn't know it), but it does seem as if there's a tendency in GURPS for characters to be dreadfully close to one another in basic abilities. I find this a little boring. I might also note that this problem gets worse for low-power campaigns.

Another problem: skills. The skill mechanics are confusing! It took me much longer to understand the GURPS skill mechanisms than for other systems...it does not seem intuitive. And the point-haggling is annoying, as well — if you have enough skills based on either DEX or INT, you'd be a fool not to reduce them all be one and buy up the characteristic by a point, instead. This seems to encourage a very min-max approach. I don't object to spending time on character creation, but I'm not interested in spending hours calculating and recalculating my character skills and modifications. Seems to me that sort of thing only reinforces a very mechanistic attitude.

The whole *system* is overly complex! There was an old "Murphy's Rules" cartoon that said that it could take two or three hours for a novice to create a character for RuneQuest. But without exception, GURPS characters have taken me longer to create, re-create, and fine-tune. The only characters who have taken longer in my experience were pre-experienced pro-rated Sorcerers in Chivalry & Sorcery, assuming that you count the creation of the Sorcerer's magic staff as part of character creation. Of course, I'm not as experienced with GURPS as with RQ. Hmm. A balanced test would be nice...

Finally (I think), the combat system is completely (you guessed it) anti-intuitive. I still don't understand it! The way different values express a difference in the chance of your being hit as opposed to absorbing damage...it's highly confusing. Much like

the HERO system, in fact. And there are all those specialized rules dealing with battle maneuvers, stunning, special weapon effects...okay, other systems have these as well. But still, I haven't been able to absorb the rules of GURPS, and I'm not *that* dim — right? 8^>}

Overall, the problem with GURPS just might be that it is simply too complicated, with too many exceptions, amendments, and patches built into the rules system. It doesn't seem to have been designed around a simple and logical core, as say Pendragon is. The Advantage/Disadvantage design system is a nice idea, but too restricting and quirky ("Hi. I'm Bob the paranoid deaf albino midget!"). The large number of skills are good, but the method of increasing them (experience points) is bad. The large number of different genres is very good indeed, and might be the best thing about the system. But overall I tend to blur when dealing with the nuts & bolts of GURPS.

THE CENSOR NEVER SLEEPS

I ran into an interesting bit of news on the InterNet recently: apparently one of the distributors of White Wolf's stuff has notified its customers that "Clan Brujar" a supplement for Vampire, is obscene, and are asking to have copies sent back. "The Games People Play", the game store in Harvard Square that carries TWH, has decided to pull the game from their shelves.

I went down to the store yesterday to drop off the issues of TWH, and out of curiosity asked for Clan Brujar. A clerk informed me that it had been removed from the shelves. in response to the distributor's request. In response to my questions another clerk told me that the decision had been the owner's; and that there were still some copies in the back, waiting

to be returned to the distributor. They got me one from the back, and though I have no use for Vampire I bought it.

Damn it, this censorship outrages me. I can't accept it. These people are making moral decisions for me without even telling me, and I resent it. I know this book has been banned from many stores in Texas, but we're talking about *Cambridge* for God's sake!

Let's face it — in some areas, a game store might have to fear community censure for carrying even slightly questionable stuff. But this is Cambridge — and though ex-President Bush's attacks on the city were less than accurate, this is indeed the last place in the world I'd expect to find this sort of thinking.

I'd agree that a decision not to carry a product is a store's *right* — but I think that it's bad business. White Wolf stuff *does* sell (though I personally have no interest in the system or genre). There's no reason for them not to carry "Clan Brujah" other than their decision to impose their own morality on their customers. For one thing, I've looked over "Clan Brujah" — we're not talking anything that would even raise a serious eyebrow on broadcast TV. There seems to be a double standard involved here.

I find this decision offensive enough that I will no longer patronize The Games People Play. And I buy a lot of games. So in that sense, this decision was bad business.

I should mention that the owner of the store is, as far as I know, not a roleplayer. I doubt very much that she has read the book in question.

