## Suspense & Decision



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### **SUSPENSE & DECISION**

## **ISSUE # 10**

Aug 2014 - Sep 2015

**Special Consolidation Issue: Return from Publication Hiatus** 

Published by: PlayByMail.Net ©2015









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If this is your first encounter with our magazine, then welcome! If you are a reader returning after our rather extended absence, then welcome back! Either way, it is good to have you onboard for this issue - an issue that marks our magazine's return to publication after a rather lengthy and conspicuous absence.

The world did not end during our magazine's absence. Play-By-Mail and all other forms of gaming survived without Suspense & Decision providing commentary and distraction.

Even still, it is nice to be back. Feel free to write in and give us Hell for abandoning you, or to heap praise and accolades upon us for returning. Or, more importantly, feel free to just resume sending in your thoughts and comments about your experiences playing various games, whether of the PBM variety or otherwise.

If we miss including in this issue something submitted over a year ago, know that you have our sincerest of apologies. Our primary focus at the moment is simply on getting the ball rolling again.

Thank you for your understanding, and happy reading!

- Charles

Is NUCLEAR WAR unavoidable?
Is Nuclear Escalation inevitable? Is Nuclear Proliferation inescapable? Are Weapons of Mass Destruction ever going to be found?

 $W_{\text{e}}$  don't know either, but we do know that the card game NUCLEAR WAR is the most fun you'll ever find in a box that size.

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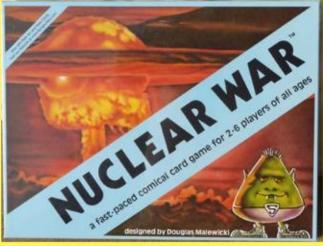
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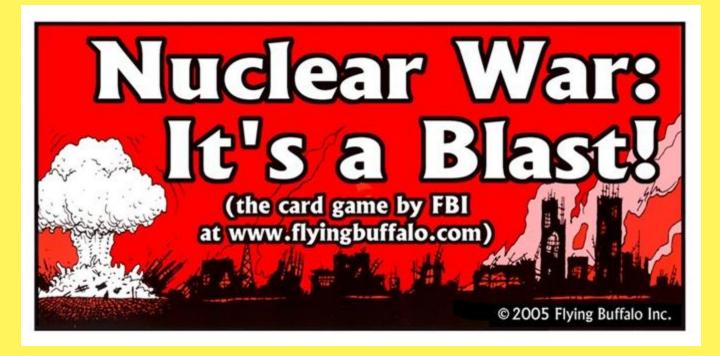






## **Congratulations to Rick Loomis!**

Did you miss the <u>Kickstarter</u> for the **Nuclear War Card Game**50th Anniversary Edition?



## 1,388 backers

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\$156,696

## Welcome to Arkers (DM-8)

### Part III (Push you Wussy!)

**Duel II Fiction by Julius A. Nicholson** 

"Come on you wussy! Push!" the man growled.

Adoric Tyden struggled under the weight of the barbells as he lay on the bench. Drops of sweat rolled down his face and onto the floor and he gnashed his teeth and grunted. His arms shook and quivered as if he had palsy. On either side were metal plates that read 100 lbs. This only made the situation more embarrassing.

"Would you do it already? Geez!" the man yelled. Adoric could hear laughter. But he couldn't tell whose it was.

The man who was yelling at Adoric was Ayrie Zile. Ayrie was built like a fortress. Big, blocky, and hard. He had brown eyes the colour of bronze. Ayrie wore his thick black hair spiked like a porcupine's quills. His skin was the cream-colored of the northern kingdom of Vithicar. He had a strong chin and wore thin clothes and constantly complained of being hot. The unbearable "heat" of the southerners was too much for him since he came from a kingdom covered in ice. He fought in the arena under the name of *Brain Smasher*. Ayrie fought using the bashing attack and preferred a mace.

The person laughing could be Vera Kylmar. She used the lunging attack and fought under the name *Lady Death*. This "lady" made one think of a cobra about to strike. She had deep-set brown eyes that were like two discs of stained wood. Vera had sandy brown hair that hung mid-length to her shoulders. Vera was short and had an

hourglass build. Her skin was the colour of cream. For some reason, Vera loved wearing risqué clothes and the colours were usually blue and red. Even during her fights. Whenever Vera walked onto the sands, cheers became cat calls. And she loved every minute of it.

It might have been Abdel Colthan. If Vera reminded Adoric of a cobra, then Abdel reminded him of a sly fox. Abdel had slanted brown eyes and black luxurious curly hair that he wore clean cut. He was short and has a narrow build. His skin was the colour of sandalwood. He had knobby ears and a large nose. His wardrobe was practical and dignified, as opposed to what his stable mates wore. Abdel Colthan fought using the parry strike style.

But, the truth was it was Azoman Tul. Azoman was as arrogant as the day is long and he had been giving Adoric problems since his arrival. Azoman had almond shaped eyes that were the deepest violet. His fine, straight, chocolate-coloured hair was very long and flowed down his back. He was tall and had a thin build. His skin was white. Azoman tended to wear white shirts opened to the third button and skin-tight black pants. Azoman was popular with the ladies and infamous for his womanizing. Whenever Azoman fought, whether if he won or lost, the sand would be covered with flowers from his adoring female fans. He fought using the parry-riposte style.

Raddock sat watching the events. It was hard to tell if the giant man knew what was

going on or if he was simply day dreaming. It looked as if he was still wearing the same clothes from four days earlier and he definitely had a smell. Adoric felt a bit of relief when he realized that the giant wasn't a fighter in Hildar's stable, but a mascot.

The weights slammed back onto the rack with a loud crash. Adoric struggled to sit up and he was winded. Sweat pour down his face. He felt so terrible; he couldn't look his stable mates in the face. So his eyes never left the floor.

Hildar look at Adoric as the young man gasped for air. Hildar felt pity for him. He and everyone else in the room knew what would happen if this deal didn't work out, Adoric would end up in the Dark Arena. The Dark Arena is where all warriors, whether they were new or seasoned veterans, ended up when they stopped winning. A few weeks ago, the warrior monks of the Chosen had sent the gentle giantess called Ocean to the Dark Arena. She had finally stopped winning and held a 9-15-0 record at the time of her death. The fans thought it was a cold thing to do considering the she had followed him from Seam. But she wouldn't have any other way. She had failed as a warrior and she felt that she had failed Mantor the Bright. It was the honourable thing to do.

There were cities in Adorak that would not kill a warrior. Aruak City was a perfect example. They treated the ritual of going to the dark arena as a symbolic gesture and a memory of what the warriors in the past endured. During the match, the warrior would meet his "death" and then be ushered out of the city that same night and told never to return. The disgrace of not making it as a gladiator was punishment enough.

Hildar looked Adoric over and determined the man still had potential. During his test, he had scored pretty well. His strength checked out at 90. He had scored slightly above average on the constitution. Adoric also proved to be very intelligent. His reflexes were incredibly quick. He was very quick on his feet. But he didn't have the endurance to take on an offensive style like lunger or slasher. Hildar suddenly had an idea.

"Adoric. You will get a chance. But, you will not fight in the arena. Not yet, anyway. You are going to train everyday with Azoman Tul and you will learn everything there is to know about the parry-riposte style. You will then fight in the rookie class of the Tourney of the Dead. After that, you will return to Arkers and fight as a regular member. Welcome to the horde."

Hildar then left the training area with Radduck in tow.

"Great! We're going to have two dandies running around waving tooth picks everywhere," said Ayrie Zile.

"They're called epees." Azoman corrected his brutish stable mate.

"If you swing them too hard, they break. They are tooth picks."

Adoric ignored the bickering and asked, "What is the Tourney of the Dead?"





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## Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?

### **Editorialis Interruptus**

**Bernd Jaehnigen** 

Such were the words that often greeted every PC user, back in the ancient days of DOS. The usual remedy was to restart your machine, and pick up where you left off. Hopefully, you would avoid repeating the steps that led your application to lock up, you'd learn a little about what your machine can do, and you'd carry on. I hope that we can look back on this year of extended absence as a temporary lock-up, view this August/September Issue 10 as a reboot, and get back to giving the PBM community the magazine it richly deserves.

I can't speak for Charles — I write this, not having read his inevitable narrative on our year on ice. I will say for myself, that while I had every intention of taking the reins upon Charles' step-back, I was both daunted by the high bar he had set, and assaulted by real-life issues. That combination made each succeeding month seem like that much higher a hill to climb, in order to get the magazine on track. Moreover, Charles has a way of doing layout that I find a little confusing, so I had intended to use an open-source layout tool. This only added to my Sisyphusian struggle.

My complications have subsided, and I recently acquired MS Publisher, which is a great tool for this kind of layout, and which I have used before. So, I decided

to return to PBM, whether as an editor for *S&D* or my own new zine. Lo and behold, two days later I received an email from Charles, suggesting that we ought to re-open the S&D office complex, take the covers off the printing machines, and start the presses back up.

Will we fall down on the job, again? I hope not. Part of the lesson here is to manage the task, and make it fit comfortably into our lives. This might involve cutting the size back, reducing the frequency, bringing some new people on, or some combination thereof. It will require a more-or-less daily commitment on my end, in order to keep things manageably on-track, so I am committing to a daily PBM workout of at least 30 minutes. And it must be stressed that it requires ongoing contribution from you. Write an article once in a while, or just write a short email to the editors with your thoughts on something you read! Make a little ad for your game, even if you are just a player! Post comments and questions in the forum, that might fire up a magazine debate!

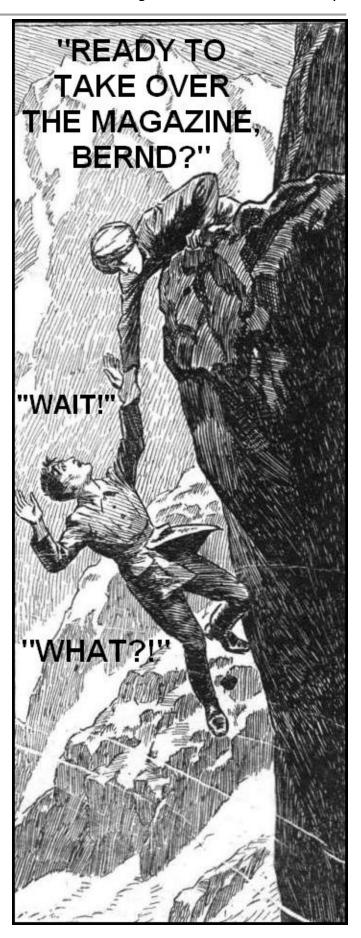
We should also view this year off as a manifestation of the biggest problem in PBM — dropouts. Forum contributor Ramblurr put in a tremendous amount of work in recovering and rebuilding some

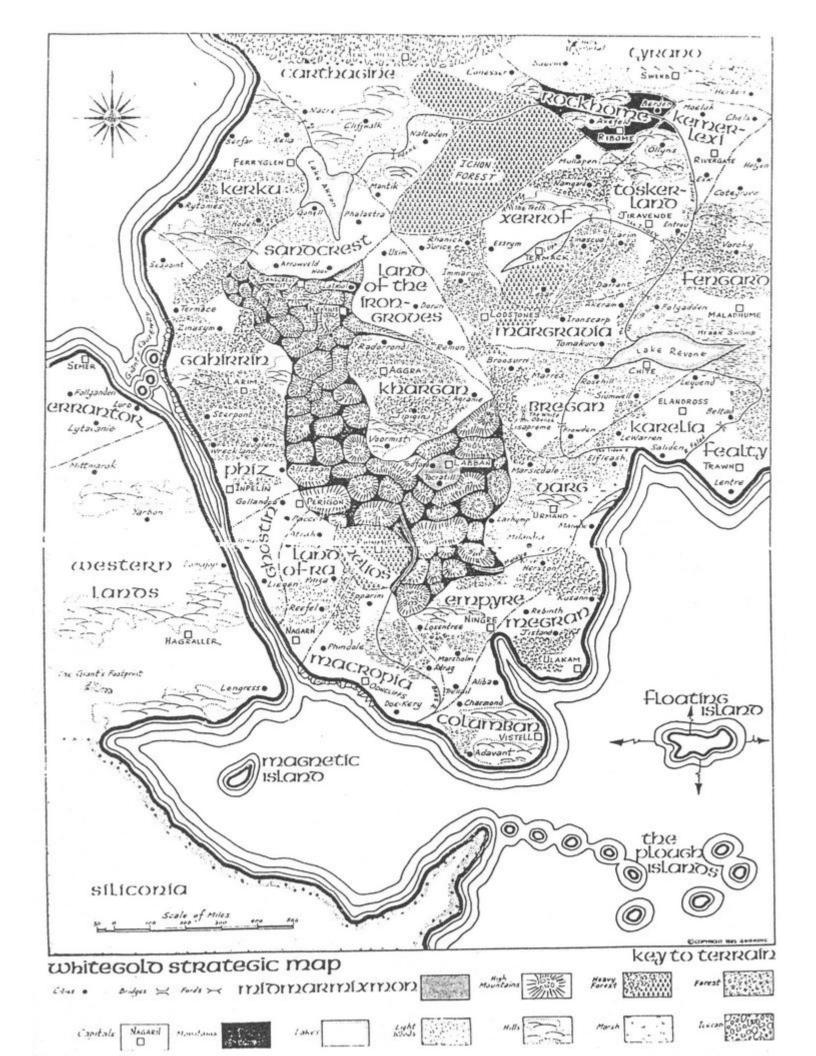
old PBM code, launching a free open game of *Far Horizons*. It was vigorously played by several people, and brought to life a legendary rivalry between Charles and myself for PBM bragging rights. Then one day, Ramblurr disappeared. One of my opponents in Alamaze dropped out in front of my advancing hordes. Similarly, I played the *Nuclear Destruction* game that Rick Loomis of *Flying Buffalo* generously offered for ten cents a turn — right up until I dropped out.

Why? These games are hard to get rolling, and involve a lot of investment from both moderator and player. We should ask not only why dropouts are such a major problem, but why there are dropouts at all? It's worth a deep dive, and deserves some reflection from anyone who has ever dropped a position or stopped running a game. I suspect that includes the majority of you readers out there. What makes people drop out, how does it impact PBM, and what can we do to minimize it? Send in your thoughts, so we can put together a roundtable for next issue!



**Evie & Bernd**Assistant Editor and his dog





## The Good Old Days Of PBM

## Whitegold C Danks

I've been playing PBM games since the mid 80's. There have been plenty of games since then, and I wish I'd kept some of these rules and printouts.

There was nothing better than waiting for your turn to come through the post, or waiting for a letter to see how your diplomacy went. Now emails can be sent constantly back and forth and turns can be sent to you, instantly.

What's this all about then? Well I have kept some of my games so I'd thought I'd see if some of you remember games which were played a long time ago...

During a wargame convention in Edinburgh, I met a guy called Ben Parkenson who was standing in front of a huge map of Whitegold. He showed me the rules and a flyer and I was hooked! He didn't stay long in the game and sold Whitegold to a guy in Ayr (I think the name was Steve). Eventually it was sold in 1990 to Paul Webber who expanded the game and started Eastern Whitegold (but that is another story if anyone is interested.)

As you can see by the map, the world was split into 24 player-controlled countries, 3 NPC (Fealty, Rockhome & Tyrano) and unknown areas (Silicania, Plough Islands, Floating and Magnetic Islands).

Each nation was unique. Some were military in the normal sense, others were wizard-led, others (like the Varg) were from another world! Not all were human nations and some were taken from the history books.

The Kingdoms all had player data sheets running 3 to 4 pages. I've included the Kingdom of Xerrof, as an example.

- 1. History of the Kingdom and the good and bad in detail.
- 2. Actual cities, army in great detail, what you can produce, reinforcements etc.
- 3. Notes and a "start" as what you can do.

I am a bit of a military history buff, so the armies are what brought this game to me. Obviously everything was in code but "200 CD (tb) Ic,sms" were actually "200 crack tigerback troops with lance, small metal shield wearing chainmail!"

Troops were rated "crack" to "raw."
There were 8 different types of armour, 23 types of weapons and 5 different types of shields. As there were also 18 different races, 10 different types of Cavalry and 22 creatures, your army composition was rather large.

Once your armies were set up, it was up to you to either start a war with your neighbour or start exploring your country. Generally, your turn consisted of 6-8 free actions in which anything goes. The return was never more than a page long, the battles could be a page, and your armies/cities were also updated.

As the GM was from Scotland, we'd all meet up once a month in a pub in Glasgow and have a beer (or two), just talking.

One of my favourite countries was the Western Lands. It had a large army base, but was poor in weapons and armour. It did have a large area to investigate. One extra item you could buy was a country map from the GM (done by an artist, and sold at a cost.) This was hand drawn which was not only nice to look at, but also had special areas to explore.

Apart from invading the player-controlled country to my North (Errantor which was run by a wizards council of 12), I'd spend most of my time sending expeditions into Siliconia and the Floating Islands. I fought against bandits inside my own country and tried to get the best of a small monastery to my west.

When Paul took the game over, he expanded the cities aspect. Rather than just having a block, you actually had to apply a civilization type to each (as per the PC game). You had to lay down temples, wells, fields to feed

your population etc.

One of the reasons the game died was it became too complicated for the GM to control. It was just too time consuming and wasn't worth the GM's time (i.e. he couldn't make any money).

I still have most of the player data sheets which are great to read. I'm missing only a few and I guess I'll never know what the fairy Kingdom of Helios was actually like. I never got to the bottom of Siliconia and what treasures it held. Some of the player data sheets were incomplete, and I'll never get to read about the history of Kemerlexi.

If there are any old Whitegold players out there, I'd be interested in hearing their experiences with the game. If you have any data sheets, I'd be most willing to trade them with you.

I've always wondered what happened to the GM data which (I hope) is lying in boxes somewhere in someone's loft. One day, maybe...

If anyone has games from the past which they would like to share, along with old rules, maps, etc, then please write an article and submit it.

Does anyone remember the first KJC game? I think it was called "The Tribes of Mirchwood" or something? Does anyone have information?

The inhabitants of Merrof are a proud, fearless race holding allegiance to hobody but themselves. They disdain foreigners but do trade on occasion with other countries. What is most unusual about the Merrof people is that they hold all cats sacred, and like cats, they are cruel and predatory, preying on other nations when the mood takes them. Many Whitegold Leaders regard Merrof as a barbaric state rather than a nation, but the Merrof people are more civilised than most would believe.

The Capital city of Xerrof is situated on a large island near the centre of Lake Xerrof. Huge drawtridges span the waters but these can be rapidly withdrawn during times of war. The city is of average fortification but the natural most provides an efficient barrier, especially as vast shoals of predatory fish inhabit the lake. This fact is unknown to outsiders and, due to the manner in which the Xerrof people regard foreigners, this is likely to continue.

Xerrof has a small navy of sixteen barges which are used primarily to transport troops, but some of these vessels do have armaments. Their use is

debateable during peaceful times.

Those fortunate to have visited the Capital tell of the hundreds of cats which roam Xerrof's streets. It is a serious crime to harm a cat in any way whatsoever. The punishment is death in one of the most cruel and barbaric forms ever concieved. Offenders are devoured alive by the Xerrof Eattle-Cats, a slow and painful way to die

The large feline population has resulted in the complete elimination of rodents in Xerrof. The cats are fed daily in the city centre when fish (caught freshly each day from the lake) are spread out for a veritable feline feast. Suprisingly, the fish population in the lake shows no signs of

being depleted.

Espionage agents find it difficult to operate in Xerrof because of the

way strangers are treated and looked down upon.

The army of Xerrof has no cavalry but an elite group of warriors ride huge Battle-cats into combat. These powerful felines resemble the Old Earth Smilodon or Sabre-toothed Tiger. The Cats are raised from freing cubs with their future Riders, and so a strong bond grows between each man and his beast and they fight together as a single unit; the man using his weapons, the cat relying on fangs and claws. In size they are just a little smaller than a normal horse.

Xerrof has not much in the way of magic. The priest, who run the numerous temples and lesser shrines are known to have some powers but they seem to be mainly of a clerical nature. What is certain is that many Xerrof people

seem to have a mind-link with the feline species.

Until recent years, it was thought that Xerrof had little to offer other ations in the trade for the hides needed for warmth and to make leather saddles for the Battle-Cats(There are no cattle in Xerrof). However, the discovery of a strange, light metal by a travelling Merchant has promoted interest from several other countries. The Xerrof people are curious about why the foreigners are interested because they have been using the material for plates: The Leader of Xerrof is, of course, eager to discover the reason for this.

The rriests of Nerrof do have one ability which may proove to be an asset in war. Twice a year, they can summon their deity, P'urr, to aid them. She appears as a raging widcat of a similar size to a middle-aged Dragon. She can absorb considerable damage before her earthly form is slain and can inflict great damage herself with claw and fang. P urr will only answer a summons to battle.

Kerrof is a highly trained, albeit barbrous nation, but she will make a good friend if treated fairly. If crossed then she will make a bad enemy.

PLAYER DATA SHEET FOR XERROF.....

FINANCE CITY TERMACK LEBAR ZINASCUA MULLAPEN NAMGARD ESSRYM	Income 9,000 2,100 1,400 1,800 1,400	Total Monthly Income: 17,000 Less Cost of Regulars: 10,660 Less Cost of Navy: 500 TOTAL INCOME AVAILABLE: 5,800
ESSRYM	1,300	

SPELL CAPACITY: NIL SPELL NOS. AVAILABLE: NONE

RESOURCES: A strange light metal that your people have been using as plates.

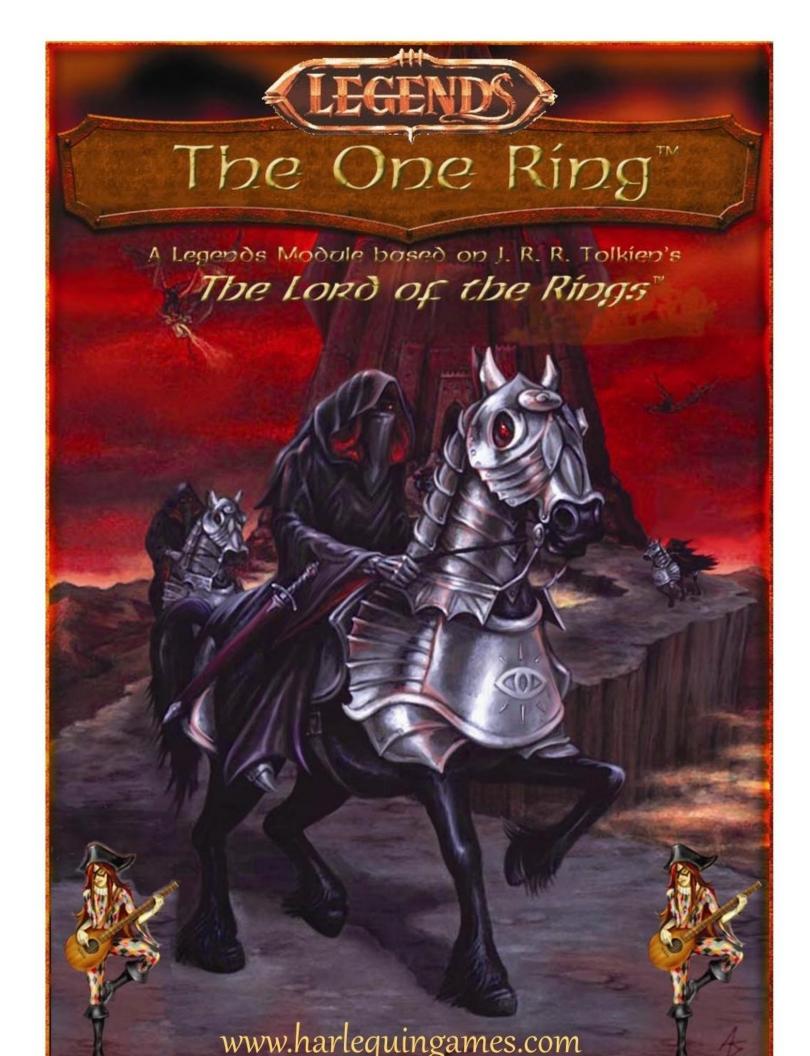
### NOTES:

- 1. The people of Xerrof are a strange bunch but when roused provide some of the hardiest fighters in Whitegold. They prepare for a battle in a somewhat ritualistic fashion and if they are ambushed or surprised may act despendently.
- 2. Termack is positioned on an island in the centre of Lake Xenof, Sturdy drawbridges reach to land on either side of the city which may be retracted at any time. It is occasionally dangerous to cross the drawbridges in high winds, especially since the lake is full of carnivorous aquatic creatures.
- 3. Chie, one of your people was reduced to askes by a mind blast from a Margravian.

## DISTRIBUTION OF FORCES CITY(WALL POINTS)

tb) = tigerback) lb)= lituback	TERMACK (4,200) 2COCD (tb) lc, SMS 2COCD (lb) l. SMd, SMS 4CCCD g. Smd, lbow 2COED (lb) lc, SWS 4OCED g. Swd, l. bow 4COVE pR, l. bow 3CO NF l. Swd, S. bow  LEBAR (2,100) 400ED (lb) l. Swd, SWS 4COVE pR, l. bow 5CONF l. Swd, Sbew 4COGH club ZINASCUA (2,500) 2COCD (lb) l. Swd, SMS 4COVE ghashimen 2-hSwd 2CONF ghashmen pR ICORG ghashimen b. Swd, St.  MULLAPEN (2,200) 2COCD gt Swd, l. bow 2COVE (lb) Sp, SWS 5CONG b. Swd, St. 2CORG Showd, St.  NAMBERD (1,900) 2COED (lb) lc, SWS 4COVE pR, l. bow 4CONG b. Swd, St. 2CORH Sh. Swd ESSRYM (2,000) 4COED g. Swd, l. bow 1CONF l. Swd, Sbow 3CORG Showd, St. 2CORH Sh. Swd
	SIEGE WEAPONS: TERMACK 2 HEAVY, CATAPULTS  ZINASCUA 2 TOWERS, I RAM
	NAVY: TERMACK 6 large, 6 med, 4 small barges
	MERCENARIES AVAILABLE FOR HIRE Sea Serpent (one only for Lake Xerrof), griffors, ghashmen, humans
	PRODUCTION LIMITS/SURPLUSES  'F' class armour is available at 5½ G per suit (i.e. more expensive)  Only 'D' class armour or worse may be manufactured  REINFORCEMENTS (per month)  1-400 infantry G → E  0-100 tigerback  0-100 tienback  LEADERS AND BATTLEMAGES (including place of origin)
	3 'SPECIAL' - TERMACK, ZINASCUA, ESSRYM
	3 'NORMAL' - LEBAR, MULLAPEN, NAMGARD

The 'Special at Zinascua is a ghashman who has 'acquired'
the abilities of a general battlemage. He is however, not willing
to civilize the secret, threatening to enrighte to Margiavia
if pressed.



## There and Back Again A MEPBM Player's Tale

DJ Barry, Jr.

I had not forgotten about PBM gaming... not by a long shot. However, I had not thought about picking the hobby back up either, at least, not until I got an email a few weeks ago inviting me to join a game of MEPBM (Middle Earth Play By Mail, and if you're reading this, you probably already knew that). To be honest, I got all warm and tingly, as I started to relive fond memories of being fifteen years old pulling my hair out trying to determine what my best options were, with regards character creation and struggling to work out the exact strength of my armies. I had no computer back then. Heck, there wasn't even an email game available at that time, and all I can remember is how much I learned about the functions of my TI-85!

I also remember how hooked on such an amazing pastime I became. I went from reading fantasy literature to living it out, in a way. I was the ruler of my own kingdom, grand architect of its structures and inner workings. The fate of all things rested squarely upon my teenaged shoulders. It was beautiful!

I carried my hobby with me after high school into the Army, and it helped to pass the tedium of being an infantryman with (thankfully) no real war to fight. I even got two of my friends to join in on a

game. I played through college, always sure to keep an email game going, so as to fill my craving for human competition in a strategy game and as fuel for imaginative daydreams.

As I recall, the moderation of the game changed hands at some time, and I disliked the new handlers... so I switched to another game (Forgotten Realms). It was nice, but lacked the same feel. I eventually became so bogged down with work, that I ended up shelving my hobby, but when I switched career paths and went overseas to teach English, I picked it up, again. I was thankful to learn that the game was under new management, and many active forum members seemed to extol the virtues of the new (and still current) moderation team.

I picked up a few games, but became a "dropper." So much about the modules were so well known, that the game had become rather mechanical. New players having been draw into the game after the release of the movies made for a great deal of team frustration, when certain opening strategies and expected player responsibilities were not met. And, in the spirit of being open and honest, when I was accused of cheating in a Fourth Age game (hey, it's not my fault that someone from the opposing

team sent me an invite to their yahoo group... and yes... I did log in and check things out), I just dropped and shelved my hobby, yet again.

Since having received the email from the current moderators, I have once again found myself reading the same great articles from fifteen or even twenty or more years ago. I'm re-reading rule books, revisiting websites which haven't been updated in a dozen years, and plotting out nation setups for the Kin-Strife module (Oh, please, let me play the Witch King... PLEASE). And, just today, I found this little gem of an ezine, and decided I would do my best to contribute what little I can offer, even if all I have to give is my story.

However, I can add one nugget of wisdom to those of you reading this and are also lucky enough to work for any of the great companies still going strong in the PBM gaming industry, and it is this: sometimes, all it takes is an email to get people right back on the proverbial wagon!

I have read several articles published in this magazine discussing topics such as innovation and how best to retain or attract players, and all them have made fair points. Even after having received the email, I still looked into what other older and newer games might be available for me to get involved with. My time and money are both precious, and I have high hopes that my decision to once again explore the world of Middle Earth - specifically the MEPBM Kin-Strife

module - will be as new and exciting as 1650 was (if only for myself) nearly 25 years ago. And, all it took was one email.

Also, I am very happy to see that people still gather to submit and publish articles, insights, and reviews of so many of the great games being run (most of which I have, admittedly, never played, and only some of for which I have even read the rules). I honestly would have thought in this world of console-based shoot-emups and massive multiplayer blah-blah-blahs, that this genre of gaming would be quite dead, by now. I am more than merely happy to learn that I am wrong.

Finally, I hope to contribute something to the PBM community. If I'm lucky, perhaps I might find a way to submit a little something which might pass the editor's muster once a month about the game I plan on getting involved with here in the near future. A small piece of creative writing detailing the actions of a character, a review of how well my grand strategy worked out - or more than likely - failed in a most epic manner! It really doesn't matter. It's just nice to be back. I don't know what it might take to rebuild the PBM industry, but I am certain my story is proof that it can be done.

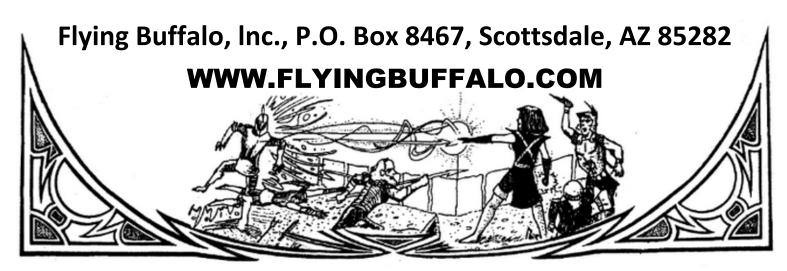
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"For what it's worth, I truly miss the S&D Magazine. I thought it was well-written and full of interesting and opinionated debate (a good thing) on a variety of topics I was interested in. I also found it extremely useful in determining which games were still active and looking for new players. I felt the gap after issue #9 and hoped for a revival after the hiatus. After spending most of the last several months in hospital after surgery and recovery, I was saddened to see not. Should you ever try to resuscitate the mag, I'd vote for keeping the name. I thought the reasons given for it were compelling and maintaining some level of continuity might be useful. Frankly, though, I'd just like to see it come back either way. Know that you have at least one (forlorn) fan out here in the wilderness."

## - BlueGolem PlayByMail.Net forum user

## Suspense & Decision

### **Dear Blue Golem,**

Know that we have heard your cry in the wilderness. Be forlorn no more! We have put the hiatus on hiatus, and have chosen this moment in time to reappear. Your loyalty - and your patience - stand rewarded.

None of us are promised tomorrow. Thus, there are no certainties, and certainly not in the realms of play by mail and magazine publishing. Nonetheless, we shall give it a new go.

Issue #10 has materialized, at long last - more than a year after it should have first appeared. We're not even certain whether we managed to track everything down that was intended for this issue, originally, way back when. But, we have tried, and what you now have in your electronic hands is the results of this attempt at a comeback from the nether void of non-publication. How long will it last, this latest venture to breathe life into Suspense & Decision magazine? Who can truly say? Nobody knows.

## - Charles Managing Editor of Suspense & Decision magazine



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## Ridin' Out the Storm A Galac-Tac Chronicle - Episode 1

**Douglas Neman** 

### Weather Report: 3500-01

What a way to celebrate graduation. Get drunk, make a lousy pass at the hottest brunette I've ever seen, find out she's an admiral's daughter, and wake up with a hangover and a first-class ticket to nowhere.

And why did I get drunk? Because stupid me finally showed Shelandra my journal after all these years, and she just stared at it, then she laughed. "Why do you call it the Weather Report?" she asked.

"Don't you get it?" I asked her.

"Uh...no, sunshine."

I started talking to her like she was in the drone zone. "Because my name's Jake Storm. So if a guy named Storm makes a journal entry, he can call it the Weather Report. Get it?"

She just looked at me like I was crazy and laughed again. So I said screw it and got drunk. I think I have a dim memory of Shelandra even telling me on the dance floor, "You know she's Admiral Brighton's daughter, right?" but all I heard was blah-freakin'-blah, and my next memory is waking up on my own ship, locked in my cabin.

Yeah, that's right. Fresh out of the academy and I've already been given a command. Starship? Destroyer? No. A scout ship. One of the first ever built. Rex told me Admiral Brighton signed the order himself, along with the words, "Make sure that junkfilth excuse of a private stays as far away from this planet as possible for the rest of his career." Or some such sentiment. Yeah. The feeling's mutual. I hope his precious daughter marries a politician.

According to the orders I found lying next to me, I ship out tomorrow. They finally pulled the plug on old Kickbrass Karsten, so his wet-nosed snotty little son is our new emperor as of yesterday afternoon. And guess what Diaper-Rash wants to do? That's right. Conquer the galaxy. Prove to everyone that he's not the wet noodle that he really is. Get out of daddy's shadow. And what better way to do that than to send a war fleet to drop some bright and flashy greeting cards on our neighbors. Yee-haw. Go get 'em tiger. I think he's compensating for something, big-time. I also think his generals will kill him within a year. Hell, six months, if we're lucky. But until then, we're all on a crash course for war. The crown wasn't on Snot-nose's head more than two seconds before he commissioned new colonizers

and a big fancy defensive space station, and told his existing scout ships to go find his enemies yesterday.

So between Emperor BabyTantrum and Admiral My-Daughter'sToo-Good-For-You-You-Low-LifeScumsucking-Garbage-Disposal, I won't
be seeing home again for at least a year.
I'll be out in deep space. Alone. With no
weapons. Or shields. Or escort. Or a
bottle of hooch. Not even a good book
to read. Not a freakin' thing.

I hope Cryboy's generals kill him within the next week.

Rex says I shouldn't say stuff like that about the emperor. He thinks it'll get me killed. Right. Like anyone would ever be interested in the journal of a J5 private. Besides, I'm just sayin' what everyone else is thinkin' but is too scared to admit. So am I brave or stupid? I really don't give a toss.

You wanna know how droned out our Esteemed Wunderkind is? Fearless Leader actually renamed our *entire empire* last night! Our empire is now named...

Wait for it...

Benevolence, Ltd.

Yeah. Real cute. But in space, no one can hear you laugh sarcastically.

Hell, maybe deep space is the best place to be. Get as far away from that nutjob as I can. Maybe I can find a nice planet where the people are sane and settle down. Maybe it'll be like those commercials where the guy lands on the planet full of hot women and cold beer.

Yeah. Right.

Anyhoo, that's it for this fun-filled weekend. Freshly graduated, commissioned a J5 private, drawin' a freakin' paycheck, and headed for adventure.

But really, all I want to do is ride out the storm.

### **Addendum**

I won't be alone, after all. Rex just came on board and let me out of my cabin. He's been assigned as my copilot, and he says it's my fault! Apparently, Sarge told someone higher up that we're an inseparable team and we always get in trouble together, so Rex says he's being punished by association! I told him the only one being punished here was me, but he didn't think that was funny.

Anyhoo, now we're stuck in this tin can together for the next year.

Yeah. I really hope she marries a politician.

Do you remember? **Blood, Gore and Guts Across the Galaxy** 

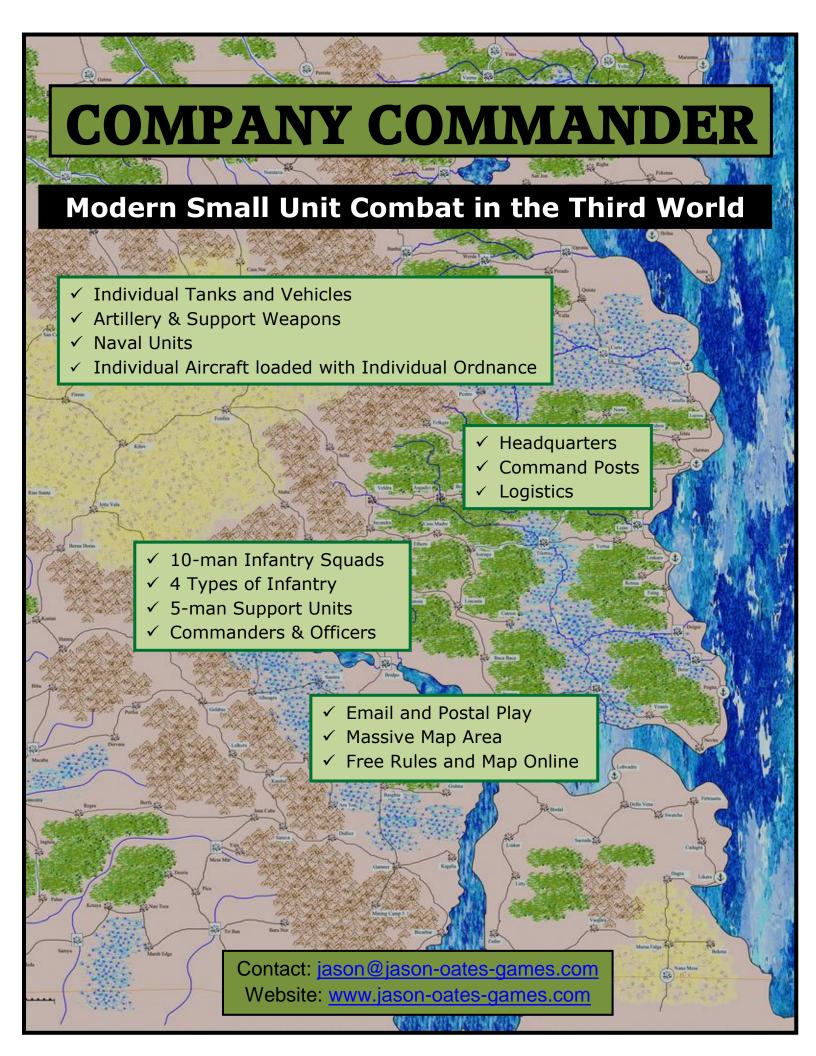
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## Trinsic Rose

## Trinsic Elven Quarter Grows Jim Kemeny

40th October 355 SR

### Back to normal after the Ilshenar Quest

I never got back to *Twin Oaks Tavern*, it seems the quest was over, the Duke healed and the poisoned waters cured. The elves in particular seemed to have played a big part, notably Kaine of Silverleaf and VanQa. I was proud to have been able to serve the Duke personally, what small role I could play.

But it was grand to be back mining and smithing, out with Spark on the frontier and rediscovering muscles I forgot I had.

I caught up with the news, reading backnumbers of *Ye Sosarian Morning Poste* (for a flavour of this newspaper see <a href="http://www.uoforums.com/topic/28476-ye-sosarian-morning-poste/">http://www.uoforums.com/topic/28476-ye-sosarian-morning-poste/</a> (this is a full surviving record after the Great Fire up to 2008). It published only IC ("in character") information. So characters on-line but not present at a situation being reported would have no knowledge of it).

### An Advert placed by Jern Fretting:

"Jern Fretting, tinker and fully qualified blacksmith with arms lore, will be travelling the highways and byways of Sosaria, at odd hours during most days but never after 8pm. He will be available for making items free, if provided with the necessary raw materials and equipment. He will also provide basic free farrier services (horses only, both mounts and sumpters): simple sprains, sores, removal of stones and the like. Shoeings can also be done where there is a forge and anvil.

In addition to chance meetings on the road, appointments may be made either by notes left in the mailbox outside The Trinsic Rose Tavern or at the garden gate of Fretting Cottage in the Village of Silverleaf (postcode Slf) or by mail-carrier to 322791984."

\* \* \*

I was shocked to learn that my neighbour, Kaelyn, was attacked, is being tended by the healers and apparently lies close to death. But I saw that the *Trinsic Rose* was open again last night with Mine Hostess in attendance. Ah, what a blessing to have a news-sheet to keep us all informed of what happens in near and far-off places! So collecting Dusky from the stable and in my best outfit I rode "Poste"-haste to my favourite watering hole to be there for the 7 pm opening time.

So we caught up with the news. It was a quiet start. A young lady came in and bought a drink. She seemed to be short of gold and just wanted a cheap wine, but I thought it was a pity for a potential new customer not to taste the best that this fine tavern has to offer. So I gave VanQa some gold for her on account. We talked a bit, her name is Cherice. Another lady came in and sat alone in the corner.

VanQa took me to a window and showed me other elven houses round the tavern [the elven Quarter of Trinsic]. There is also a

house owned by Miguen, and a Silver Warrior tower. I never realised that there is now an elven village here! I wonder if VanQa will give the village a name? I must explore it soon.

Miguen talked of the virtues. It struck a chord in me, I feel moved to learn more. So VanQa took me upstairs to her library (I didn't even know the tavern has an upstairs!). I will come and do some reading here when I have time.

Cherice left before me, giving me a kiss. I hope to see her here again soon. I left just as others started arriving at 8pm: a Kaldorian VanQa called Cecul, and a few minutes later an elf I didn't recognise.

Altogether it was an eventful evening, giving much food for thought.

### 65th October 355 SR

### Free Repairs Night at the Trinsic Rose

I heard about this and decided to come for the first hour in case they needed a smith. A tailor was there, VanQa's sister, Lady Draxandru Rose. Our first customer, Kaelyn, came soon after me and I repaired her shield and Lady Rose did sewing repair work. Kaelyn bought us both drinks and we chatted a while.

A very shy man (he didn't say his name) came as well wanting a cloak, and he also wanted a bow fixing, so Lady Rose went to get a bowyer, another shy person, Mina Rosandrax. Quite odd to see two very shy people trying to talk to one another!

I heard some people walking around outside, as though they wanted repairs done, but didn't want to come into the tavern. I went

out to look, only to see a red cloak disappearing southwards. Lady Rose also went out once to look for someone she had heard.

Finally, an elf in magnificent shadow armour came, though it seems just to chat. Lady Rose called him Uriel. He explained why that armour was good for just his needs. Shadow is my favourite metal to work with, so light yet malleable. I would have liked to repair it, but, disappointingly, it seemed in fine order.

No doubt many more folks came after 8pm with repairs needing doing, but I had left by then.

### 15th November 355 SR

### First Anniversary at the Trinsic Rose

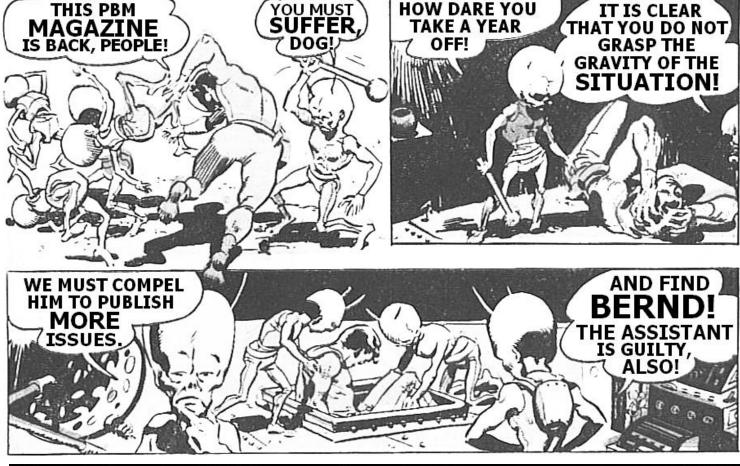
Never seen so many people there before, the place was packed, not an empty seat and many standing! VanQa provided free food (also varieties of delicious pies) and drink nicely prepared and in containers on the bar. Many legendary figures, including our own Duke, Lord Twothumb (who I'd never seen before) General Soulshadow (sitting next to me), Muldran, the winner of the Magincia Festival of Tales at which I performed, Tabbitha who used to be sheriff before moving north, Britannia guards, Kaldorian soldiers, Trinsic Guards, elven followers of VanQa, the list goes on and on and on. Many familiar faces, too, of course: Miguen, Tom Lorn, Tiggarn, Kaelyn, Drax Varibolt, Sir Elion, Aisha...