In fact, that's another good point — what sort of distributor would contact customers, notify them that a supplement was "obscene", and tell them to ship it back?

Were I involved with White Wolf, I'd certainly be concerned about this. Who decided the book was obscene? Was this person even a roleplayer? Will they be making these decisions again, and if so according to what standard?

As I said, the store has the right not to carry any product it wishes. And I have the right to find such behavior offensive, and refuse to give them my business. What disturbs me is that I'd never have known about this if I hadn't seen the original messages on the InterNet.



COMMENTS #178:

SWANSON: I can't help but balk at the comparison of HeroQuesting and serial TV. Why? It took me a while to figure out, but I suppose that my first objection is that TV is so shallow — and a HeroQuest should be as deep as roleplaying can get. The experience should be truly transformational, but the greatest part of this change should be within the personality (or soul, if you will) of the character — something that can't easily be displayed in the three-minute wrap-up before the credits roll.

You want an original plot? Jeez, Mark, if Shakespeare couldn't do it how can you expect me to? 8^>} Actually, I do have a plot which I'm sure isn't original, but which I think is a little unusual in a roleplaying setting. It was part of a Rune-

Quest Glorantha campaign I ran a few years ago, which I'll eventually write up as a scenario pack or something. The fairly inexperienced player characters had accidentally come into an unexpected position: they held the name, house, properties and obligations of an old established company of bodyguards/explorers/adventurers who were...unavailable. Under pressure from several sources, they had to try to fill the shoes of people far more experienced and powerful than themselves. But the word got out that a bunch of green apprentices were all that was left of the Grey Company...

They needed work, as the Tax Demon was coming to collect the large tax on their sumptuous house — and the previous masters of the Grey Company had neglected to tell them how to get at the Company treasury. When the summons came from a noble asking for their services on a trip into the Big Rubble, they jumped at it; they planned to hire as many mercenary warriors as they could to accompany them on the trip.

When they got to the house and met the lord, however, they discovered that he was only eleven years old. He had led a sheltered life, and had an over-romantic idea of what danger and excitement were. He and his several young noble friends were determined to have an adventure in the Big Rubble before his parents came back in three weeks. They'd pay handsomely for the Company's services. And if the players wouldn't help him, he'd go on his own...if he couldn't find anyone else.

The players knew that they were being watched by the authorities, their movements being recorded. If they let this youngster simply go and get slaughtered, they might well find themselves in even greater trouble than they were already — and they'd certainly have the boy's father out for their blood. And so the adventure became clear:

they had to figure out a way to dissuade the boy from going into the Rubble without annoying him to the point at which he'd simply fire them and go off by himself.

What did they do? They told the boy that a practice trip would be necessary into Prax, and set up a false ambush to scare the youngsters a day from the City. But things didn't turn out quite as expected...

You seem to lead a busy life...are you still gaming?

BUTLER:

"You see, Timothy...All things are divided into the twin forces of Order and Chaos, forever contending for dominance." —Dr. Fate, from "The Books of Magic" by Neil Gaiman

"Chaos versus Order indeed. I thought everyone had heard of fractals these days. There's no Chaos, no Order; just patterns of different levels of complexity." —John Constantine, *ibid*

Sound familiar? 8^>}

"Slay them all without salt"? What's the salt *for*, Bob? 8^>}

Your discussion of the pole stable versus center stable society is interesting, and mirrors some of my own history. In childhood, I saw the world as a black-and-white universe — Good and Evil seemed clear. Sometime in my early teens, I had a sudden insight: no one sane feels themselves to be evil, particularly those who I was sure were evil (I was frequently beaten up by some very self-righteous kids in those days. 8^>}). Voila! An eruption of shades of gray in my world, and subjec-

tive morality sprang forth from my brow like Athena. Of course there was no absolute standard of evil or good!