What a response, I was delighted, all the work VanQa had put into things over the last year. Was it really only a year? it seems like the tavern has always been here!

All was beautifully held together by Lady VanQa. Darts competition was spiced up with the right to choose someone to kiss (I got two hits and chose VanQa and Kaelyn).

I slipped out quietly at 8pm, threw myself down in a corner of the stable, burrowed deep into a pile of hay and fell asleep. But this was one time I would have loved to stay longer for the further events that evening. Indeed a night to remember!









## The Librarian Wisdom from the Tribes of Crane

The light was fading and my eyes strained to read the manuscript. Not that it mattered much. I had read it many times as I have most of the tomes preserved here. Age catches us all, about the only thing that comes without effort. Once I was the proud chief of the Claw, a humble wandering tribe of Crane that became an Empire and I as its King, now a librarian. How does one make that transition? I have been many things in my life, but I did not believe I would end up a librarian!

I felt a stiff breeze blow down the corridor, cold, foretelling the coming of winter, which was always early in Gwadar. I started my empire here, in this small city in the far north of Crane and now it seems I will end my days here as well. I looked up startled; a young man stood there, gazing at me. His fur and leather dressing identified him as a warrior of the Claw clan. I would not say he snuck up me, but I certainly did not hear him moving down the corridor. So now my hearing, like my sight is also failing. You'd think my sense of smell would have picked up on this Bosk herder. Are all my senses deserting me?

"Welcome to the Grand Library of Gwadar my young friend. How may I help you?" The young man grinned, "I am looking for Beowulf, once chief of the Claw. They say you know where he can be found." Beowulf looked at the young warrior; a glint of recognition filled his eyes. "You have found him. What business do you have here?" "It is wisdom I seek old man," answered the

warrior. I tried to place this young man, but my memory is not what it once was. "What is your name warrior?" The clansman grinned again, "The name is Rolfe and you would do well to remember it old man. It will someday replace yours around the campfires of the Claw." Well, you have to give him points for confidence, yet despite his bravado, I found myself liking this youngster. Quite a lot in fact! "What wisdom do you seek exactly? There is much information here you see, from the history of empires, their rise, their fall, men of great report and not so great, tales of good and evil, the wars between the Ghods, the creation of our realm as wells as other realms and many other topics, some so ancient as to have been forgotten by most men." He looked at me this time with a serious look upon his face, "That which will protect my clan from the greed of others. I do not want to be the Chief who leads his people to destruction" the young chieftain responded.

"Walk with me chief and I will do what I can. It goes without saying that this realm of PBM in which we live is a dangerous place and the Ghods of this realm, while not as many as they once were, are still as jealous and competitive as they have always been." As we walked along the many cubicles that accommodate the writings from thousands of authors, some well-known, others more obscure, we finally arrived at the cubicle I was searching for. "You see, often times you must battle them as well as your more earthly rivals for survival." I quickly began

pulling one manuscript out after another, looking for the one that might provide some insight into the thinking of one's adversaries. Finally, after a few minutes of rustling papers, "Ah, I think I have found something that might prove helpful." I pulled the last wrapped writings from the cubicle. "Let us sit down and see what useful information we can glean from this author's writings. Let's see, who is the author here, hmm, a Cassandra. Yes, I remember reading a few of this author's works. I think we will be well served with this."

I carefully dusted off the manuscript as I unrolled it, taking great care not to damage it. Many of the great scripts were already threadbare and worn from years of handling. It is my hope that I can at least pass them on to the next librarian in no less a condition than I found them. The young warrior had pulled up a stool and set down beside me, waiting for me to continue.

"Yes, there is some useful information here, but I must warn you, this is but a small portion of what you must learn. The rest can only come with experience." Rolfe nodded his understanding. I continued; "well then let us begin." I quickly looked over the text and spoke to Rolfe, never taking my eyes of the parchment. "Cassandra states that the first thing one must learn is to understand the true meaning of the words you hear. She has provided in her text examples of what someone might tell you and what it could mean. Look here, you can read these for yourself. You can read can't you Rolfe?"

Embarrassingly, Rolfe shook his head no. "It is something that I work on, but it vexes me to no end Librarian."

Beowulf looked up briefly, "well then we will

read this together, but this is a skill you must learn yourself, otherwise you will always be at the mercy of others. Let this be your first lesson in wisdom! Now to what Cassandra has to say."

We both looked at the text and began to read the wisdom of Cassandra:

If this is said: I'D LIKE US TO BE FRIENDS

Then consider it to mean: *I'd like you to* be my friend.

I THINK WE CAN WORK TOGETHER I want you to work for me.

YOU AND I WOULD MAKE A GOOD TEAM I think you're an idiot.

DO IT MY WAY AND WE CAN BOTH WIN I know you're an idiot.

YOU CAN TRUST ME I'm sure you're an idiot.

IF WE STICK TOGETHER I'll win.

MING SAID YOU'RE A LIAR

I believed him so I'm telling you about
Ming.

THERE ARE FIVE OF US ABOUT TO ATTACK YOU

I wish there were five of us about to attack you.

I WILL AGREE TO A TEMPORARY TRUCE TO LET YOU PROVE GOOD FAITH My building program doesn't mature for three cycles.

THIS SENSELESS FIGHTING IS JUST HURTING BOTH OF US I'm losing.

## WE OUGHT TO COMBINE AGAINST OUR COMMON ENEMY

I'm under attack on my other border.

## I HAVE NO REASON TO DOUBLE CROSS YOU

I have no reason you've found out about.

## THE GM(GHOD) HAS EXTENDED THE DEADLINE

I've heard you're new to the world.

## MING IS A LIAR, A CHEAT AND A SEXUAL PERVERT

Ming is your only natural ally in the world.

## YOU DISTRACT THEIR ATTENTION WHILE WE COME IN BEHIND Behind you.

HI, I'M A TRADER Hi, I'm a liar.

HI, I'M A PIRATE

Hi, I'm a Pirate novice.

MING TOLD ME I made it up.

### I DON'T KNOW WHY HE WOULD WANT TO KILL YOU

He's my brother.

## IF ENOUGH OF US POOL OUR RESOURCES

I'll get to manipulate five more chieftains.

## YOU HELP ME THIS CYCLE I'll change my contact information next cycle.

## THE GM(GHOD) DIDN'T FORWARD YOUR DIPLOMACY

We took your empire apart by mistake.

## MING IS ABOUT TO FALL, HE'S ON HIS LAST LEGS

Ming has just built 20,000 new units and you're nearest.

## HE'S NOT AS WEAK AS HE LOOKS I saw him first.

## I UNDERSTAND EVERYONE IS AGAINST YOU

I've read that it is possible to induce paranoia.

## I THINK YOU'D MAKE A GOOD LEADER I'm too busy and anyway the alliance will fail.

## LET'S HAVE A FAIR FIGHT TO SETTLE IT ONCE AND FOR ALL

We've developed nuclear weapons and your cavalry look dandy.

### IT'S PRETTY OBVIOUS YOU KNOW LITTLE ABOUT THIS WORLD Hey, you're winning.

## I'D LIKE TO APOLOGISE FOR THAT STAB And the next one too.

## CAN I GIVE YOU ANY HELP? How best may I deceive you?

When we finished the young warrior stood and slapped me on the back, "Well that is a beginning" he said, then turned and began walking down the corridor the way he came. He turned after a few short steps and once again flashed that wide smile that first caught my eye. "Thank you Grandfather, I will strive to make you proud" he told me and then left the library. His manner made me smile! My last thought as the young chieftain left, "Goodbye Grandson, I hope you live to replace my name at the campfires of our people!"

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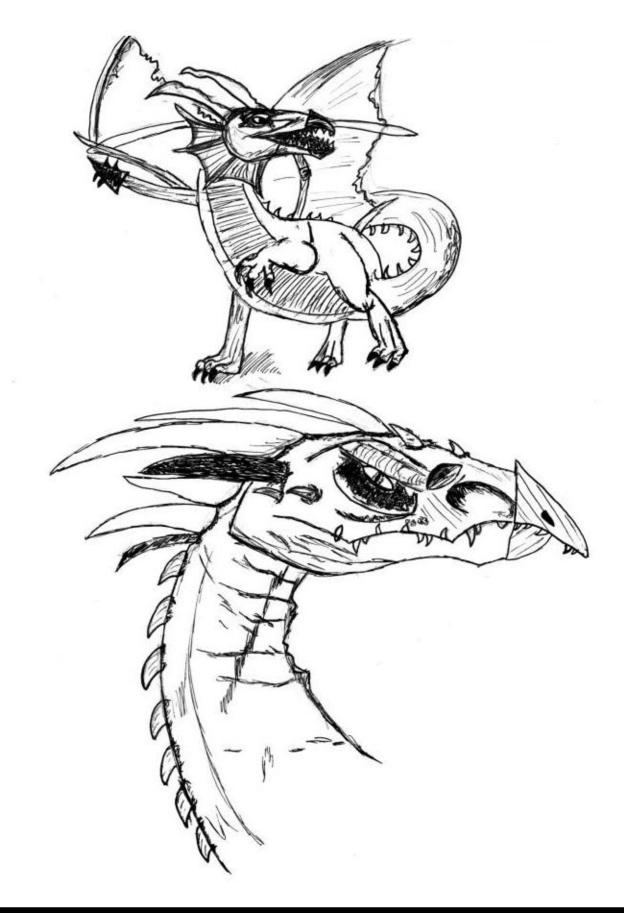


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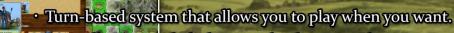
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#### If It Ain't Broke Don't Fix It

#### **Reflections on Eve Online and Phoenix**

**Amber** 

I always find it hard coming back from holiday to start playing games again. It takes some time to remember what I was doing, where I have stored everything and get back into the swing of things. This time when I returned home I was greeted by the fact that there had been the muchanticipated invention and manufacturing update in Eve online.

I have been playing Eve for over 10 years now; I started as a missioner and miner and then grew into specialising in the invention, manufacture and selling of T2 items. There have been many changes along the way.

One that made a lasting impression on me was when they changed ice mining. I spent over five years mining the same piece of ice. It was never exhausted, it never moved, it was always there and I knew every facet of its structure. I must have spent months of my life collecting ice from that shard. Then overnight it was gone. They made ice depreciate like the other asteroids, so they spawned, were mined, and then they were gone. I missed that piece of ice but I kept playing and adapting until I had 30 specialised characters in a fine tuned process line that churned out tech two items to sell.

I enjoyed doing that, I could log in for an hour in the morning, do mindless clicking for an hour while I woke up, reading the forums and emails. At the weekends I would spend more time tinkering with my characters - sitting and selling at Jita - and I found the whole thing quite relaxing.

All that changed with the recent update. All of the old industry has been completely replaced with a new more intuitive system. I couldn't face having to start all over again, it may be easier when you have one character but when you have to go through and redo 30 characters it makes it a bit more of an issue. That and the fact that you have to keep adjusting your teams and moving systems to get the best prices, I just couldn't get my head around how it was going to be better.

I read through all the documentation and I just quit. I couldn't even bring myself to just have a go at it to see what it was like, it sounded too different. I thought that I would play Eve forever and I would not have believed that in one update they completely put me off playing. But they have made industry into what *they* want. It is how they want the game to progress, and really they are not going to be bothered if one person doesn't like what they have done.

All this made me start thinking about Phoenix and the one area of the game that we have always been dissatisfied with.

Trade.

Trade has never worked the way that we would like it to, one of the problems of working with such an old game is that there are fundamental aspects that are too ingrained to change.

When it was postal, trade worked better. You would turn up at a planet and have to scan the market to see what was for sale there.

Then on your next turn you could buy or sell to the market before moving off to the next planet. You had to pay to have a trade ship moving about, so you were limited with how much you could buy and sell in a week. With the Nexus things are very different. Markets are listed and you can see what is where, with many of the trade transactions being private deals that never even appear on the market display. Ships are free to run, so you can have large fleets of ships going around hovering up the markets as they go. Some players even have programmes to scan the most profitable market routes each week.

In the past we have tinkered with bits of trade so that you can get enough *stellars* to keep your bases going, but it is far from being a perfect system. In fact, sometimes we get the feeling that it is really not fit for its purpose. However there are some specialist players out there that do make the system work, and if you work at it you can make *stellars*. You have to learn the tips and tricks, make the private deals and get the edge over other players, but it is possible and that is what some people love to do - be the best in the game at something that everyone else says is impossible.

What would be the alternative to tweaking the old system as it creaks along?

We could completely rewrite the entire trade aspect of the game and make it into what we would like it to be. We have spent hours talking about this.

Integrating a trade system in to a new game from the ground up is very different from adapting an existing system. I would estimate it would take two years minimum and that would only be if it did not conflict with and break the rest of the code. Phoenix is currently around 300k lines of code that

Darak knows like the back of his hand, but he is always terrified when he has to make even minor changes to it - it always does the most unexpected things. Two years would be a very long time with no other progress or bug fixes and at the end of it there is no guarantee that the players would like it any more than the system that is currently in place.

We have reached a compromise in our own minds how we want to proceed, not just with trade but also with other aspects that people find challenging about Phoenix - by developing more help programmes to make thing easier until you get the hang of things.

At the moment players (or affiliations) who can programme have a definite advantage over those who can't, so we want to offer more custom editors, like the base editor, to come to grips with more challenging aspects. It's not a perfect solution but given what we have to work with it will have to do - after all, it's not completely broken.

"One game that should get more information in *Suspense* and *Decision* is <u>Harlequin's</u> game of Legends. I once played several games in it and *Flagship* ran several articles on different aspects of it. We need more in this style!"

#### - Greybeard

PlayByMail.Net forum member



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### A Panda's Perspective

#### **Galac-Tac Review**

**Eric Carver** 

"Six round battle orbs materialized over FELINE PRIME. Catmander T'sich grinned and licked his chops as he directed the fire of large stationary platforms to neutralize the Panda's threat.

"Too easy", T'sich hissed to his subordicats.

In a sudden flash, twelve separate but deadly Kung-Fu carriers materialized and started spitting out their distinctive black and white Pi fighters and Pi Bombers,

"Alert all small and medium satellites! Fire at will!" hissed the catmander, as he frantically clawed the command console, bringing up additional screens and reinforcement options. The Pandarins did not have enough missile power to wipe his platforms, thank the Great Feline! And after the fleet blunted their initial salvos, the remaining ships would make short work of them, all of them.

T'sich's attention snapped back to the screens as a subordinate yowled, "Catmander! The outer system defenses are showing a massive energy spike!" It was apparent that the fleet which had aborted its attack on Catnip-9 was now here, at the front doorstep of the Feline Emperor.

The rapidly failing outer sensors showed nineteen separate Pandarin missile frigates, with another four estimated by the defense grid's AI. The catmander hissed in fear. Those missile frigates were more than enough to take out his platform defenses – the defenses the homeworld now depended on for survival.

T'sich pondered briefly as the missile tracks curled in toward the vulnerable platforms. None of the drones they had requested were ever authorized by the Emperor. Spilt milk for now, but worth addressing if tomorrow came. Thinking quickly, T'sich yowled into the all comms frequency, "All missiles – fire medium ships, all fighters – launch to medium and small! Take out their frigates! Leave the big dogs for later! Stop the missiles or we all die today! Honor and Glory to the Emperor!"

\* \* \*

Welcome to Galac-Tac - a science fiction game set in a hypothetical galaxy which might be closer than you think. In Galac-Tac, you take one meager planet and a handful of humble ships and build an Epic Space Empire! Galac-Tac is a pretty darn good game - read on to see why...

The first thing I loved about Galac-Tac was how simple it seemed. I quickly got over it. The game that had seemed like rockscissors-paper in space was really more like rock, scissors, paper, lizard, spock...etc... Hours to learn, decades to master... An old adage that is spot on for this game.

If you are a reader of this hallowed tome, you have undoubtedly come across articles about Galac-Tac from Davin and Genny in previous issues. Go back and reread them, I will wait....

"Why, Panda, why?", you might ask, "Why do you spend your precious time writing about this game called Galac-Tac, when you could be farming massive phat lootz online or plotting against your enemies in "episodic turn-based strategy games" (sic), or even reproducing for the good of your Panda species?"

The simple reason is twofold:

- 1. Galac-Tac is a good game.
- 2. Galac-Tac is a game I can recommend to my friends.

Yes, Galac-Tac is a good game. No seductive Amazon women come out of the turn report and lavish praises on you for conquering that colony that once belonged to your arch nemesis – THE NINJA CATS. Yet somehow, when you make progress in the game, tangible rewards show themselves at the conclusion of your brilliant manuverings and battle tactics. Play well, and you are rewarded. Play poorly, and the Amazon women may get strident about needing a huge kitchen remodel while you all take a vacation to Hawaii to "work on your relationship".

Galac-Tac is also a game that I can recommend to my friends. In fact, friends still play this game and we enjoy a healthy funloving competition. (ZERO tables flipped so far!) Currently, in Galaxy 37, my beloved Mongols are wreaking havoc on such empires as: Romulans, 58008 (think calculator humor), and Cloud Cooco Land. Private solo games are also available for practice purposes. 58008 used this feature to ACTUALLY understand our current game and its RULES, thus craftily gaining "unfair" advantage.

But I WILL catch up, yes I WILL... moooohahaha, MOHAHAHA, moooo...ha....haaa...

To the uninitiated, Galac-Tac seems like a simple game. I suppose each step IS fairly simple as it adds to your previous learnings: First you must search for planets, then colonize them, then utilize their resources, then seek out new spaces to acquire or conquer, and then go to war as you continue to develop what you have and hold. Combine all of these "simple steps" together and you end up with quite a complex razordance. You gradually ease into this until the realization dawns upon your noggin that, "Dang! This game isn't so simple after all!"

Galac-Tac also appeals to the Lady Gamer. Don't ask me why, I speak *Pandese*, not Lady-talk. But, for some reason, the women in my life and my other "dude" friend's lives love spanking the ever-living schnitzel out of our Panda. We thought we were going to have to separate and space out couples so there would not be any collusion or funny business. Little did we know how dangerous, vicious, skillful, and deadly was the Lady Gamer. (*Not in the FACE!*)

Combine this appeal with the fact that the game is cheap, I mean *dirt cheap* to play, and you have yourself a family-friendly winner.

The game is run by Davin Church, who is a programmer and a very responsive game moderator. Davin is helpful, and proactive in service of his Galac-Tac players. The game has an amazing game assistant program which allows for error checking, web-based entry, custom color maps, and so much more!

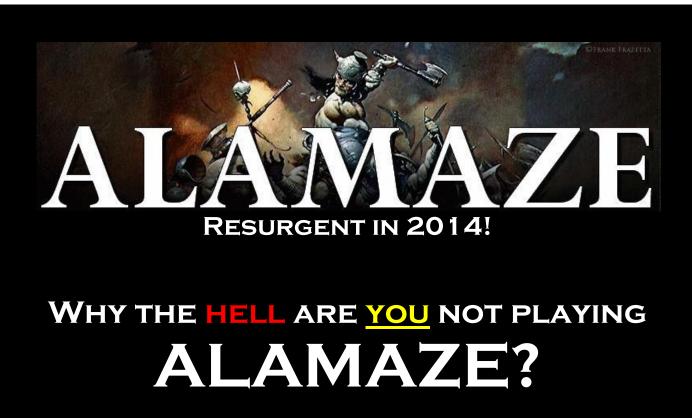
Go to <a href="http://www.talisman-games.com/">http://www.talisman-games.com/</a> and sign up to play Galac-Tac today!

#### Advantages:

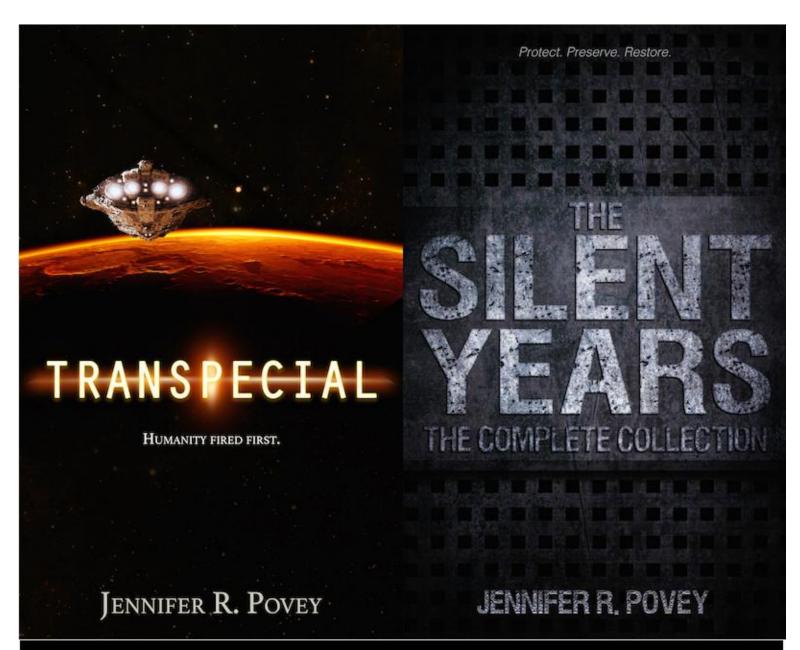
Excellent game design and execution

- Easy to include and involve friends
- Simple to learn, but complex to master
- Fun for the entire family
- Excellent game moderation and tools
- Might get to space punch a Space Panda!
- Excellent game moderation and tools
- Might get to space punch a Space Panda!





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## Commands to Conquer Understanding Combat in Galac-Tac

**Davin Church** 

This continues a series of articles about Galac-Tac, a classic PBM game of galactic conquest that has been around since 1982. This article will discuss the commands used in Galac-Tac to initiate combat in the game system and how they differ in their effects.

There are five commands that can be used to start a fight: Attack, Defend, Patrol, Secure, and Sentry. They do so against any and all enemy ships present, regardless of what the enemy's orders are and whether or not the enemy has weapons. Once any ship at a given location starts combat, all ships (except scouts who escape detection) participate in the combat. Ships without weapons simply try to escape the fighting, but they remain targets and may be chased down and destroyed.

Let's begin by discussing the defensive options before moving on to the offensive ones.

#### **The Combative Commands**

#### Defend

For your primary defenses, you'll want to give your ships the *Defend* command. These ships represent your major emplacements that guard against a direct attack by enemy forces. When in this mode, ships are always ready for a fight. Weapons remain manned and there is constant vigilance for enemy incursions. The ships are positioned near the center of the star system to directly protect the habitations there. If any enemy

appears in the system your ship immediately fires its weapons and combat begins.

Ships are usually placed on *Defend* in Home Worlds (HWs) and other Production Centers (PCs), since those are in the most need of protection. Ships on *Defend* can also be given "standing orders" to help fine-tune their behavior when combat begins (see below).

#### Patrol

In order to find out what an enemy's defenses look like (e.g. how big a fleet does he have), you would send in a ship in Scout mode to see if it can size up the opposition. Therefore, there is also a need to protect your own systems against the same tactics being used against you.

To accomplish this use the *Patrol* command. Patrolling ships spend their time in the outer reaches of a star system, where Scout ships do their work. Consequently, they are very thinly spread out and cannot reinforce one another. Their primary purpose is to simply spot the enemy's scouting ships and call in the rest of the defensive force to eliminate them. If the patrolling ship has weapons, it gets to fire on the scout immediately. After that, all combatant ships move quickly to the central area of the star system where the entire fleet then engages in the combat.

Each patrolling ship has only a small percentage chance of catching any given scout, but in larger numbers a patrolling fleet can catch them nearly all the time. Patrols are also mostly used in HWs and PCs to provide protection against this sort of intelligence gathering.

#### Sentry

While HWs and PCs need continuous protection, colonies are not usually as critical. Colonies are not often left completely unprotected though, since scouts permanently placed there can monitor your economic system continuously. Since it is more expensive and time-consuming to set up permanent patrols in a large number of colonies, a rotating sentry may be set up instead.

A ship or fleet given *Sentry* orders is given a list of two to four locations to protect. They then automatically proceed from location to location, one stop per turn, and then start back over again at the beginning of the list. This continues indefinitely until given other others. As it stops in each system, the sentry performs the duties of a patrolling ship. Hopefully the sentry will have weapons because they are often the only protection available in such colony systems.

#### Secure

Defensive commands (except for *Sentry*) apply to the ship's current location and the ships do not leave the system. On the other hand, offensive commands are designed to attack other systems, which means that you have to move to their location. The offensive commands are therefore all movement actions where you make your attack upon arrival.

Secure is the simplest of the offensive commands and means "take at all costs". Securing ships will therefore leap directly into the central area of the star system and

immediately begin engaging the primary defenses there. Weapons will be manned and armed before moving, so they can begin firing at the very beginning of combat. All securing ships fire at will at any available target of opportunity; they do not offer any more detailed control during combat.

#### Attack

The Attack action provides more flexible control of the combat. To begin with, attacking ships arrive on the outskirts of the system (where Scouts and Patrols roam). They then size up the opposition much like a Scout would. The Attack action offers the ability to abort the attack at this point if they seem to be too badly outnumbered.

The Attack action may be given a maximum SSD to attack and if the enemy has a fleet bigger than that, then the attacking ships would turn and run away. The enemy would observe this, but wouldn't be able to catch them and force them into combat this turn. Otherwise, the attack continues and the attacking ships move into the central portion of the system where full combat with the defenders then commences. Attacking ships can also be given additional "combat orders" to help fine-tune their attack (see below).

#### Fine-tuning the Fight

Galac-Tac is primarily a strategic-level game where the supreme commander (you) directs your ships and fleets to various locations to engage in combat and other activities. Once each combat commences, though, battle tactics are directed autonomously by the commanders and ship captains on the spot and you are simply informed of the results (if any ships survive to tell the tale). However, you may sometimes give "general directions"

on how you'd like them to organize the battle.

When ships are in *Defend* mode, you may optionally give them direction with the *Standing* action. For ships that are in *Attack* mode, you may optionally provide similar direction with the *Combat* action. The two actions (*Standing* and *Combat*) are otherwise identical and can only be used with the *Defend* and *Attack* orders, respectively.

For either of these, you may direct that each of your weapon types try to target something in particular, when feasible. You may request that they target mostly other weapons systems, or main-body systems (shields, hangars, and cargo bays), or engines. You may also request targeting of (motionless) platforms in preference to moving ships. Or, some weapon types may be directed to concentrate their fire on Drones or Missiles in flight, providing a defensive "covering" fire.

Each weapon type may be individually specified, and each ship or fleet may be given a separate *Combat* or *Standing* action. For instance, you could have your whole fleet fire its T-Types (Missiles) mostly at platforms, its P-Types at any target of opportunity, and its Drones only defensively at incoming Missiles. These are not guaranteed targets, but only suggestions for concentrating fire.

In addition to giving your ships general targeting instructions, there is one more control that can be specified here. Since missiles (as ammunition) are expensive and can be logistically difficult to replace, you only want to use them against large enemy fleets and not against pitiful little scout ships or other insignificant opponents. So these

commands also allow you to specify a minimum SSD size that the enemy fleet has to be before T-Type (Missile) weapons will be brought into action. This keeps down the waste of expensive ammunition.

These targeting guidelines are specified by supplying three numbers (each from 0 to 6) in the action indicating the desired target type for each of your weapon types, optionally followed by the minimum T-Type SSD.

#### Strategy in Force

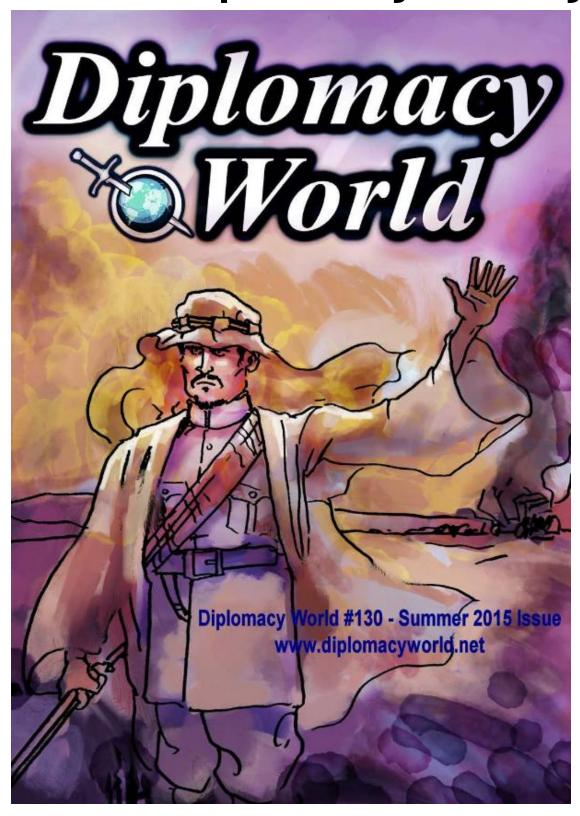
Using these different commands in the right combination when going into battle can transform a large combat from a randomly violent encounter into an organized strategic triumph. Use them thoughtfully, in combination with your best ship and fleet designs, or suffer the consequences of the enemy doing the same to you.

"I would really like to see some 'retro' game memories; articles about Tribes of Crane, Heroic Fantasy, Can't remember the guy / co or game names but there was a guy that did games in the early '80's. One was a space game where to move you actually had to do the 3-D match as his game 'board' was a cube so not only did you have your X / Y coordinates but also the Z factor. He also did a hand modulated fantasy game and a test / short lived Detective game where you were a cop and give 5 cases to work on and you had to decide how to proceed on each (at the same time!) to close the case."

#### -Nebless

PlayByMail.Net forum member

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## Secrets in the Sand A Tale from the World of Alamaze

#### Part I

In dusty Vanasheen, the walls criss-cross at harsh angles, their lines designed to stifle the sand which constantly blows in from the surrounding dunes.

Captain Drake and his squad found the walls just as unfriendly to them. The men twisted through one anonymous alley after another, seeming to get no closer to the artisans' district near the eastern gate. Sergeant Jerrick tried asking for directions, but no locals would admit to speaking Midvalian of any kind.

Continuing to burrow through the canvas canopies and market stalls, Drake could not believe this was the same city that Princess Thalia had convinced to join their cause just a month ago. Did Drake not wear the dancing horse of the Rangers upon his armor? Why would the Vanash not help him?

The glass-blower's shop, when they found it, had been wrecked. Within the open, curtained entrance lay bent tongs and broken tubes. Colorful shards of jars and lamps sprinkled the ground beneath toppled shelves. A coiled serpent figurine lay on its side near the back wall, its tail snapped off.

One of Drake's men cried out, doubling

over to hold his crotch and a small blurred shape shot toward the front door. The captain snagged the running girl by the collar only to have the child whirl like a dog and bite his hand.

"Gods above!" Drake yelled through gritted teeth, though he did not let go. "Stop that. We're not here to hurt you."

The girl looked up at him doubtfully, bright teeth at the ready. It seemed that this Vanash at least understood him.

Drake said, "I'm just here to talk to the glass blower, Ghalaz. You work for him? Do you know where he is?"

The girl glanced at the door, where Jerrick stood guard. "Men take him. Big men with black eyes." The girl seemed to be about eleven, dark of face like most desert folk, with long, sleek hair combed straight back in interlocking coils. Her light house robe had been dirtied from wherever she was hiding.

"How many?" asked Drake.

The girl shrugged and said, "Ten."

"Dirty dragon," said Jerrick. "He came right into the city, even knowing that we had taken over the place."

"How long ago was this?" Drake asked the girl, letting her go.

"Less than one hour. They make grandfather get into big basket and they walk out. I stay here because I not know what to do."

"Ghalaz is your grandfather? What's your name?"

"I am Leenah. I live in back with grandfather."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

Jerrick said, "Captain, there's got to be more dragons hiding in the desert. If we take the horses we can catch them before they meet up and do their transformation ritual."

"I don't think they'll risk taking dragon form at all. Not with all the troops moving down from Synisvania. Better for them to stay inconspicuous. It's worked for them so far."

Drake signaled his men to leave.
"Buryan, you question the south gate guards and—"

"I know where they go," said the girl.

Drake turned to her. "Did they say something?"

"They ask about jewel. My grandfather know about it. They make him take them."

Drake put his hand on Leenah's shoulder. "It's not just a jewel, is it? It's a palantir—a seeing stone."

The girl nodded. "I know where my

grandfather take them. I show you if you save him."

"We Rangers came to the Sands to protect people from the dragons. You tell us where they're going and we'll get him back."

"No." Leenah looked fiercely at Drake.
"You take me with you."

Jerrick asked "You don't trust us or something?"

The girl looked at him contemptuously.

"Guess not." Jerrick leaned over. "Look, child, Rangers aren't the ones who burn villages and crops. We're the ones trying to end—"

"We don't have time to negotiate this," said Drake. "Jerrick, take the girl with you. Make sure she doesn't slow us down."

Jerrick was an old veteran, so even though his eyes told Drake that he was crazy to agree to this, the sergeant simply said, "Yes, sir."

Horses did not do well in the desert, so the squad were taking dromos with them. The animals had longer legs, sturdier backs and a more relaxed gait that made them better for carrying the supplies while the men rode the horses. They also stank more than a troll.

"You sure there's anything out there?"

Drake asked the girl. They were just outside the city gate, looking at the dirty

yellow dunes that filled their view all the way to the western horizon.

"Yes," said Leenah. "I go many times."

"Can you at least tell me how far we have to ride?"

"More than a week. We can catch them?"

"Yes," said Drake. "We should catch them before that."

"Why dragons not fly away with grandfather?"

"Dragons shift shape to walk among people. They're so big, though, that they have to split themselves into about a dozen man-sized avatars. You can always tell when you meet a dragon because all the avatars look alike."

"They not change back?" Leenah asked.

"Not easily. It takes a special ritual, with special ingredients, and sunlight, then starlight and then sunlight again."

"What if they change and we not see?"

"If they fly, the Rangers will get reports of them and track them back to their lair. They're not ready to fight a war yet. They'll want to stay on the ground to avoid attention." Then Drake told her, "Stay with the horse. I'm going to double-check our provisions."

Buryan rode over to Drake as the captain and his sergeant counted water bottles at the back of the line. Drake reckoned the young soldier was the smartest man under his command, but more importantly, Buryan was reliable. "Sir, the north gate reports that a dozen men left for the mountains in a dromo caravan right before we got here. They had a large basket of salted meat in their cargo."

"That would have shielded the smell of the old man from the dogs," said Drake.

"I'll get everyone turned around to head north," said Jerrick.

It took Drake only a moment to decide. "No. We let the girl take us to the palantir. The old man must be leading them on a false trail and it's better to secure the artifact before we do anything else."

Buryan was silent. Jerrick looked at Leenah who was fidgeting on the horse near the front of the line, then said, "Yes, sir."

That evening, as the cool settled on the sands, the men took dinner atop a rocky outcropping, facing outward so that they could watch over the animals at the same time they watched for enemies. They lit no fire and ate bread and salted meat. As Drake tore at a strip of beef, Leenah came to sit near him. The girl had dropped her head wrap around her shoulders and it made her neck seem scrawny.

She asked, "We keep riding after dinner?"

"Yes, and sleep by day. It will be easier on the horses that way."

"And the men too."

"The men do as they must. Rangers care not how difficult the march is."

From behind them, Jerrick's mocking voice floated up, "Speak for yourself. I'd like it to be easier."

Drake returned the jest. "Sergeant, you're demoted to latrine duty for lack of commitment."

"I suppose you'll be putting young Buryan in charge?" Jerrick asked.

"Really?" said Buryan with a hopeful voice.

"No," said Drake, "I'm putting my smartest soldier in charge: Strong Heart."

All the men laughed softly at that.

"Which man is Strong Heart?" asked Leenah.

"None. Strong Heart is my horse."

"You name him yourself?"

"Yes." Drake looked out at the desert for a while. They could see clear to the horizon as both moons were overhead near each other. In the southern tongue the large, golden moon was known as Mohtar. The smaller diamond-surfaced moon was Mirage.

"You like horses?" Drake asked. "You seemed nervous riding earlier." Leenah had been seated on a horse by herself for the journey, tethered to Jerrick.

The girl said, "Nervous, yes. I feel ashamed. My ancestors be great horse riders. Cavalry protect sands."

"You're talking about the Nomads? I thought they were all gone."

"Yes. Gone. But not forgot. My grandfather know all the stories."

There was such wistfulness in Leenah's tone that Drake could not help but feel a kinship to her, a bond in their desire to see the wheres and whens beyond view.

"The trick to riding a horse," Drake said, "is in not expecting them to obey you instantly. You have to accept that they are their own animal—"

"I think being own animal I am very aware. Is why I am nervous."

"Yes, but you must use trust. When you want the horse to move a certain way, you guide it, not command it. Be too gentle and there is no guidance. Be too harsh and the horse refuses by instinct."

The girl sighed. "Seem very complicated. How to find balance?"

"Practice!" said Drake cheerfully. He got up and pulled Leenah to her feet. "Come. I'll help you."

As the rest of the patrol finished their dinner and got packed away, Drake and Leenah worked on horse handling. The girl's enthusiasm soon overcame her fear and he could not stop smiling by the time Drake roped her horse to Jerrick's for the evening's ride.

"Still to be tied?" asked Leenah.

"You learned a few things about staying on top of a calm horse moving in one direction. You're hardly an expert."

The girl hesitated just a bit then said, "You teach me more?"

"I'll teach you more."

The skeletons attacked them at midnight.

Mohtar and Mirage were setting near the horizon, their crossed light filling the land with long, ill-defined shadows. The traveling had eased into a routine for them all, the caravan rising and falling in time to the animals' steps. And not a few of the men were drowsy.

From the shadows at the horses' feet, the sand erupted into blasting sprays and six skeletons leapt at the riders, their bleached bones luminous under the doubled moonlight. Two of the skeletons held knives. One was unarmed. The other three carried a scimitar, a pike and a wooden club respectively.

It was the pike wielder who came at Drake first. The Ranger's first concern after twisting to dodge the thrust was Leenah and the knowledge the girl held. The captain pulled the reins left and saw that Leenah had fallen off her startled horse. Near her, Jerrick was grappling with a skeleton.

Just as Drake was about to spur his horse on, a bone arm stuck a knife into

his upper thigh. He yelled in frustration. The pike was coming at his face again. Turning to avoid it, he strained his wounded flesh and the pain unbalanced him. Falling into the sand saved his life, as a second knife swipe hit his leather breastplate instead of something more vital.

Drake struggled to his feet in the soft sand and drew his longsword. Around him the men were responding, weapons drawn. Buryan and two other Rangers crashed their weapons into the pikewielding skeleton, driving it back from Strong Heart. Drake left them to it so that he could help Jerrick.

Except that Jerrick would have to find a way to win on his own. The skeleton with the scimitar was running at Leenah. Drake struggled to cover the ground to the girl, with the sand sucking at his boots. He winced each time he pushed with his injured left leg. Jerrick swung his foe as they wrestled, throwing it, into the running skeleton.

Tumbling ungracefully down, the falling skeleton splintered apart on the ground, but drew itself back into human shape as if pulled together by invisible cobwebs. The time needed for the skeleton to rise, however, was enough for Drake to get between it and Leenah.

"Stay close," grunted Drake, parrying the first blow from the skeleton and pushing the monster back. "There may be more out there."

Magical skeletons were animated by

spells which bound the bones together into a somewhat conscious being. Breaking those bones or knocking them apart could not destroy the skeleton, but the binding energy was finite and forcing the skeletons to retake their form again and again would eventually drain its power.

Against his instincts, Captain Drake stood tall, knowing that the skeleton's light weight made it vulnerable to attacks from above. Each downward strike exposed Drake to getting his belly slashed by the skeleton's scimitar, however, so he tried to hold a pattern of deflecting a scimitar slash first and then hammering the edge of his longsword onto the neck or shoulders of the skeleton.

A sword could not just cut through bone at will. Not even the aged brittle bones of the long dead and previously buried. Luckily, the consciousness of a skeleton was not enough to make it an expert swordsman, so scoring hits was not difficult. The skeleton used slashing strikes that took some time to wind up, but were delivered with swift malice. It made knowing when to block easy, but actually blocking demanded absolute focus. Damaging the bones took time and effort. But, each successful strike drove the skeleton to its knees, giving the captain time to recover as the wound in his leg burned.

The worst part about fighting skeletons was that they never tired. Even as the energy holding them together waned,

the skeleton itself moved and struck just as ferociously as ever, while the human struggling against it suffered fatigue. The clanging of longsword against scimitar and the rattle of steel against bone melted into a drone as Drake blocked and hacked at the skeleton, always keeping himself near Leenah, each step sending a spike of pain from his thigh to his brain.

Until one blow finally cut the skeleton in half, for good.

After the legs and torso fell near each other, Drake made sure to keep Leenah back. The skeleton's sword arm slashed out at them. Drake brought his blade down through the wrist, and the skeleton's hand stayed separated, fingers angrily clenching and unclenching on its sword hilt.

The dozen soldiers of his patrol were finishing off the remaining five attackers, when Drake looked up. Jerrick was stomping his into the dirt, breaking its jaw off.

Once defeated, the many bones of the skeletons were thrown into one pile and their weapons removed. Drake checked Leenah over for injuries, but she had only a few scrapes. Her hair had not even been shaken out of its neat braids.

"Hello?" called a man's voice from the dark. "Is it safe to come out now?"

"Yes," Drake replied. "Come out and show yourself. The skeletons are all gone."

From out of the shadows walked a tall, broad-shouldered man. He wore loose desert clothes, but was clearly not a native, his strong face pale and smooth, and made to look even paler by his long, black hair. Something about him seemed familiar to Drake. Primal even.

"I am Suroc," said the stranger touching his chest and then flourishing his upturned palm in the nobles' gesture of offering friendship. "You have my immense gratitude."

Jerrick asked, "What are you doing out here by yourself, Suroc?"

"These things attacked my caravan. Wounded my horse. I was not able to escape when the other travelers did and I've spent the last two days hiding while the skeletons slept. I would have died here, had you not come along."

"You stay here?" asked Leenah. "Next to skeletons?"

A look of guilt crossed Suroc's face. "Sadly, the carcass of my horse was my only source of nourishment and I also used her as cover to hide."

"Get him some water," said Drake to a nearby soldier. "Buryan, take two men and find any of our horses that ran off." Buryan would understand that his instructions included checking out the stranger's story.

There were only two minor injuries from the attack besides Drake and he decided to put some distance under hoof before breaking for their meal. Later, after they dismounted, Buryan approached Drake.

"Sir, there were no tracks in or out of that spot, but two days of desert wind would have wiped them out anyway. I did find the horse, though. It had been attacked and beat up like he said. But the neck was cut clean, like an execution."

"And that part about eating the horse?" asked Drake.

"Hard to say of he'd been tearing bits of flesh off it, but there were empty water skins on the horse, so he could really have survived out here for two days."

Further down the line, Suroc was standing with the horse Drake had loaned him, looking not a bit traumatized. The man seemed more interested in the soldiers than the potential threats in the desert and he had an air of contentment and ease about him.

The talk when they ate together was naturally about Suroc.

"I was on my way to Klandra," said the stranger. "It's a small village past the mountains to the north-west."

"You're a trader?" Drake asked.

"Of sorts," said Suroc with a smile. "I'm mostly an errand boy. Messages and deliveries. That sort of thing."

"You are spy," said Leenah.

"That's not what I said."

"Maybe he's an emissary for one of the northern kingdoms," said Buryan to Leenah.

"And maybe I be turkey," said Leenah. She looked at Drake. "This man is spy."

Drake looked at Suroc, amused. "Well?"

"I run errands," said the man, balancing politeness with finality.

"And your errand took you into a skeleton attack?" asked Drake.

"Well, now that you mention it, it seems that the skeletons might well have been a deliberate attack on my person rather than some wandering evil that happened upon us. I don't believe in coincidences."

"I wouldn't rule out random wandering evil that easily," said Drake. "There's a lot of history out here under the sand."