For quite some time my gaming reflected this thinking. Things were never black-and-white — the deepest villain always had some good qualities, and the noblest saint had some secret sin. I amused myself by standing the stereotypes of fantasy gaming on their heads.

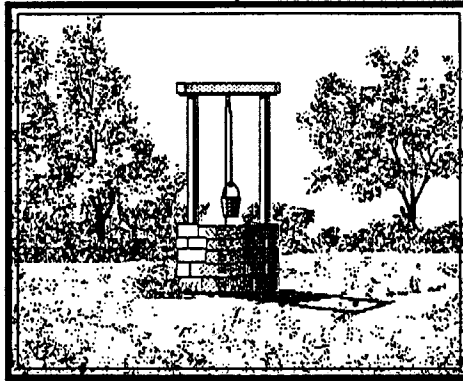
But somewhere along the line, I had another insight — I can't recall the time, but I know the cause. It was Tolkien's Silmarillion. It's as black-and-white a work as can be imagined: Good versus Evil in a most basic form. And yet it was great art, and more importantly it showed a clear moral foundation for The Lord of

the Rings. That great sweep of story and emotion would have been meaningless without the underlying but always unspoken foundation of Illuvatar underlying all.

So now I mix — shades of grey in the world, but always at least the possibility of an absolute morality. I think it works well.

Regarding my negative attitude toward all character build systems stemming from a single bad experience with GURPS — that experience was simply a crystallization point. I've used quite a few systems for character creation, and my complaints apply to all. I still feel that the best method is to create a character from the personality and story concept first, and let the balance fall where it may.

ERLANDSEN: Thanks very much for the information about that T&R court



case, counsellor. There was something deeply pathetic about it...touching, in a way. Though I help thinking of that old joke about the man watching his wife fighting a bear: "This is the first fight I've seen where I don't care *who* wins!" 8^>}

Truthfully, I'm glad that things worked out as they did — more for the sake of the precedent and the hobby in general than anything else. Interesting: I wonder what would have happened to the hobby if the judge had ruled the other way (unlikely though that result would have been) and shut down T&R for good? What would the gaming industry be like without T&R? Now *there's* an entertaining question!

Say, I've heard some odd rumors about the Steve Jackson vs. the Secret Service case — you wouldn't happen to have any interesting info on that, would you? Wait — what am I doing!?! Like you're not busy enough! 8^>}

Re the New England IFGS asking State Troopers to try a game: the thought of Jabba the Trooper thundering down at me with even a padded weapon in hand give me the shakes. 8^>} I don't think they'd be interested — though we often do have donuts on site...8^>}

Regarding backstabbing players: have you played **Paranoia**? It raises backstabbing to an art form. But I suppose that it would be a special case, and not really relate to your argument. I do think that you should stick to your guns on your standards of judgement of bad players. Just because a group of gamers accept and practice a particular behavior doesn't mean that behavior is justified, after all.

I hope you're enjoying your new cloak? You must send a picture to Bob. Perhaps he could work up a group shot of the Pack, in costume!

JOENBY: Congratulations on

reaching double digits, Doug! The next milestone will be triple digits, so keep writing! 8^>}



Regarding the whole issue of whether or not the GM of a game (either LARP or not) is obligated to make sure that the players win: Perhaps the obligation is to try to entertain the players, or allow them a forum in which they may entertain themselves? I know that some of the best games I've been in have been ones in which the players ultimately failed in many of their main goals. On the other hand, Bob Butler's black & white vs. greyscale discussion might be applicable here. Neither total success nor total failure, but rather a mixture of both...ambiguous, except insofar as the PCs adjust their own view of the situation.

It's different in live-action RPGs, of course. There usually isn't enough time or manpower to adequately present an open-possibility scenario — even a multi-thread game would be a real challenge to write.