"Yes, I know," said Suroc. "Just a few miles south of here, there's an old oasis where women who were desperate to become with child would sacrifice animals to unspeakable evil."

"That not true," said Leenah. "Always is ordinary oasis. My grandfather tell me. It get legend for evil because of bandits in cave near it."

"Is that so, now?" Suroc seemed amused that a child would challenge his knowledge of the world.

"Is so."

"Was it the same six skeletons that attacked you?" asked Jerrick.

"They bore the same weapons at any rate."

As Suroc spoke, Drake sat back and observed. The man's voice was smooth and easy to listen to, but still strong. He spoke with a precise voice that revealed either great training or great determination to be in control.

"It was soon after sunset," said Suroc.
"We had ridden through the day since
mine was the only horse and the dromos
can take the heat. We were trying to
decide just where to camp when the
skeletons rose up out of the sand in an
instant. Three of them went after me. My
horse took many injuries, but I managed
to stay on it." He shrugged. "For a little
while, at any rate. By then, everyone
else had been able to ride off. They must
have figured me for dead because they
never came back." Suroc smiled. "Not
that I blame them."

"And then you escaped?" asked Drake. "How?"

Suroc's smile widened. He opened both palms and snapped his fingers.

The pale man, and the large rock he was sitting on, disappeared.

"Like so," he spoke from behind them. Suroc was sitting on his rock about thirty feet away.

"You're a wizard!" said Jerrick, walking over to him.

Suroc laughed. "Nothing so dedicated. I dabble. I've picked up a few useful skills,

that's all."

Jerrick put his hand out to touch Suroc, and it passed right through the illusion.

"Not bad," said Drake, putting his hand where he had last seen Suroc's shoulder and gripping solid flesh. The man reappeared where he had been all the time.

"Just tricks," said Suroc. "Not potent magic."

"Well," said Drake, "Sometimes, appearances are the most potent tool of all."

For a moment, Suroc seemed surprised, and then he smiled and said, "It appears there is some depth to you, young master Drake."

"Captain Drake."

Leenah asked, "So, what happen after you trick skeleton?"

"Nothing. I could not leave the horse and the water it carried. Poor thing was injured beyond hope. I ended her life, as a mercy." Suroc slashed his forefinger quickly before his throat. "Then I just waited. None of the tricks I knew were of use. The skeletons searched for me all night. Then they just sank into the earth. Until you came along on your way wherever you're going."

"We're going west for a little while," said Drake. "Then we go back to Vanasheen. You're welcome to stay with us as until then."

The next seven nights were peaceful. Their meals in camp were full of talk. Suroc seemed to have boundless knowledge of the land, though he and Leenah still argued over what the history really was. The girl was fanatical in her defense of whatever story her grandfather had told her. Suroc, for his part never pressed his case, but took the air of a man content to suffer naivete.

Leenah seemed to know without being told that she was not to mention the palantir in these conversations. Instead, their camp talk was about ancient towns and trade routes, like spook tale legends about caravans of a hundred dromos that vanished without any trace and discussions of the best ways to handle the last murderous ten days of the route into Tarsus.

Leenah's command of the language improved rapidly as he threw herself into the listening and telling. It was not just her grasp of grammar and diction. Her accent seemed to shift with his time amongst the Rangers too. The girl clearly had a gift for language. And, for stories.

"There are places in this desert where men walk like snakes," said Leenah one night, with absolute conviction. "They protect ancient treasures from the hands of greedy men and just one of them could hold off an army of orcs and slay the mightiest heroes of any kingdom."

"You've seen them, have you?" Drake teased.

"You do not have to see a thing to know it is true," said Leenah.

Suroc said, "That last bit at least I agree with."

Leenah ignored him and said to Drake solemnly, "You should not doubt me."

When the girl had gone to bed, Suroc and Drake would continue their talks, discussing politics and war.

Everywhere in Alamaze, the elder races were growing uneasy with the rule of humans. Trolls had started an uprising in the west. The Black Dragons were attacking settlements in the south. The Dark Elves had sealed their borders to outsiders, once again, amid accusations that they were developing forbidden magic. And now, rumors were emerging of a shadowy race of immortal ancients who had influenced empires across the ages.

"I don't think they exist," said Drake one night, speaking about the Ancient Ones.

"Why not?" Suroc seemed offended.
"They could hide quite easily in plain sight."

"No one is immortal."

"The Witch Lord—"

'Was killed," Drake said. "Hence, not immortal."

"We know demons are real."

"I've never had to fight a demon, so their immortality has yet to be proven."

Looking at Drake like he was a child, Suroc said, "Pray you never have to find out the truth of your jest."

Leenah's riding improved as quickly as her speech. The girl seemed to take great pride in exercising control over the beast beneath her, and was soon patrolling the caravan with Drake, keeping her horse away from the long gait of the dromos.

"Who taught you to ride?" Leenah asked once, while Drake was showing her how to tie her reins together, as a precaution against the girl's small hands losing hold of one. "Was it your father?"

Suroc sat near them, drinking tea as usual, and listening.

"I never called him father," said Drake.
"But, he did many of the things a father would. And, he did teach me to ride."

"You are a good teacher, Captain Drake."

"Thank you." Then Drake felt that the girl's efforts deserved acknowledgement too, so he added, "You are a good student. You pay attention to your horse."

"You don't have a real father?" asked Leenah.

"Everyone has a real father."

"You know what I meant."

Drake did not answer.

Leenah said, "I don't have a father

either. He died long ago."

Drake bit his lip, unsure what the girl wanted from this conversation.

After the silence had lasted a while, Leenah asked, "Does this horse have a name?"

"No."

"Can I give him a name?"

"Yes."

With a smile of mischief, Leenah asked, "Can I call him, 'Firehelm'?"

"No," said Drake, "That name is taken."

"But only—"

"How do you even know about that?" asked Drake.

The girl smiled. "Is the story true?"

Once again, finding himself too close to the topic of fatherhood, Drake simply said, "Find your horse another name," and walked away, while Suroc gave him a puzzled look.

It was the final morning of the ride. Leenah expected them to reach the palantir the next night. She had reminded Drake that night, "You promise to rescue my grandfather first, right? No fighting for the palantir until he is safe?"

"He will be our first priority," Drake said, hoping he had kept the guilt out of his voice.

When Suroc and Drake sat for their usual conversation after dinner, the morning sun hinting at the scorching day to come, Suroc asked him, "What is the Firehelm story?"

"An old story of no consequence."

"Even old stories have consequences, if they are true." Suroc had not lost a bit of his paleness in their travels. He sat now with his hair free, halfway down his back, his eyebrow cocked in amusement and curiosity, as usual.

Drake had a quick glance at where Leenah was sleeping.

I grew up on the docks of Meridon, greatest city of the west and gateway to the Sea of Mystery. As a child, I did odd jobs for money on the ships in port, sometimes even signing on for short trips across the bay where I wouldn't be gone more than a few days. My mother was a washer woman. My father, I never knew.

When I was nine, a company of soldiers took a charter with a captain, who was a friend of mine, out to an island just off the coast, and I joined in. I was told to stay far away from the soldiers, and I did, for a whole day.

But, then their leader took an interest in the ship's catapult. He was the reason I had been so willing to keep my distance. He was not particularly tall or strong or ugly, but he stood still with hard eyes, as he watched his men clean their gear and when he did move, it was with purpose in everything down to the tips of his fingers. It seemed like he did not even blink, unless it was deliberate.

He asked the captain for a demonstration of the catapult, and he and his men stood in two neat rows near the bow to observe. I had always been fascinated by the power apparent in this machine, so I moved closer, too, setting down the halfeaten bowl of soup the cook had gifted me, so that I could climb the rigging for a view over their shoulders.

I watched the captain explain the mechanisms, and then they loaded some of the kitchen garbage into the machine and fired it. The leader of the soldiers asked a few questions, kneeling at the base of the catapult. In my efforts to hear the answers, I fell with an almighty clanging upon two soldiers. The look on the leader's face was of a man who had been offended in some fundamental way by my invasion of his space.

"Get out of here," he growled, and with one action, picked me up and shoved me towards mid-ship. The captain, my friend, gave me a look of reproach, and I knew I should go, peaceably.

I stepped to the rail to get my bowl, and the leader grabbed me shoulder. "I said to leave."

"But, that's my soup. I just want—"

With a gauntleted hand, he poured the soup over the side, then shoved the bowl into my chest and looked down at me with those hard eyes. "Leave," he said.

For the rest of the day, I kept thinking of his hard eyes—the way they seemed connected to a soul that was just as stone-hard. And, I was angry. This was hardly the first time I'd been picked on, and I can't say I'd never backed away from a bully, but something about him being so powerful and callous made my blood run hot.

So, I watched the soldiers. At some point, the leader gave his helmet and armor to a private to clean, and began consulting a map with his lieutenants. I waited.

After the evening meal, when they were all relaxing on deck, I made my move. I walked calmly to the bow with a kitchen basket and a torch, no one taking note of me. Within minutes, I had the catapult rigged to launch. I rested the basket on the end of the catapult arm, and picked up a rotten potato from it. And threw it at the hard-eyed man. It hit him in the back of the head, and he turned with that measure of deliberation he always had, his eyes not just hard now, but bright with anger.

"Listen, boy, if you—"

From the basket, I lifted his helmet high for him to see, then dropped it back. I had doused the basket in tar and oil and it ignited when I set the torch to it. The captain, the crew, and the soldiers were all screaming at me, but the leader, he just stared me down. And I stared back, like I could communicate all my outrage down the channel of our connected eyes. Then, I pulled the lever and launched his

helmet into the night. It blazed through the sky like some glorious firebird, before tumbling into the dark sea with a hiss of finality.

All the men charged at me, then, and I clambered into the rigging, the tips of their fingers brushing my ankles, and was soon looking down at them, as they cursed at me.

"Stand down," said the leader and his men fell quiet. "Go back to your duties." With no objections or second glances, they all complied. "Child," The leader said to me, "We will not harm you. Come down."

His tone was firm, carrying absolute conviction in his intent. This man did not lie. When I stood there, barefoot, before him, I looked him straight in the eye, defiant of his accusing expression. He said, "Explain yourself."

"I put what was yours next to what was mine, at the bottom of the sea. That is justice."

"Yes, the soup. I understand. That was, indeed, wrong of me. I often prize control more than I should. But, revenge is not justice."

It took me a moment to recover from the idea that this man would so easily admit his error. Then, I said, "It was the only justice I could get."

"True justice," said the man, placing a surprisingly gentle hand on my shoulder, "demands restraint at every step, from the finding of guilt to the awarding of punishment and restitution. You, however, were impetuous."

"There is no justice, unless you take it, and if you wait too long, you get nothing."

"Of what interest is justice to you?"

There are moments in life where you become aware of parts of yourself that have always existed, but which grew into their function unnoticed. Thinking on the man's question, I realized that I had always seen the way the world around me bent towards the powerful and the callous. And, growing besides that awareness had been a need to straighten out the ways of the world.

"Justice makes man different from beast," I said. "Makes him better."

"What do you know of us?" asked the man, pointing at his men. "What do you know of the white horse on our armor?'

"That you're from the east?"

"It means that we are Rangers," said the man. "Generations ago, we traveled to the east because from the time of the first men, we have been bringers of justice. We go to the wilds, to the places of the world where men are ruled by their animal instincts and where things beyond mankind seek to impose their beastliness upon us, and we take the light of justice to lift man up."

Then, the man gave me one final measuring look and said, "If you indeed care about justice, we can teach you its

practice. The work is never-ending, in every wretched corner of the map, and there are never enough of us who understand and care about the cause of justice. Become a Ranger, and you can fight for justice your whole life."

"Do I get my own sword?"

"If you prove worthy of our oath."

"Then, I will take your oath."

"So, that was how I met Trueblade, and became a Ranger," said Drake.

"Marshal Trueblade?" asked Suroc.

"He was just a captain, then. But, he still had such power to lead and inspire. I disembarked with the men, when we reached land. The Rangers were already calling me 'Firehelm'. I told the ship's captain to let my mother know what I'd done, and I never went back to Meridon, again. I've been too busy." Drake watched Suroc, amazed that he would reveal himself to a virtual stranger, so, yet feeling safe to continue. "I did not see combat for many years, but my training began, immediately. Swords, navigation, horses, siege tactics, logistics...I learned it all. If you know who Trueblade is, then you know his reputation. The man has no frivolous inclination, whatsoever. He wrung out all the childishness remaining in me. Taught me purpose and focus."

"And, now, you are on a mission for him, I suppose?" Drake smiled, but did not answer.

"An important one, no doubt, to which he assigned you personally."

"Every mission a Ranger undertakes is important."

Suroc said, "I've also heard that only men may become Rangers."

"Yes, So?"

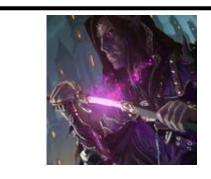
"So, it seems that you have notions the girl may follow your path."

"That's not—"

A shadow fell over the sand, then fire blasted them from above.

Three dragons screamed down, belching flame. Around Drake, men were tumbling out of sleep. Buryan was on fire at the center of the camp, wailing and writhing. The horses scattered in fright. Just as the Rangers got to their feet, spears in hand, the dragons landed around the camp with thumps that knocked them to the ground again.

#### To Be Continued In Part II



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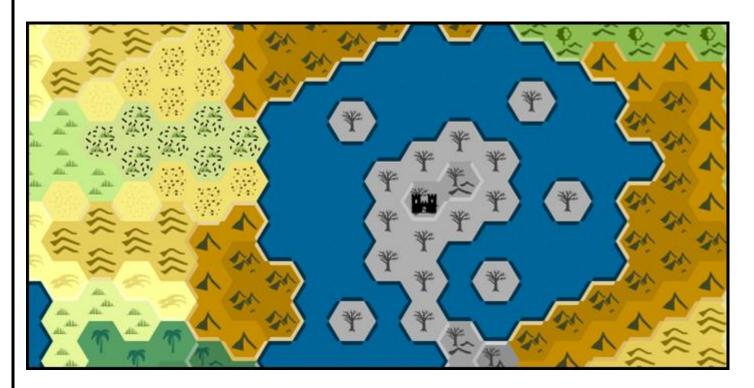
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## **Fallen Empires**

## **A Troll Campaign**

**Rob Harding** 

In the northern hemisphere of *Clantium*, a number of fledgling settlements, cities, and tribes have allied under the banner of *The North Born*, in order to prosper and secure their homeland from foes. What follows is a summary of one year's play for the first alliance within the game.

\* \* \*

There had been rumours of large creatures in the north for some time. Many disregarded the warnings as tales to prevent the young from wandering into the wilderness alone, never to return. Snorri Skullsplitter, with his company of men from the settlement of *Sturmheim*, was sent to scout the mountains to the north, to seek new resources for the growing demand of the townsfolk - a routine mission, or so he thought ...

A week into the mission, Snorri's scouts alerted him that large tracks had been discovered ahead. Arranging his men in skirmish formation, Snorri led his company along the trail, until they reached a system of caves. Snorri split his men into 3 teams, torches were lit, and they proceeded into the darkness.

### **Extracts from Troll Cave Battle Report**

He heard them before he saw them, heavy feet crushing the bones on the cave floor. Snorri looked towards the noise, and saw the creature that men call Troll. The Troll was nearly ten feet tall. It had eyes as dark as the night, set in a face with a large overhanging brow

and stunted nose. Its lips were pulled back in anger over huge teeth that were broken and rotting. Its flesh looked like stone, and was bulging with muscles and covered in scars. The men were quick to react. They threw nets over the Troll and leaped in, thrusting and swinging with their weapons. Snorri himself dealt the death blow, crushing its skull with a heavy swing.

He only realised that more Trolls had arrived when a spray of blood and guts splattered over the one he had just slain. Two Trolls had entered the cave silently, the noise they made masked by the sounds of battle, and were working their way through Snorri's men with savage speed. Snorri and the men of Sturmheim quickly responded to the sudden attack. They surrounded the Trolls, keeping them off guard with the flaming torches and attacking from behind when the chance arose. This pair was larger than the first Troll, but they were taken down just as effectively. Snorri looked down at the dead creatures, and ordered some of his men to drag the corpses outside to be burned.

As runners were sent back to *Sturmheim* with the news of the encounter, the alliance hoped that this skirmish was simply that, a chance encounter with legendary monsters which would no longer trouble the good people of the north. How naïve we were ...

On Snorri's return journey the Trolls exacted their revenge.

## Extracts from *Troll Kingdom*Battle Report

More tracks had been discovered each night, and many of the cave mouths in the mountain were sealed by giant rocks. It seemed the Trolls were preparing for the men from Sturmheim, barricading their holes and building up their numbers. Snorri's scouts found more tracks around the mountain so there could be hundreds of the creatures, which would be more than his force could handle.

One of the sentries called an alert, then another. Flaming torches were thrown out towards the movement, and brief glimpses of creatures almost twice the height of a man were seen before they disappeared into the darkness. Suddenly the Trolls were among them, flinging men left and right. Snorri heard the wet sound of bodies breaking and led a charge with a handful of his men, all wearing mail and armed with maces.

Try as he might he could not keep up with the Trolls and they sped through his men, tossing them aside like dolls. His men fought hard though, and some of the Trolls lay dying in bloody messes as he ran after the others. The Trolls did not stop, but kept moving through the camp and finally they burst through the other side and sped off towards the caverns in the mountain, baying in fury as they went.

Snorri stopped where it had all started and looked down at the mangled remains of a Troll. This one had a different skin tone, more like sandstone where those he had slain before were like granite. Its eyes were further apart than the others, and its body more lithe. He shivered as he realised that Trolls come in more than one form.

The *North Born* rallied, and roving units were sent out to discover the extent of the threat. News meanwhile had filtered to the southern regions of Clantium, and others were quick to mock seeking to gain advantage.

### From: Emperor Tristan Ironheart

### Fellow leaders,

For several months now rumours have been flooding my city of a mighty alliance of Northern Cities and settlements. Why would such an alliance have been formed? The stated purpose of this alliance is to defend themselves against mythical monsters such as trolls and giants!

Whilst some may be fooled by such nonsense, it was not difficult for us to see that a northern alliance such as this would soon look south at the wealth we work hard to generate - my own city borders the north which left my people feeling uneasy. The question I must ask out of good conscience is whether those of you outside the northern alliance are secure from any threat they may hold. Mythical Trolls and Giants or peaceful, wealthy cities...

### May Ironka guide your choice.

A terse response was issued to the selfproclaimed Emperor in the south and shortly his position changed to a more conciliatory tone. In honesty, we suspected the change was due more to the swift arrival of a sea scout vessel arriving at his home city, the crew depositing a trolls head outside his city gates.

A number of tribes were sent to investigate creatures of similar ilk to the trolls close to the settlement of *Broughton*. These creatures upon closer inspection were *Cyclops* and a minor battle ensued, which only served to escalate the situation.

## Extracts from *An Eye for the Future*Battle Report

Cerialis looked with pride at his own warriors from LegioIX; they with their companions from the Tungrians and Wildings had done well to eliminate the Cyclops from posing a threat to the fledgling settlement of Broughton.

Beshta the Cyclops opened his eye. The battle had gone as foreseen, just as everything always did. He had known his path since birth. He had known his children would all die fighting the men of the North Born. He was tired of knowing these things, but he also had known that he would be. He continued his long trek to the north, where his foresight had told him he would find the trolls and prepare them for war.

Gulp ...

Given the size and speed of the enemy, the North Born frantically attempted to bolster the defences of their settlements and cities on the front line. Walls were expanded and defenders were equipped with heavy weapons in the hope these would prove more effective in future battles. Worrying news was reported from scouts to the north of Broughton, sent on a diplomatic mission to a settlement with a view to trade...

### **Extract from North Born Turn**

The scouting party is shocked by what they find. The settlement has been destroyed. There are scattered remains of the inhabitants around the collapsed buildings. They also find the remains of about fifty or so Trolls. Estimates are that the population would have been about three thousand including defenders. The walls were made of wood but there are now many holes.

An attempt was made to forge a peaceful solution with the trolls – this ended abruptly when the small force was wiped out and their heads were placed on stakes outside one of the many caves.

From intel gathered it was discovered the Trolls primary target would be the settlement of *Sturmheim*. Hastily, additional defenders were sent to withstand the onslaught which no doubt was on its way. Within weeks, the attackers materialised.

## Extracts from Sturmheim Besieged Battle Report

The commanders of the North Born Alliance listened to the reports coming in. The Troll army was close and the men sent out to harass their advance were coming back to Sturmheim in small groups. The estimates of the Trolls numbers had them at over four thousand, with many different types of the creatures seen among their ranks. Some were known to the North Born, but there were others that had not yet been fought.

The defense force was at full strength now. Aside from the Sturmheim warriors there were men from the LegioIX, Tungrians and Wildlings tribes and soldiers from the Hammer of the North mercenaries and soldiers from the

settlement of Broughton - in all the largest alliance of men since the time of Dangarten himself.

The Troll army poured from the northern valley, flooding the fields surrounding Sturmheim. They marched with discipline, though with less order than the men watching them. There were Trolls of many colours and sizes, some walked with a loping gait and others rocked from side to side as they moved. Before long there were thousands of Trolls lining up not far from the walls of the settlement and the first line of defenses.

Some began to settle down to make a camp of sorts behind their front line. Their camp was split into groups of their own kind and there seemed to be a group of leaders meeting in the centre of the camp. The Trolls front line spread like a crescent moon around the northwest side of Sturmheim. A group of at least a thousand carried on past Sturmheim and headed into a valley to the south-west and were soon lost to the sight of the defenders.

With *Sturmheim* effectively cut off the defenders made ready, after several days the attack came ...

## Extract from *The Walls of Sturmheim*Battle Report

Fire arrows were launched all around and the ribbons of fire in the fire channels on the ground began stretching out into the clearing mist. Catapults were now launching a variety of missiles through the air as dark shapes began to loom out of the mist. Granth could see a Troll on fire and its bestial screams rent the air. There were

no siege towers in sight but soon he could see battering rams made from large tree trunks and also the largest of the Trolls carrying massive metal balls on long chains. By now the Ballistae were in use and were effective in bringing down some of the monsters, but not enough.

Once the Trolls were at the walls the defenders started to use their heavy crossbows, at that range they would now be effective. For their part the Trolls were throwing rocks at the defenders as well as a variety of spears, javelins and other assorted metal projectiles. Some, Granth noted, were throwing old helmets and breastplates.

The battering rams were soon heard at the gates and it was not likely to be long before the gates were down. The Trolls with metal balls were using them against the walls and the shock waves could be heard on the ramparts, the prodigious strength of the giant Trolls rained blow after blow and cracks could be seen snaking across the walls. It was then that oil was poured over the walls and a rain of combustible material thrown down that caught fire. At first there was no discernible effect, and the burning Trolls continued to strike at the walls until the flames took them.

By now the sun was high in the sky and crows and vultures were circling, eagerly waiting to begin their feast. It was difficult to tell how many Trolls were dead, it looked like hundreds, but they had caused devastation to the fortifications. Two gates were smashed open, and there were many points along the walls where the taller Trolls would have no problems scaling. The

## defenders knew that another attack like the first would not be so easily repulsed, if it even could be ...

Things looked bleak for the *North Born* – if *Sturmheim* were lost then nothing would stop the trolls rampaging through their homelands causing death and destruction. The defenders were at breaking point, energy reserves were low and the men had a haunted look after witnessing the trolls feasting on lost friends. Salvation however arrived in the form of the dwarves.

## Extracts from *Pigs Might Fly*Battle Report

In the distance Granth could see another large group of Trolls coming through one of the passes to the North surely these were not the group that had gone south a week ago. He heard those with better eyes than his saying that they were well armed and perhaps over two thousand in number. Sturmheim was already fit for sacking without more Trolls coming to join the fray. In the sky he could also see large birds approaching, presumably to feast on the expected dead. With a wry smile Granth remembered a saying of his Fathers "Pigs might Fly" - this he applied to any situation unlikely to occur. Perhaps these were flying pigs and Sturmheim was saved after all.

A dark shape came thundering overhead and he heard a short gurgle as a Trolls head was neatly removed from its body. Not a pig but a huge bird swept overhead. It swooped back up and circled around again. On its back was a short stocky man dressed in glittering armour wielding a long axe. Was Granth dead already and in Valhalla with the

Gods? Surely no axe of human making could kill a Troll with a single blow, let alone behead one?

## The Morven Dwarves had arrived with their allies the Kasbec Trolls, and the field was theirs for the taking.

Sturmheim had been saved by the actions of the Dwarves, but not without cost. Thousands of men had given their lifeblood to the cause and the once proud walls of the settlement were in ruins. The Dwarves pushed the remaining trolls at Sturmheim back to their mountain homeland. Yet still the troll threat remained. The 1000 trolls last seen heading south west appeared on the vast lake shore of Broughton and began their siege preparations. The defenders of Sturmheim held rapid council and the decision was made to leave a small defensive force at the settlement to assist with the rebuilding whilst all others were to head to Broughton where they would fight to the last to decide the fate of the North Born.

### Full Battle Report - By Fire and Water

Arval wiped the morning dew off his weapons and armour and began his morning exercises. He and the others of Cohort IV of LegioIX were but a small part of the large force assembled here at Broughton Lake. In all there were around twelve thousand men involved in the assault plan. All these warriors were men of The North Born Alliance, and had come to finish off the Troll incursion that had started at Sturmheim many weeks ago.

This force of a thousand or so Trolls had spilt off from the main force early in the siege, and had headed straight for the settlement of Broughton. Broughton sits on an isle in the middle of a vast lake, and the Trolls had upon arrival began digging a tunnel under the lake. Arval considered this a mammoth task, one that would take men years to accomplish, but judging by the mounds of soil and clay piled around the Troll camp it seemed they had traversed much of the distance and would perhaps in another week or so have completed their task.

The North Born had been harassing the Troll encampment for days now, mostly at night. Their mounted archers and light cavalry had been riding up to the Trolls perimeter and loosing volleys inside, making as much noise as possible in the hope of keeping the Trolls on edge, but also getting them accustomed to the noise. They had not managed to lure the Trolls out, but that was not their intention.

The mists that rose around Broughton Lake were still thick this early in the morning. The sun would rise in the next hour and begin the task of burning it away, but until then Arval and his comrades could only see as far as the closest sections of the fourth Cohort. He could see that they were all following the same routine as he and his comrades, and as he finished donning his armour he saw that they were moving forward to take their place in the battle line. Barkan, his section commander, quietly snapped the order and he and his section moved ahead to take their place aside their fellow warriors.

Many of the warriors of the force were veterans of the siege at Strumheim, but Arval was a new recruit. The men beside him bore scars and minor damage to

their armour proudly as symbols of their bravery and he felt out of place among them. He took his position in the line, third to the left of the sections commander, and waited. The mist was still thick, but occasionally a breeze would cause it to part in places, showing him lines of men all around, waiting just like him for the battle that could well be their last. He heard murmurs from ahead, and he heard the roars of the fire shot before he saw their glows through the mist. The assault had begun.

Many minutes passed before the order was given to advance. The officers knew that in this mist it was important that everyone stay together, but it was also necessary that they maintain as much quiet as possible. Although the siege weapons were now being launched at the Troll camp the commanders did not want the enemy to know how many men would be attacking, or from which direction. Barkan reminded them to keep step with the line in front, and they began the long march to the Trolls camp.

Arval felt he had been walking for hours even though he knew the distance was less than a mile. He needed to empty his bladder, was feeling cold and clammy from the mist and was beginning to sweat. Water dripped from his helm into his eyes and mouth. He now understood why so many of the veterans wore sashes tied about their head. They had now marched far enough that through the mist they could see the flaming shot impacting around the Troll camp. Arval could not tell if it landed true or not but that was not his concern he supposed. Still it gave him a good idea of how

much further to go. Not far, or perhaps not far enough. He wasn't keen on dying, but would do his duty to his chief and his comrades.

He realised that the Fire shot had stopped, and he heard an enormous crash, followed shortly by more. That would be the fire carts impacting along the northern edge. He didn't understand the strategy behind all that was going on in the battle, but Barkan and the others had told him that it was as sound a plan as any when fighting such monsters. They burn just like anything else they said, and the more that died before the troops arrived at the camp the better.

He could hear the Trolls now. They made piercing screams as they burned, but also they were yelling in a guttural tone, obviously preparing their defense. Arval could just see the earthen ramparts now, crudely made by the Trolls. They would not be an easy climb with all the equipment he carried, but in training he had climbed worse. There were three ranks of men ahead of him, and the first had just reached the base of the mound. The line rippled ahead of him, keeping the best order they could but also looking for the safest route up the muddy slope. Arval and the men of his section followed their path, and minutes later he crested the top of the embankment.

The scene before him was like one of the stories of the underworld where all evil souls go. There were countless fires burning around the camp, and the stench of burning Troll hit him like a wave. It was not like the flesh of man, which he had smelled at his father's funeral pyre, and was like nothing he could describe. The man behind him gave a gentle nudge, and he came to his senses and began moving down the inside of the ramp. The front line had formed at the base, and Arval could see Trolls bounding towards the fragile line. He hurried down to join his section thinking through all the lessons on Troll killing the others had told him.

Barkan shouted the order to lock shields, and Arval arrived just in time to follow it. He drew his weapon and tried to slow his breathing. The first Troll was not far from the front line now and he could see its hideous features. It was stocky but not much taller than a man. Its shoulders were wide and powerful and it had hands like spades, good for digging Arval thought. He was brought back from his musings by the sight of a dozen or more heavy crossbow bolts piercing its torso before a final one tore its throat out. Their hides were not as thick as those who fought at Sturmheim,

More Trolls came out of the mist, and the front line in front of him was finally stuck by a dozen or more of the creatures. Some were impaled by swords as they came in, more went down to crossbow bolts, but still more began killing those ahead of him. He breathed deep once, and found himself calm and more aware than he had ever been. A Troll had broken through the two ranks before him, and the man in front struck with his sword. The Trolls knocked it aside and moved in to crush him, but Arval struck first. He took a single step forward and thrust his sword into the beast's neck, tearing out its throat with a simple twist of its blade.

Stepping back he took his place in his section. The man to his left grunted his approval, and the battle continued.

The lines had been fighting for some time and Arval was now in the front rank. Those from in front who had survived had moved back to re-gather their strength and take on water, and he had helped deal with a couple more Trolls since his first kill. He realised that calmness and precision were as vital as aggression in battle. The mists were clearing and Arval could see the others of the North Born fighting around the northern and western sides of the camp. The engineers had long since finished shooting their machines, and Arval knew that victory would be theirs. Fewer Trolls were attacking the lines now, and the warriors had pushed forward perhaps a hundred yards and could now see the vast tunnel mouth.

A strange noise began echoing through the camp, some dark magic he feared. It sounded like a deep rumbling, or a charge of a thousand heavy horses. The ground beneath him started to vibrate, and the lines were called back. They withdrew in good order, moving back towards the earthen ramparts and carrying the wounded with them. The Trolls turned towards their tunnel bellowing in their strange tongue. They seemed afraid.

The tunnel mouth exploded with an enormous rush of water. Arval could see the bodies of hundreds of Trolls being carried in its wake. Shouts came from among the lines and Arval and his comrades turned and fled for the safety of the earth banks, scrambling up the muddy slopes and dragging the injured

with them. He reached the top and turned to see the devastation. The water lost its momentum quickly, but not before destroying the camp and most of the Trolls with it. Arval took off his helmet and tore a piece of his tunic off. He tied it around his head to stop the sweat running into his eyes. He had survived his first battle.

Finally after a yearlong campaign, the trolls were no longer a threat to the *North Born*.

\* \* \*

## Links for Fallen Empires

https://www.facebook.com/groups/2020994 66643560/

For a review of the game see <u>Issue 1</u> of Suspense and Decision.



Diplomacy: The art of keeping cool.
--William Jennings Bryan

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## ATTENTION

The game creator of Gothic Hammer invites you to provide feedback!

If you could let your readers know that the game, Gothic Hammer, has been tested for over a year, but is ready for serious play, now. It has been started fresh, so anyone who starts up now will be the first players in the live game. The game is open ended, so getting in early has its benefits. I am looking for brutally honest feedback.

**SEEKS BRUTAL FEEDBACK!** 

I would love to hear any way your readers think I can improve the first impressions and/or the feel of the game. This will stay a free game, so any help is appreciated, and taken without feelings hurt.

People who want to give feedback without playing or setting up a position in the game can send their thoughts via email.

Thanks, John john@gothichammer.com www.GothicHammer.com

## WANTED

If you happen to see Mark Wardell around...



...be sure to tell him to send us his new e-mail!

The Mad Scientist of PBM

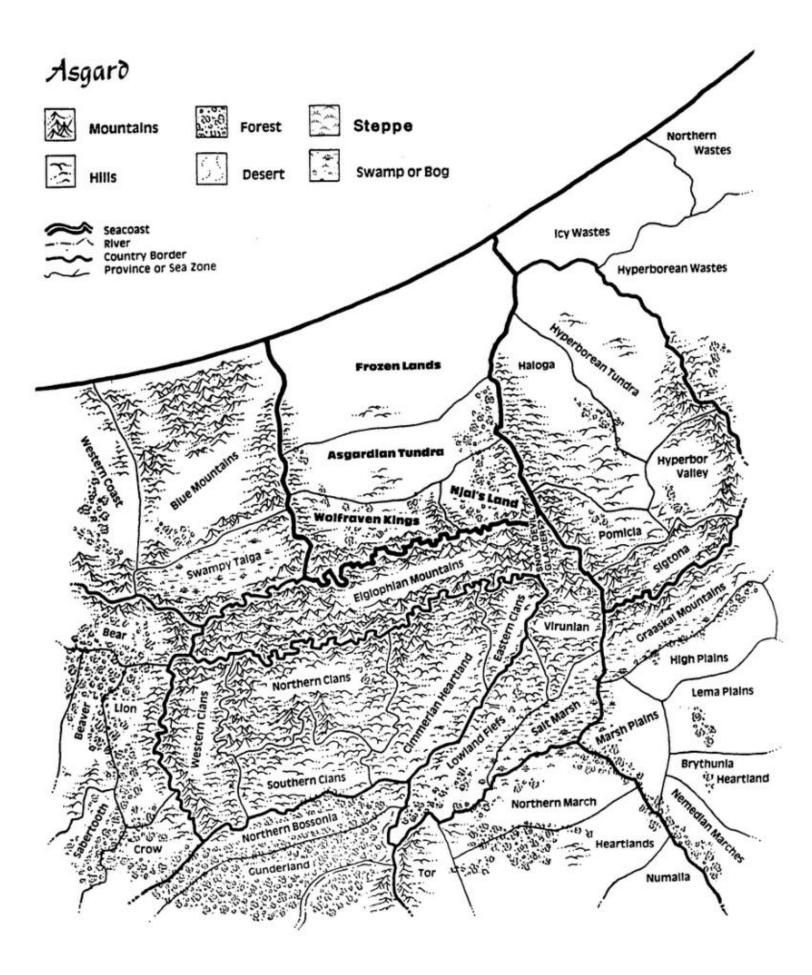
# Gothic Hammer

## www.GothicHammer.com

Gothic Hammer is a massively played online game that combines old school play-by-mail and modern live action strategy gaming concepts. You can run an empire without needing to be constantly by your computer.

Your moves regenerate every 12 hours so you can do your moves whenever you have the time. The game lets new players be immediately relevant by the nature of the Baseship and their character's powers. The game is meant to reward long term planning and strategy so quick thrill players should seek other games.

Try out this free game right now!



## The Allure of Asgard Not All Are Destined To Become The High King Charles Mosteller

Occasionally, from time to time, I take strolls across the planescape that is play by mail gaming and its communities.

PBM is a dimension unto itself. To walk through that door is allow adventure to unfold before you. It's a special kind of place - one that opens you up to all kinds of possibilities.

<u>Warbarron.Com</u> is the digital abode of The Road of Kings. It is there that Crom abides. Enter at your own risk, but be forewarned of what awaits you there!

A maze of over a quarter-million forum postings (358,509, to be exact, as of my last visit there) scattered over four thousand forum threads awaits the unwary traveller. Both the curious and the intrepid, alike, have entered there. Some have been lost in this maze for years on end.

As goes dens of PBM gamers, this place is Shadizar. The knowledge that you can gain here is truly wicked. Beware, this is the path to gaming madness!

For here gather the <u>Hyborian War</u> faithful. Both wit and wisdom dwell here.

So, too, do many mysteries. During a recent trek unto this realm of play by mail greatness and despair, I chanced to come upon a message posted there. The words that caught my eye were these -

"I've never understood the allure of Asgard."

## "I've never understood the allure of Asgard."

- Kalifornia

A Warbarron.Com forum user

Upon reading these words, I couldn't help but to shake my head. It is not given unto all men to understand all things.

There are many things in life that I don't understand. Verily, the allure of <u>Asgard</u> is not one of them.

Back in <u>Issue #6</u> of Suspense & Decision magazine, I penned an article titled: *To Spur Them Over The Ice: The Origin of a PBM Gamer*.

'Twas the allure of Asgard that this magazine sprang from.

Indeed, every article on the subject of play by mail gaming that I write owes its existence to that very same allure. In the realm of PBM, I am, first and foremost, an Aesir.

A reaver of the icy north, I was set upon by a great and dire evil, almost as soon as I touched my toes in the frigid realm that is Asgard. 'Twas there that enmity betwixt myself and the Hyperborians was born! The allure of Asgard, thus, quite plain and simply, is everything.

It is the magic that brought PBM to life for me. It is the very thing that made it all worthwhile. The allure of Asgard, my friend, was the key to a whole new age -The Hyborian Age!

The only mystery that the allure of Asgard holds for any man is that men are sometimes blind to the obvious. To understand, one must first appreciate.

The allure of Asgard is what spurs men over the ice. It is what drives them to contest by force of arms their own fierce kin to the west, to march eastward into the clutches of wicked sorcerers, to face certain death at the hand of the grim Sons of Atlantis to the south.

What do you think the crown of the High King of Asgard is made of? It is the allure of Asgard, if it is anything. God save the King!

Thousands of postings, multiple websites, even the PBM Wiki, itself, all have been erected from the allure of Asgard.

The very future of this magazine - *if*, *indeed*, *it is to have one*, *at all* - depends upon this very same allure.

To some, the allure of Asgard is invisible. To them, it exists not, at all.

To me? It falls like rain. It blankets the ground like snow. It runs through every fiber of my being, and courses through every last one of my veins.

I bask in it. I bathe in it. I run my fingers through it, and it is thicker than sand.

The allure of Asgard forms the foundation of my gaming world. It has stretched my imagination to limits which I had never before imagined. It is ale to quench my thirst!

Verily, it is a tonic to my soul, and an ointment to my heart. It is a river running through me. It is an ocean in which I drown.

It is also the home to which I return.

Sacred ground. Hallowed memories. Friendships, both forged and sacrificed, are intertwined with this allure of which men who do not understand it dare to speak openly of it.

To never understand it is sufficient. Unless you crave more from the meager existence that is life.

To never understand the allure of Asgard is to forever remain a pauper. To answer its call is to rule over one and all. I drink it to the lees. Holy is the grail of the allure!

From a distance, it glows like the Aurora Borealis. Up close, it is an oasis, one that spans the four corners of the Earth.

To never understand it is nothing. To encounter it - and to experience it - is something that dwells within you all the days of your life.

I haven't played Hyborian War in several years, yet the allure of Asgard remains a loyal and steadfast companion.



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Send forth your tested lords and generals to lead the host. Send forth your spys and heroes to steal the treasures of the world, kidnap a mighty noble, or even assasinate your foes most gifted wizard! Decree the policies of your land, giving your subjects good government or bad. Call forth your priests from their temples to speak prophecy and council. Command such wizards as you have for the tide of war may turn upon their arcane magics. Rule and conquer! The jeweled thrones of the earth await thy sandaled tread.

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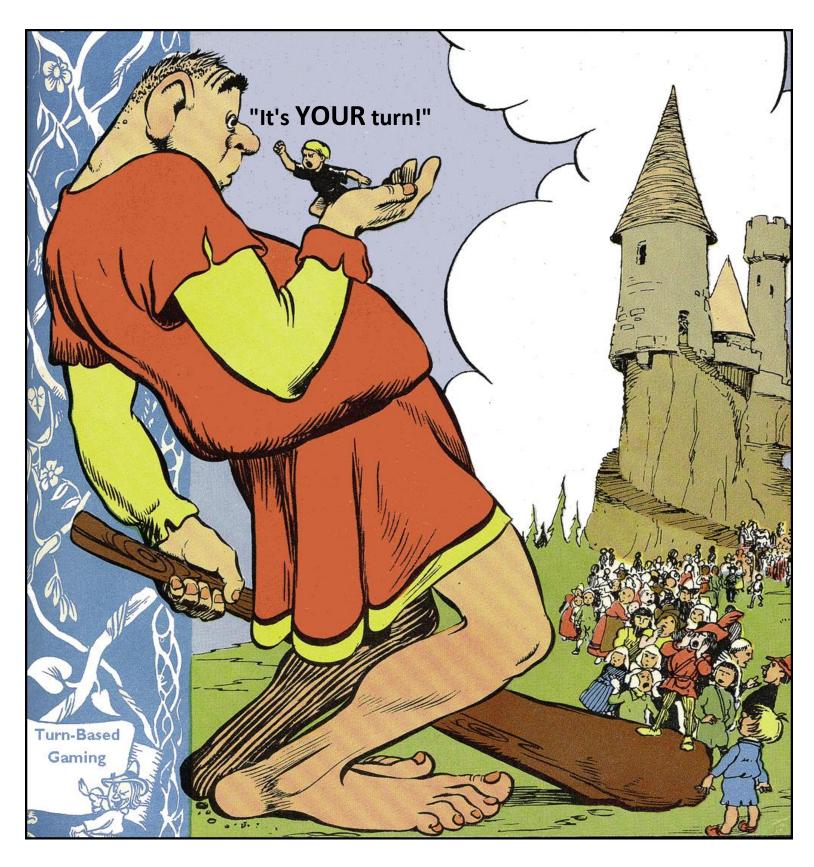
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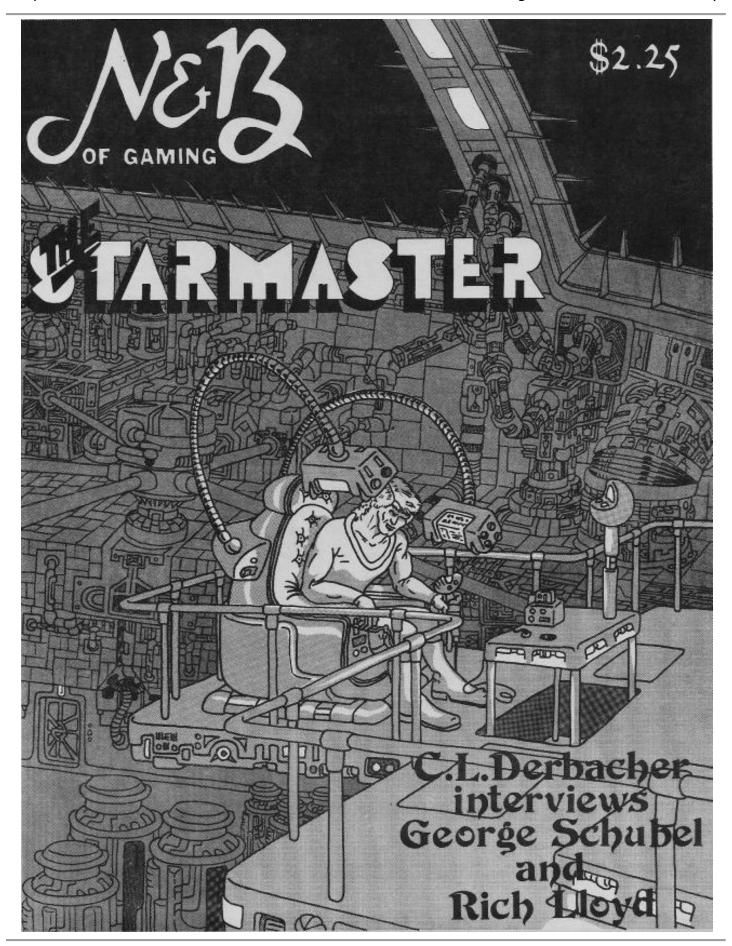
Hyborian War - Duel2 - and Forgotten Realms play-by-mail games

## ONCE upon a time ago...



You had to stand up to giants!