Roleplaying can make even a complete failure and miserable death in a game satisfying. But I don't think that applies to LARP, either. When I've been in a losing situation in live games, what I've felt most strongly is annoyance at the GMs for not scaling the adventure properly for our group. It could be that the primary reason for this admittedly juvenile reaction was physical: when you're being swamped by more zombies than you can handle the

stress can be overwhelming. I certainly wasn't thinking much about roleplaying when I was lying on the ground, hoping that there would be at least a little healing left if the others weren't all killed, and worrying that in the darkness someone might step on me!

As I've said before, I don't think of Zanzibar as a real roleplaying character. He's pretty much just me in a grouchy and wisecracking mood.

About your first resurrection — I'd like to hear more about how you handled it. Was it really the first time that anyone had been resurrected in that world? That could certainly give a character some strange ideas about himself — and the same goes for the player, I suppose. 8^>}

PHILLIES: Glad to see that Pickering is still moving along nicely. It gives me a kick every time I see reference to Greater Medford. Is that a real area (for those of the Hunt who don't know Massachusetts, Medford is a real town, just south and east of Malden).

Ever since I first read Pickering I had the nagging feeling in the back of my head that I'd read the name before somewhere. A few days ago I rediscovered the book in which I first saw that name: the excellent *Time and Again* by Jack Finney. Have you read it? One of the major characters is named Jake Pickering. Otherwise there seems to be no similarity.

As you may know by now, I can't take credit for the IFGS photos in the last issue. They were Bob's production all the way. I only wish I had the facilities to do that sort of work.

Re Escape From the Lot, I did consider trying to make a ramp. The problem was that there was nothing to build a ramp with. A bare parking lot has little to offer in the way of building supplies...I might have scavenged in the woods, but it was really cold, and very dark. The only other possibility I can think of, in retrospect, would have been to bundle up my cloak and put it under one of the wheels. I don't know how well that would have worked, and the cloak would almost certainly have been destroyed. What the hell; after all, everything worked out all right.

“Obligatory sex scene”? Unless you plan on either introducing some new older characters quickly or putting Pickering and Telzy together in Cyberspace, you'll probably have to call it the “statutory rape scene”. 8^>}

RUGGLES: Wow. What an impressive job! The art alone was great, and must have taken forever to draw — but the text had me ROFL. Great job! Now, how about doing *comments* in comic form? 8^>}

I do have a few questions about the game itself. What sort of guns do you use? Is this a paintball game, and if not, how do you know if you've been hit? If you remove your helmet to indicate that you're dead, how can you feign death and kill unsuspecting enemies from behind? Is this done under the auspices of some organization, or is it just random craziness?

I hope we'll see some more zines like this one from you...it lends a nicely different quality to the issue.



SAPIENZA: Congratulations on your first half-century. I'll be twenty-nine on March 11th, myself. It's not as easy to take as twenty-eight was...but thirty may be an ordeal. I'm reassured to know that it's possible to be into gaming past forty, however! I guess my parents are wrong — I *won't* grow out of this. 8^>}

I found your religious system very interesting. I couldn't help but wonder, though, if the GM agreed to some of the implications. Was reincarnation a part of the game before you designed the religion?

I'd like to hear more about your view of HeroQuesting. It sounds as if at least part of your experiences have been skill and power based. To what extent, if any, was the experience transformational, and transcend the mechanics of the system?

Is nudity in game art really "bad taste"? I wonder. I know that as a kid there's no way I'd be seen with such a game — I made a cover out of a paper bag for a paperback copy of Heinlein's "Assignment In Eternity", which had a *very* stylized female nude on the cover. Didn't take that cover off til puberty set in, too! 8^>}

Looks like I was late on the draw with my RuneQuest Damage Bonus proposal. The playtest version already has something very similar.

WILNER: I'm a little confused by your Net address — is it marc(a)@net-com.com, or marc@netcom.com?

I've heard of Duel — it sounds interesting. Do you find it easy to absorb new rules, or could anybody figure out the system in fifteen minutes?

I agree with many of your points on winging games, of course. I'm not much for historical games, but do insist on spending enough time preparing the original

setting of the game so that I can make up convincing incidental details on the fly.

Your "bunch of strangers meeting at the pub" tickled me. That's almost exactly the phrase I used in my "Bar Wars" article, which was written to counter that very stereotype.

Amusing that you should mention Thessaly from *Sandman*, as she's featured heavily in the three original paste-ups that my roommate Scott and I have. We just recently got them signed by Neil Gaiman (the artist had already signed them), and he told me that Thessaly is "spiritually" modelled on the artist, who is a bit of a dragon lady. Incidentally, Neil seems quite a nice guy, and is surprisingly young.

"Comic books" is apparently the right word to describe Sandman, incidentally. In an article in the February 25th *Boston Herald*, Gaiman said that he preferred the term, particularly as opposed to 'graphic novel': "...it's like calling a hooker an escort, or a garbageman a sanitation engineer... there is a literary snobbery and a foolishness there I find very strange. I'm not an escort; I'm a hooker and I'm proud of it."

As I mentioned to John Sapienza, the RQ4 authors already have a Damage Bonus system much like mine. I'm still waiting to hear from them about the Runic Sorcery system.

The tables at the end are great, but as a math semi-literate I have to ask: isn't it basically the same information repeated three times?

DERRYBERRY: Re your comment to Dana E. re lead figures and teddy bears: Apparently there's a very good chance that lead figures will be nationally banned. In which case, the market in teddy bears might boom...



You may be pleased to hear that Steve Purcell, the author and artist of Sam & Max, Freelance Police, is reported to be starting a regular bi-monthly comic book soon. It will feature at least *some* Sam & Max in each issue. I'm told that it should be out in a few months.

Plundering my album covers? Not I. All the graphics I use are downloaded from BBSes. So somebody else is guilty, not me! (Hmm. Perhaps I'll need the professional services of Attorney Erlandsen if I'm not careful...8^>}

I had a few problems figuring out V for Vendetta, too — but I think I understand it now. V was torturing his protege to enable her to somehow transcend her fear — fear of the system, fear of torture, fear of death. This was how he himself had been changed. Or at least, that's what I think.

I also often add extra Disadvantages for no point gain when designing a character in a build system.

If you don't win the "Most comments in a single zine" award, I don't know who does! 8^>}

HOBERTMAN: Welcome, David! Glad to see that I'm still able to drag people into things, despite my advancing years. 8^>}

I sympathize with your problems at the hotel during Arisia — as I forgot to mention last issue, I spoke to at least three other people who had their rooms screwed up somehow. The hotel does need to do something about their procedures, I'd say.

Re the sadomasochistic folk at Arisia — well, I have to admit that I find their presence a little bemusing, but not any more so than the filkers, for example. One of the nicest things about Arisia is the spirit of tolerance and friendliness there.

On the other hand, the three drunk S&M (or bondage, I don't want to get into a technical argument here — I admit I'm somewhat ignorant on the subject) guys were apparently looking for trouble — I ran into a woman with two small children (one in a baby carriage, the other maybe four years old) waiting in front of the elevators who told me that three drunk guys had been talking some fairly loud and hardcore S&M talk in the elevator, and had refused to stop when she asked them to. It does sound as if they were looking for trouble. I should make it clear that I don't mean to suggest that such behavior characterizes their particular group, whatever it is; I suspect that young horny drunk punks of any orientation or preference might have acted that way.

My point? I don't object to the folk who attend Arisia for the sexual themes. But I do object to harassment of anyone by anyone, at least in that forum.

I wonder if any of the Hunt can guess which of the characters in the PC Comments at the end of your zine was played by me? 8^>}

Colophon

Rack & Rune #14:
Unicorn Bait was generated in ASCII form using PC-Write 2.5. It was formatted for desk top publication using Publish-It 2.0. It includes clip art generated with the Windows 3.0 Paintbrush utility, as well as clip art downloaded from several BBSes. It was printed on an Epson LQ-570 dot-matrix printer. Early bird my ass!
It's...morning! *PM*