**Turn-Based Gaming = Entertainment** 



## The Nuts & Bolts of Gaming

## **Recollections of a Mad Publisher**

**Rick Buda** 

The Nuts & Bolts of Gaming started as strictly a fanzine for StarWeb (Flying Buffalo). In fact, its name then was The Nuts & Bolts of StarWeb. It was a Xeroxed copied sheet folded in half (for mailing) that made four, crude pages. When did this all happen? To be frank, I am not sure, exactly. I know I began playing StarWeb, most likely, about 1978-79. I was enamored with The Berserker character, and really stared the zine to discuss strategies for playing that part to the hilt. That is actually the source of the name, twofold in its reference. One - The robotic image of machinery (Nuts & Bolts), and; Two -Getting down to particulars within the characters (get down to the nuts and bolts of something).

The first issues (not sure, exactly, how many) were mailed by me, and Rick Loomis gave a bit of a plug to *StarWeb* players via his newsletters. Soon, I was getting many requests.

We switched to 11X17" folded into 11X8 paged format, as we set down publication and content. We'd be a Bi-Monthly, and we changed our name to The *Nuts & Bolts of PBM*. I got a bulk mailing permit, and we began to produce. Soon, though, I realized the load was way too much load. We incorporated, became Bolt Publications,

and *The Nuts & Bolts of Gaming* (NaBoG) was born.

In looking at my scrap book that has a few sample pages (I used it to sell the magazine to local hobby shops), I find that we preceded all the other PBM magazines by a year or more. Of course, that was before name changes and format changes, as well as incorporation and getting an actual staff (volunteer), but we were out there. In February 1984, Rick Loomis is quoted in Flying Buffalo Quarterly #49 that, "For quite awhile, The Nuts & Bolts of Gaming was the only independent PBM magazine available." He goes on to introduce Flagship and Gaming Universal.

I'd love to say that the magazine was successful and grew into an international publication. But, it did not. I had a talented artist - Larry Brenza (who, I believe, did art for several Game Companies and has short stories based, in part, on RPGs at Author-Me.com), and his wife who would literally set up the entire 16-page magazine, add art, and in fact make it look quite professional. Al Liszka, as editor, helped me keep my sanity and guide the mag in the right direction. Nate Orzoff was great at putting together page games each issue and doing the occasional interview. But, it was a lot to do.

Don't know the date, exactly, but it was after I had injured my back at work, so it makes it 1984, or so, that I began to feel the stress. One day, I received a call from Bob McLain at *Gaming Universal*. He made an offer to buy us up. I felt that it was time. We agreed that he'd come back with an offer ad. I was to notify Bolt Publications that we were liquefying. To prepare, I paid all outstanding bills, and assembled the group by mail, seeking an OK from the few shareholders of Bolt. It came back that SELL was fine, even though it basically was a loss, monetarily.

## "We had an active subscriber list well over 2500 and growing."

A short time later – Rick Loomis calls and asks if I was selling to Bob at *Game-U*. I said yes, and we were wrapping up operations. Rick informed me that *Gaming Universal* just went under, and that spelled the end to that offer.

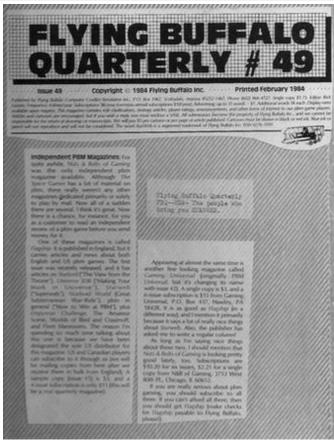
I felt bad for Bob, knowing he was a PBM writer and had a great looking magazine (for 3 issues). At the same time, I had wished he told ME sooner, so perhaps we could gather under our name. We had an active subscriber list well over 2500 and growing.

Well, we then collapsed, as we had no operating capital, and nothing set for the next issue (which was nearly overdue at this time). I felt it best to take the loss (along with friends and family who had invested) and move on.

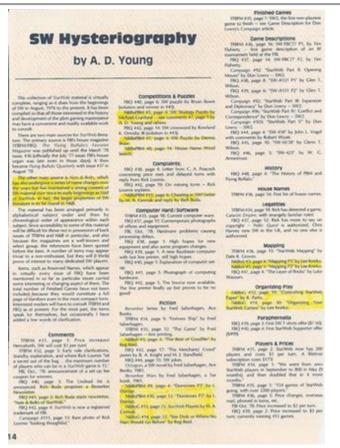


"Unfortunately, My rather complete collection was destroyed by water in the very late 80's All I have left are the one's in my lil promo scrapbook. As you can see they are more about telling people how good we were and not so much content. I'll have to go into storage and see if there are any other pages of interest -- but for now -- That's it. BTW that cover was the last year of publication. Oh -- and we were nominated for an Origins award -- I think in 85, the year after we folded. Did not win...."

- Rick Buda responding to an email from S&D's editor.









## The Nuts & Bolts of Gaming

## An Editorial from NaBoG of Yesteryear

Rick Buda

Editor's Note: This

article was extracted

from Issue #13 of The

**Nuts & Bolts of Gaming** 

magazine from the year

1983. It is an editorial

titled: Rich Sounds Off!

1983, already! This is Volume 3 #1 or what we refer to as #13 Issue of N&B. In case that is confusing it just means we were around for 12 other issues. It's just that few really know it! Let's not let that happen any more, Okay?!

In the past the first issue of a new volume has had a survey in it. This one doesn't, but hopefully the next one will. The information is helpful to us and can only allow us to know what your likes and dislikes are. We hope to make the survey easy to fill out and will try to jam as much into it as possible. More on that next time.

Now that we are in the trials of January, 1983 (FREEZING, I might add), let's look at the year passed.

1982 was a good year for gaming. Whether you call it wargaming, adventure gaming or any other euphemism, we still know what it meant. We have seen Star Trek made into a game still awaiting the acceptance of that, to see how it is played and what the public thinks of it. The Assasins Quest was bought up, allowing those fans to get their habits back in order. Originally I was going to do Blade Runner

as a GAME WE\*D LIKE TO SEE, but, it is a game already! Traveller has brought out more modules and continues to grow. Starfleet Battles grows, and has a following that fringes on the fanatic. Steve Jackson Games won awards and kudos for Car Wars and Sunday Driver,

> two good and exciting games to be appreciated by many.

One low point (only a

personal opinion) in 1982. It would seem that Flying Buffalo may have begun to price itself out of some ranges. I don't

think it will affect my enthusiasm for the game, but it certainly cuts down the amount of games I'd play. \$3.50, \$4.00 and \$4.50 per turn feeds are getting rather large, considering it is a computer moderated game, regulated as to size and scope. I guess I'm just moaning about "The Good Öld Days" when you would spend \$50.00 to \$60.00 for an entire game of SW. Now it is \$100.00 or more. One thing I have noticed about SW, is that there is less diplomacy, more and earlier wars, less strategy and more Zap and Bash.

Unsettling in the past year was the

TSR/SPI controversy. There has been talk of class action suits and the like. Letters fly and information still remains sketch at this time. Perhaps as this is read, things may have finally begun to clear up.

We here at <u>N&B</u> hope to make '83 a big year for gaming as well as N&B. We depend upon you to help us serve.

Certainly <u>N&B</u> is not for everyone. We don't try to snow you under with some pseudo-intellectual or philosophical gunk. This is a hobby, gaming, and should be fun. One survey taken shows age groups are dropping in the hobby. This can be a good sign, since it would show that the younger crowd is getting more interested. If we can hold that interest, the market will be stronger yet and the variety of games will still grow.

There is talk of saturation, and perhaps with some validity. I believe, as most do, that the strong will survive. If a game is good, it will stay. If poorly planned and laid out -- GONE. However, we have to remember that gaming is fun, and should remain so. It is there to relax (or frustrate) us. It will help burn off inhibiting emotions that we cannot always express in polite society. Did I mention that gaming wasn't always polite?

This is being written before we can even gauge what the response to Issue 12 is and we have no idea how things are going! But, please take the time to write us! Most of our columns depend upon reader response and we ask for that

response! You don't have to Write volumes, just a short note. If you have a Game We'd Like To See, great! The more minds and ideas we can toss out the more ideas some designers may get.

We would like to see more of what you are playing and buying. There seems to be some market upheavals that time will be the only factor not yet at an end. The future of <u>Fantasy</u> and some Science Fiction gaming is in question. I have differing opinions and you can read that later, inside.





Rick's Blog The Rum Runner

<u>Rick's Facebook</u> <u>American Made</u> Rum

Rick Buda is the former Editor-in-Chief of *The Nuts & Bolts of Gaming* (NaBoG), which was a magazine dedicated to covering play by mail (PBM) gaming.



Stasis vaults that have long laid dormant are now being activated by super-advanced Cybernetic Intelligences. Their contents are unknown, but universally feared, by bio-lifeforms across the Five Galaxies. The Cybernetic threat is growing. Expanding. Multiplying rapidly! Entire civilizations are now at risk, with only the dead of deep space between them and countless legions of merciless Cybernetic adversaries.

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## **TERMINATE YOUR BOREDOM!**

SPREAD CYBERNETIC DESTRUCTION ACROSS THE FIVE GALAXIES

## At Face Value - A look at the Facebook numbers

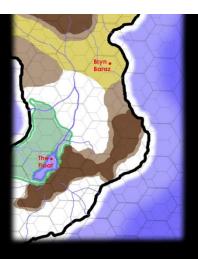
Facebook Page	# of Likes May 29th, 2014 Issue # 7	# of Likes September 21st, 2015 Issue # 10
Flying Buffalo, Inc.	1,410 Likes	1,567 (+157)
Empires at War 1805	353 Likes	473 (+120)
<u>Takamo Universe</u>	241 Likes	303 (+62
<u>Clash of Legends</u>	113 Likes	148 (+35
Phoenix: B.S.E.	97 Likes	127 (+30
Diplomacy on USAK	84 Likes	95 (+11)
<u>Starweb</u>	83 Likes	88 (+5)
Rolling Thunder Games	66 Likes	77 (+11)
Duel2	66 Likes	75 (+9)
PlayByMail.Net	26 Likes	46 (+20)
<u>Alamaze</u>	27 Likes	43 (+16)
Fallen Empires PBE	39 Likes	43 (+4)
Rimworlds	35 Likes	38 (+3)
Galactic Prisoners	30 Likes	34 (+4)
<u>It's a Crime</u>	26 Likes	31 (+5)

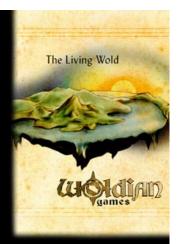
Facebook Discussion Group	# of members
<u>Diplomacy World</u>	362 members (+10)
<u>Hyborian War</u>	60 members (+6)
Middle-Earth PBM	56 members (+10)
Phoenix BSE	38 members (+2)
<u>Forgotten Realms</u>	35 members (-4)
<u>Legends</u>	46 members (+14)
Starfleet Warlord	47 members (+6)
Sci-Fi Writers and Artists Group for Takamo Universe	30 members (+5)
Postal Diplomacy Zine Archive	33 members (+11)
Lands of Nevron	21 members (+2)
Duel2	28 members (+16)
Fall of Rome	3 members (+1)
Play By Mail Games	1 member (0)

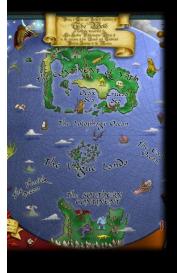
<sup>\*</sup> **NOTE:** The numbers in parenthesis reflects increases, decreases, and maintaining of the status quo since the last issue where these numbers were tracked. N/A denotes an entry that was added, this issue. Want your page added to this list? **Contact us!** 











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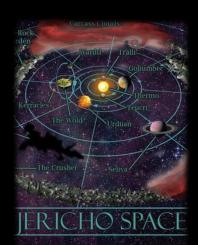














## **Dante's Inferno**

## The Trials and Tribulations of Publishing a PBM Magazine Charles Mosteller

When you fall into an abyss, gravity takes over. You just keep on falling. There's a reason why they call it a bottomless pit.

We have fallen for over a year straight, now. Deep is the hole from which we now seek to extricate ourselves. The fault is my own. Responsibility lies directly beneath these two feet of mine.

In a word, we have failed. I have failed. The magazine has failed.

We did not meet my initial goal of twelve issues in a year's time. That great hope is little more than dust in the wind, now. It has long since blown away. It dwells, now, with the forgotten.

So, why bother trying, again? Why fret with it? Why fiddle with it? Hasn't enough damage already been done, both to the magazine and to its readership?

I have starved them. I have subjected them to famine. The magazine lost its way. It got swallowed up by a wilderness of nothing. It ceased to be.

No matter how many trials, no matter how many tribulations, Hell has an infinite number of punishments, for one and all - for editor and reader, alike.

Why rise from the pit? Why now? Should we not let sleeping dogs lie? Is there any

point to beating a dead horse, anew?

I don't have all of the answers. Indeed, at times, I seem to have none of them.

What I have plenty of, though, is questions. I inundate myself with them. It is a torrent of inquiry. I am awash with curiosity. I have pages left to write.

But, is there anyone left who will listen? Are there any left who still want to read, who still desire to participate, who still desire to consume the ink from our magazine's pages?

I got myself into this mess. I can't seem to get myself out of it. Thus, it is time to trudge across Hell's face, once more!

If you should be so unfortunate as to find yourself reading these dark and wretched words, then know that it is time for you to join us on our journey, yet again.

It is time to give Issue #10 a decent burial in the quicksand that is history. That can only be achieved by publishing it.

Which brings us full circle from where we were, a little over a year ago, to where we are, now.

Ding dong! The wicked old witch is dead! Suspense & Decision is no more.

Or so you thought!

## STAR FLEET UNIVERSE

## The Best-Selling Science-Fiction Universe!

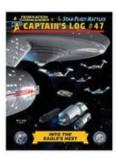
Amarillo Design Bureau, Inc. presents

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## **And So Much More!**

Whether it is Captain's Log that supports all of our games or Star Fleet Battle Force, a non-collectible card game, or our free e-zines, we have lots to interest you. Check us out!



Amarillo Design Bureau, Inc. Website: www.StarFleetGames.com PO Box 8759 Amarillo TX, 79114 Email: Marketing@StarFleetGames.com

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## My Year in the Wilderness

## Tribal Starfleet Trade Report #4

Bernd Jaehnigen

I stand before you now, having spent the past year away from the civilizing influence of PBM. I have a proverbial Ichabod Crane beard, the dirt of real life under my fingernails, and the thousand-yard stare of one who has gone too long without a turn-result in his hands. I have written elsewhere in this issue regarding this extended absence. In this space, I'd like to talk about some of my other recent game experiences — the things that both distract from and inspire PBM love.

One major activity has been my weekly game night with my fellow local geeks, which has been a TSTR topic before. It's a beer-and-pretzels affair that takes place once a week, and brings with it some much-needed social face-time along with intense gaming. We mainly play the advanced "eurogames" that are all the rage over at <a href="BoardGameGeek">BoardGameGeek</a>. Each game is either completed that night or cut off when players tire — never have we left a game set up in a corner to resume playing next week. That is an option open only to those without young children or enthusiastic pets.

Each game tends to have a devoted following on the Geek, with complete reviews, in-depth strategy articles, and after-action-reports posted in abundance for posterity. It is just kind of magnificent to behold what a community

can put together for a game it loves, and I hope to help cultivate something like that on our PBM fora. Players can often download and print cheat-sheets, variants, extra maps/counters/cards, and even contribute to "living rules". The feedback loop can be impressive — one old gaming chum interacted extensively with the game designer of The Supreme Commander (a strategic wargame covering WWII in Europe) which resulted in many updates to the rules. Not long thereafter, a new gaming chum who'd bought the game discovered in his mailbox a set of replacement maps and rules, sent unsolicited by the publisher, who wanted to make sure each player was getting the best experience possible.

Some of these games have been ported over to web-play. Through The Ages has been a particular favorite for us. It is a relatively simple game in terms of mechanics, but with deep tactical depth. But we are reluctant to put in on the table because a full game takes a good four hours, which is just a little longer than our weekly crew can usually tolerate. We've played it dozens of times online, though. We can play from any web browser or smart phone, making it an ideal diversion during lunch breaks and bus commutes. In this way, we are turning it into a PBM game, or at least a PBM-like. The <u>site that offers online play</u>

is free, and I invite any reader to contact me for a quick tutorial if you're interested in giving it a try.

Another perpetual temptation and distraction for me has been Civilization (the computer game). It can be played by email, and I will gladly set up a PBMcommunity game if there is interest. It would likely take several months or a year to finish, but that's no barrier at all for us PBMers. I will say that playing Civ alone, while highly enjoyable, is ultimately a sad imitation of real gaming. I have played games against the computer hundreds of times, and remember details of almost none of them. But, I have played against human opponents a few times and have vivid and exciting memories that linger to this day. Have you, dear reader, found yourself entranced by such a game that sucked your free time away from more social pursuits? Let us know about them, and write about how it might be forged into a PBM experience!

I've also written in the past about Minecraft, which has been a mighty and well-nigh perpetual distraction. I remember Charles asking his son what he loved best about the game, to which he instantly replied "playing with other people". So at various times over this past year I have played the game with my kids, and on a local community server. It's a sandbox game, and I often get a zen vibe from building towns and landscapes. I've also dipped my toes in the almost limitless number of expansions available in the mod

community — each of which represents thousands of hours of development and play-testing. The greatest thrill comes from building something for other people to see, and seeing how it impacts the server community. Minecraft is not directly akin to PBM, but it is a form of social distance-gaming, and thus has some overlap. If there is interest, maybe we should start up a *Suspense & Decision* server. What do you think?

Another inspiration from the boardgaming community has been VASSAL — the virtual table top game engine that has been extended to support thousands of games. Friends have posted extensive screen-shots and after-action analyses of various wargames played using VASSAL, which have been sweet honey to an old grognard like me. The difficulty of finding opponents for complex games makes VASSAL a valuable tool, as well as a PBM community resource. Indeed, the PBM world is descended directly from wargamers posting "opponents wanted" ads in Avalon Hill's "The General" magazine. If anyone would like to play Squad Leader or the like online, let's have an open test game and play it out on our forum! Some of the larger games can support several players, and can take years to finish (and perhaps weeks to read the rules.)

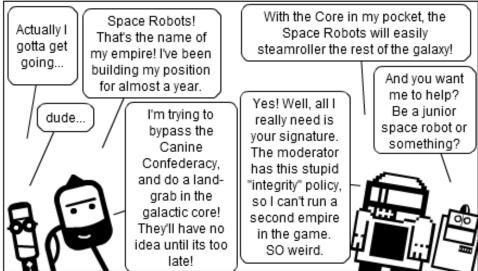
None of these can replace the thrills of a properly designed and executed PBM game, as we all know, but they can add inspiration and excitement to our little niche. I invite you to write about your

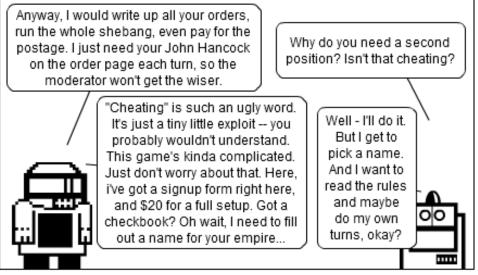
experiences with such PBM-likes, and kick off a community-edition game of your own. As I return to PBM, I will be joining at least a couple of commercial games. But I fully intend to continue participating in some of these other non-PBM games, and writing about them here. In the debate over what counts as PBM, and what falls within scope of this magazine, I am unequivocally "big tent".

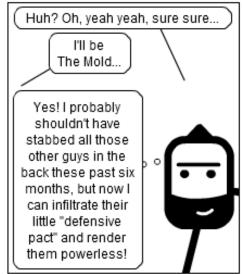
Bottom line, I urge you to strive to make

all your gaming experiences social in some way, and work to document and share them with the rest of us. If instead you succumb to the easy lure of solo computer games in the basement past midnight, you might find yourself out in the wilderness, far from the city-state of PBM enlightenment and struggling to remember just what you had spent the past year of your hobby life doing.









## Submission Deadline for Issue #11 is October 20th, 2015

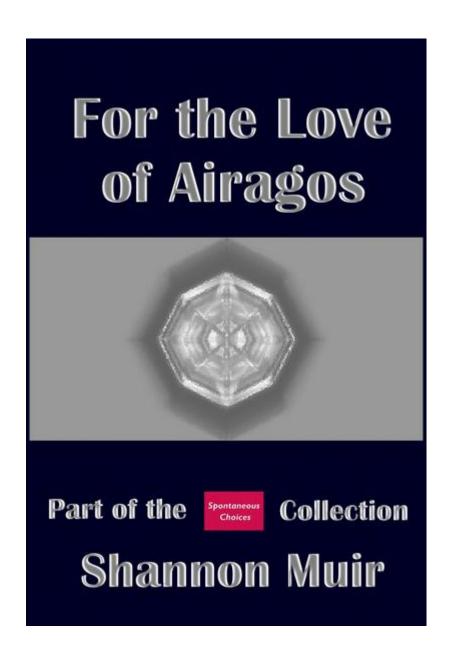
Articles - Reviews - Op-Eds - Photos

Have something to say?
Be part of the dialogue.
Immortalize your opinion!

Suspense & Decision magazine

PBM neds YOU

## For the Love of Airagos



Heather grew up playing RPGs with her friend Abe and a group of college friends. One day he mysteriously disappeared, but tried to keep the game going as Play By Mail turns - until one day those turns also mysteriously stopped. Years later, she's put in contact with friends old and new who learn they've been pieces in a larger game for a race from another world to come to Earth...

"Yes?" I replied, not sure what he wanted.

"I know it's a long shot, but did you by any chance keep the rulebook that the Dungeon Master wrote for that play by mail game? I can't remember the game flavor."

"It's in my suitcase," I told him. "Not like we can get to it at the moment. I did read it before I came down. Can't

think of anything that immediately might help though."

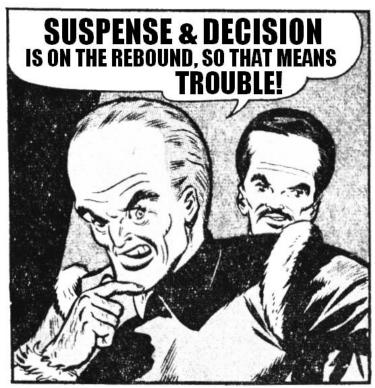
Izzy finally chimed in.

"You want me to go run off and save a fantasy world with you? Are you mad?"

Varderius looked over at Izzy.

"We need you as part of our group," he insisted.

Pick up your copy today!



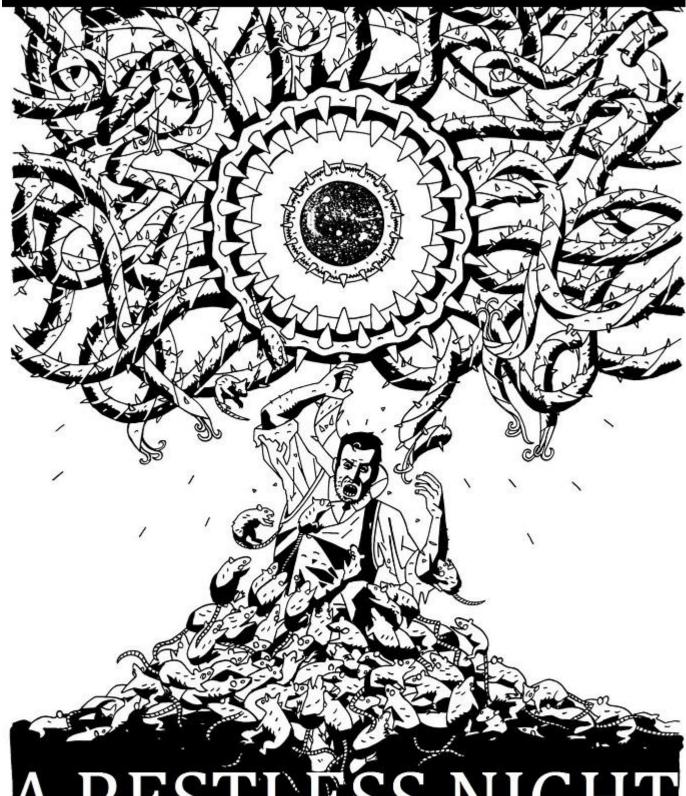




If you're not reading **S&D**, then you need to be playing **PBM**. Otherwise, you're missing out!

## A PULP HORROR ONE-SHOT FROM WARD & PARKER

FROM THE PAGES OF MERRICK: THE SENSATIONAL ELEPHANTMAN



## A RESTLESS NIGHT ON KICKSTARTER NOW!

## **EXPLORE**

Enter a new era. Herald the dawn of a new age.

The twilight of humanity coincides with the rise of the Empire of the Race!

Nowhere is forbidden to the explorator fleets of the Fessin Caste.

The galactic map is changing. Humankind has been halted in its expansion across the stars.

## CONQUER

Supported by hive allies, the tentacles of the Flagritz Empire stretch forth across a galaxy which yearns to be free from human domination.

New-found comrades in arms champion our cause!

Driven back, humans flee to the sanctuary of their traditional regions of space. Their grip is slipping. The future holds the certainty of doom for all mankind.

## DOMINATE

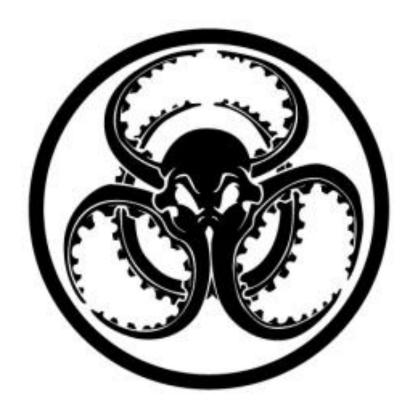
Ours is the destiny of conquest. We claim the right of domination. We ascend as gods!

We are the Flagritz! The universe is ours to rule, to subjugate, to enslave.

The race of man fears our coming. They plot to foil our advance. Yet, we are unstoppable!

Our ways are alien to them. Yet, we know them for what they are. They perceive us to be a threat, but they woefully underestimate our might and our resolve.

# Join Us!



Join the Empire of the Race!

### **PBM Puzzle**

### The Player Kingdoms of Hyborian War

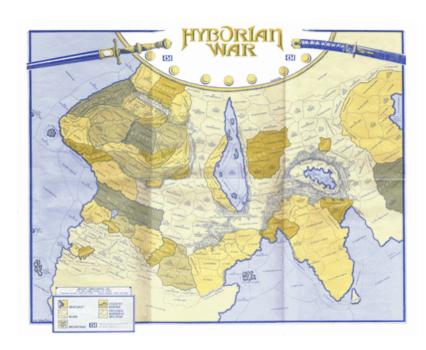
QQNJ Α Х Н R QZВ Ε Ι AIJ F J Ι S M Ι J J Z G S S 0 D D R 0 Т Т Ε Н Q R В У S S S Z M G Н Ν Q Н J F Ε Ε Ι U Ε Ι Ν R R Κ Ι Ι S В Ρ G Ε Ε Ζ C Ι Ι D G K 0 K Х Κ 0 S Ι Т Z S X D Z В R т D S S M G G Н Ι S У Т Х D У Х Z 0 С Ι Ν 0 Т Ε S Ζ R Ε Н В Q D 0 M 0 J J Х M Ι S Α Ε У Α Z D Z D R G Κ 0 0 Ι Ι S D Ι Ι D В Ε R 0 D R В J W D QR Ε Z Q S U Ν У Α T G R K Т D Ν Ι Ι J W N AS Κ Q Z QBQRE V U D 0

**ATTENTION:** Be the first person to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth beneath your sandaled feet. Who will **be the first person to solve this** copy and send a copy of it with all thirty-six player kingdoms of Hyborian War circled correctly? Send your name and a photo of the puzzle correctly solved to: **GrimFinger@GrimFinger.Net** 

\* Puzzle created courtesy of www.WordMint.com.

Here is a list of all thirty-six player kingdoms playable in the play by mail game called Hyborian War. Hyborian War is run by Reality Simulations, Inc., operating out of Tempe, Arizona.

Aquilonia	Amazonia	Argos
Asgard	Border Kingdom	Brythunia
Cimmeria	Corinthia	Darfar
Hyperborea	Hyrkania	Iranistan
Juma's Kingdom	Kambulja	Keshan
Khauran	Khitai	Khoraja
Kosala	Koth	Kusan
Kush	Nemedia	Ophir
Pictland	Punt	Shem
Stygia	Tombalku	Turan
Uttara Kuru	Vanaheim	Vendhya
Zamora	Zembabwei	Zingara



**HYBORIAN WAR™** is owned and operated by Reality Simulations, Inc..

Contact RSI: CSR@REALITY.COM ©1985, 2006 Reality Simulations, Inc.

# Jigh on!

a fanzine for the old-school renaissance



for Fantasy Role Playing Campaigns played with Pencil, Paper, and Your Imagination

Learn more at www.fightonmagazine.com, or head over to www.lulu.com and search "Ignatius."

## **Holiday Games**

#### Amber

This week, I got back from my extended summer holiday at the caravan down on the south coast. Seems like I was down there the whole summer, with gorgeous weather only interrupted by the occasional thunderstorm, which on a campsite is both magnificent and terrifying. I can remember when we first came to this campsite. There was no Wi-Fi, no proper TV reception, and to use your mobile phone, you had to walk half a mile to the top of the hill. You could just sit, and watch the trees grow. Now, there is a Wi-Fi zone and digital television, although the phone reception is still pretty patchy. I had left Darak in charge of watering the cucumbers at home, and the funniest part of the holiday was when he phoned up, to ask if he should also water the small plants. I was confused as there were only cucumbers in the greenhouse, when I realised that he was talking about the weeds. When school was finished, the kids came down to join me, but there wasn't a lot of room to spare in the car, so I chose some games that were small and portable.

So, here are my top 5 "small enough to take on holiday" games.

#### **#5 Zombie flux/Cthulhu flux.**

If you have yet to come across the flux

series of card games before, they are definitely worth having a look at. You start by drawing one card and playing one card. As the game progresses, you get cards that change the rules. For example, draw 3 cards and play all your hand, and you get cards that change the winning conditions, so that the rules and the aim are always in flux. Both Zombie and Cthulhu are fun to play, with fun pictures. Size-wise it is a pack of playing cards, but you need a table to lay the cards onto while playing it – although you could lay them onto the floor.

#### #4 Settlers of Catan card game.

Settlers of Catan (the boardgame) is one of our favourites, so I was a bit worried that the card game version would be nothing like it, but it does have the spirit of *Catan* about it. It is a large box, for the number of cards there are, and the cards do not fit well into the packaging. They tend to roll around in the box. I do like how you add different cards, as you increase the number of players, so the play is balanced whether you have 2,3, or 4 players. You build up your settlements, collect knights, and build roads to collect victory points - the first to ten victory points wins. Again, you need to lay the cards out on something. If you like the boardgame then you won't be disappointed with the card game.

#### #3 Carcassonne.

We started off many years ago with Carcassonne, and liked it so much that we bought the big box expansion. This left us with the original game. I took it out of its very bulky packaging, put the tiles into one drawstring bag and the small men into another, and it made a perfect travel version. You do need a flat level surface to lay the tiles out. The play is quite simple; you draw a tile which could have part of a city, a road, a field, or a mix of all of them. You have to place it next to a matching tile, city to city, road to road, field to field. You can put your men on the tiles, as a knight in the city, a thief on the road, or a farmer in the field, and you score points as the cites or roads are completed. I always enjoy Carcassonne, it doesn't go on for too long, as there are only so many tiles. It is always different, with the random tiles being pulled out, and it is never obvious who is going to win, as the final tiles can make or break you.

#### #2 Cthulhu Munchkin

I have never played any of the *Munchkin* series before, and I have to admit, I only got this because of the Cthulhu theme. However, I was really surprised how good it was. The box for the cards was twice the size it needed to be, so you could fit an expansion set in the same box, but I used the space to put some dice as counters. There was a long set of rules to go with it, but we just started playing, and referred to the rules when we got stuck. Again, you do need quite a

large area to lay the cards out, but once you get into it, it's straightforward to play. You start as a level one character with two decks of cards — a door deck and a treasure deck. On your turn, you kick open the door (pick a door card), and either fight a monster or follow the card instructions. When you have defeated the monster, you get your reward from the treasure deck and go up a level. The first to level ten wins.

It becomes quite tactical, as you can help other players to fight monsters, or you can add to the monster's strength to make them impossible to beat.

We played this a lot on holiday, and I will certainly be looking to expand my *Munchkin* collection.

#### #1 Pass the Pigs.

It may be a strange choice for the number one spot, and I should think that most people will have heard of this. But, I have never played it before, and I would not have believed that two little plastic pigs could prove to be such fun. It's simple, toss the pigs and score points for how they land. Will you get a razor back, or will it be a double leaning jowler? No matter how hard I practised, I could not get these little pigs to roll how I wanted them to. No need to be bored ever again – just stick the two little pigs in your pocket and roll them anywhere!



# DON'T TURN YOUR BACK

A NEW BOARD GAME FROM
EVIL HAT PRODUCTIONS
AND ERIC B. VOGEL

BUILD YOUR DECK.

PAIN ©
1
2
1
3
MARK SERVEY

MI AND SHOOT LOWER DECK.

PAIN ©
1
2
4
MARK SERVEY

MI AND SHOOT LOW WANTED

BB Hop School @ Sance

BB SCOR LINEAR SERVEY

MI AND SANCE and them nave a life of the market of the ma

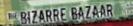
BUT WHATEVER YOU DO... **DON'T TURN YOUR BACK!** http://www.evilhat.com/home/dont-turn-your-back/



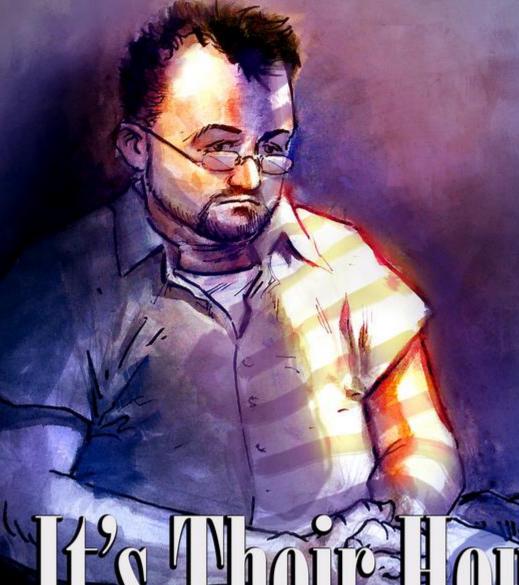








# Douglas Kann



It's Their House I'm Just a Guest

# PlayByMail.Net

presents

# POP QUIZ

How much of Diplomacy Uber-Guru Douglas Kent's diplomacy material stored online have you rifled through?

\* \* \*

Did you even know that Douglas Kent maintains an enormous amount of Diplomacy zines stockpiled, presumably, for all occasions?

\* \* \*

Have you ever even bothered to check any of it out?

\* \* \*

Do you know what Eternal Sunshine is, and where it can be found?

\* \* \*

What was the Foolhardy Page?

\* \* \*

Whatever you do, do NOT click on THIS link!

\* \* \*

**BONUS QUESTION:** In Eternal Sunshine Issue #71, why was Douglas Kent willing to risk the annihilation of the known universe?

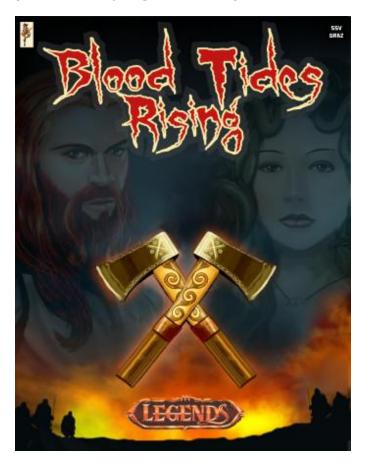
## **PBM Activity Corner**

#### News, Developments, & Bragging Rights

**From Game Companies and Game Moderators** 

#### **Harlequin Games**

LEGENDS at Harlequin Games (<a href="https://www.harlequingames.com">www.harlequingames.com</a>)



The first ever game of the new module, Blood Tides Rising, was won by the Viking faction. Avalon Revisted 25 was won by the Reavers faction with a Dragonlord also rising to emminence to claim the title of Dragon King. Throne of Chaos 26 fell to Cerralean faction who snatched victory from very strong opposition. A new game of Immortals Realm 7 launched and has filled to

maximum players. We are open to take pledges to <u>play in the One Ring™</u>. You can play the officially licensed world of Tolkein's Middle-earth™ in the Legends system.

website: www.harlequingames.com

#### **Rolling Thunder Games**

SuperNova: Rise of the Empire is setting up a new galaxy, Draco. The Draco galaxy will be setting up this week with initial turns due on Sept 29th. The new galaxy has plenty of room for new players after the initial start so getting in later is no problem. The Draco galaxy uses the SN:ROTE game engine but it does have quite a few rules/tech changes so it will have a different feel to it. Folks wanting additional information should feel free to shoot me an email at Russ@rollingthunder.com and I'll get right back to them.

Best wishes!
Russ Norris
Rolling Thunder Games
Russ@rollingthunder.com
RTGRuss@hotmail.com [alternate]

website: <a href="www.rollingthunder.com">www.rollingthunder.com</a>
forum: <a href="www.rollingthunderforums.com">www.rollingthunderforums.com</a>

#### **Talisman Games**

Here at Talisman Games, we're still improving the web site and other user interfaces to our first game, Galac-Tac, and working on converting our other games, as well. Thanks to exposure in this magazine, we got some new players to play in Galac-Tac galaxies, but we need more to make it a fun, active, and viable game. As new players sign up to play in fresh galaxies with various turnaround times, they need enough additional players in their new galaxy to fill it up to at least a minimum number of positions, so they can begin play. Please sign up to play and help us populate those galaxies!

We're still offering twelve free months to anyone that signs up for their first month of play for \$5. While waiting for your galaxies to fill up, I'd also like to encourage you to practice playing against the computer, to get used to the process and commands and to develop your own strategies for use against those pesky humans who can be so unpredictable. ;-)

Something you may not be aware of is that *Galac-Tac* also offers private galaxies. A new player can talk a handful of his (or her) friends into joining up and playing as a group, and then know exactly who is out there... somewhere... and not have to wait for strangers to sign up. Besides... it's fun competing against folks you know. "I'll most likely kill you in the morning, Bro!"

Come on over and enjoy the fun! We'll

be waiting for you.

#### Jason Oates Games

Just a little news. Company Commander 11 has ended, and I am now in the process of rewriting the game for a start up, as soon as I can. I have a waiting list with vacancies, so I am looking to get a few new players. The game is based in an Indonesian style island group, which will require players to island hop and will challenge players logistical and tactical skills to the limit.

website: <u>www.jason-oates-games.com</u>

#### **Oplon Games**



Oplon Games is announcing that a new 3-players scenario will be up soon for Empires at War, and will be about the Peninsular War 1808-1814. Three powers (France, Great Britain and Spain) will fight for dominance over a new map of Iberia, in a scenario that has no

diplomacy (alliances and wars are fixed), only ambitious campaigns and brutal battles.

The French start almighty and in the offensive, but over time, revolts and attrition will change this, and the British-Spanish will get stronger. Will the French manage to inflict enough punishment upon the Spano-British alliance before casualties and diminishing resources bring them to their knees?

1808 scenario has additional game 'events' that will trigger in the game as it proceeds; some of them have to do with actual historical events which somehow affected the outcome of the struggle, and some of them are completely random. The scenario is currently in Beta, estimated to be released in October 2015. You can read more about this scenario here:

http://www.eaw1805.com/scenario/1808/info

website: www.eaw1805.com

#### **Enlightened Age Entertainment**

Alamaze players now enjoy a very impressive order checking software that all the players swear by. "Saved my behind many times!" Now its almost impossible to make a mistake, barring your own strategic mistakes.

We've started about a game a week since April, 2013, in eight different

formats. Come see what you're missing at <a href="https://www.alamaze.co">www.alamaze.co</a>.

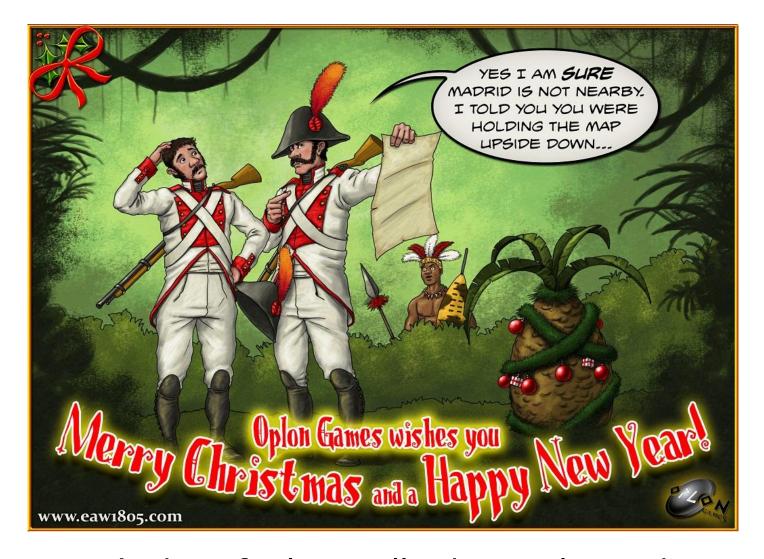
Thanks,

Rick



Empires at War 1805 source code, engine, user interface and website are now available to everyone through github.com. It is the first turn-based historical strategy game to go open source and developers are free to examine its code and help with known issues, or develop the program towards a direction of their liking. The entire project is available to anyone here:

https://github.com/EaW1805



It wasn't their fault. Really, honestly, and truly, it just plain wasn't their fault. They had no way of knowing that Suspense & Decision would not be publishing for an entire year straight. Hey, whose idea was that, anyway?

As the saying goes, better late than never. Besides, there's worse things than receiving holiday greetings during the off-season.

Suspense & Decision is back. <u>Oplon Games</u> never left! Be merry! Be happy! **Visit them!!** 

## Down the Whirlpool

# Reader Feedback Assorted Readers Speaking Out

Dear Charles,

I ran across your website and publication a short while ago. Not sure what I was doing at the time, but when I came across Suspense and Decision (around Issue #6 or #7), I quickly read through all of them with great delight. I've been reading them all avidly since then. I'm not much of a writer, and, frankly, since you've managed to rekindle the PBM flame in me, I've signed up for a few games, but none have started yet. Thus, a non-writer with little to write about.

But I did want to thank you (and your crew!) for taking the time and making the effort to start up this magazine and fight the good fight to revive interest in the PBM genre. I remember when Paper Mayhem and Flagship went down, and those were sad days, I was gratified when someone cared enough to start up something new to replace them.

In this spirit, I've decided to quit lurking and respond to your request for feedback and fill out the Reader Survey.

Also, I was amused to see my little comment/blurb re:Alamaze/S&D make it into print. ;) So here goes:

**1) Favorite Article:** Has to be a tie between Genny White's Galac-Tac piece and David Aldags' on Hyborian War.

I enjoy these strategy review-style articles the most, because they give the greatest insight into the actual gameplay of a game. These type of articles tell me the most about whether or not I myself would be interested in trying a game out. If I think I'd be interested, they give me ideas about how I'd want to strategize for it. If not, it gives me a taste of a game I'd probably not take the time to play. Either way, although I've enjoyed almost all of the content thus far, these articles are my favorites.

--- (Speaking of which, what ever happened to Part 2 of Kevin O'Brien's piece on Khoraja (Part 1 was in Issue #6)?

2) Best Thing in PBM Lately: There seems to be a resurgence of the whole PBM genre in general. Alamaze coming back. Takamo coming back. War of Wizards showing new signs of life. All of these are good things, but, honestly, I'd have to say this magazine. Any niche genre of anything needs some kind of central hub to connect its disparate audience. S&D provides such a hub, giving information and entertainment to PBMers, and allowing the various GMs/Game Companies to cross-pollinate their audiences and grow each individual game's player-base. Now that you've got this thing up and running, it would

behoove the GMs/Game Companies to brainstorm ways to increase the readership of this publication (putting links and reviews on various gaming forums, setting up relationships with computer gaming production companies whose games might have crossover appeal = in both directions, etc.) People who read this magazine are the people who play their games. The more here, the more feeding into them. The free advertising doesn't hurt this paradigm.

#### 3) Next PBM-type Game Created:

There seem to be two main types of games being run or starting up: Power gamer space operas (Takamo, Phoenix, Galac-Tac SuperNova, etc.) and very deep character-based Fantasy Wargames (Alamaze, Middle Earth, Legends, Forgotten Realms, Hyborian War, etc.). Personally, I'm not so keen on the first; just too complicated and, as one's position grows, they seem to devolve into an exercise in spreadsheet management. This has appeal to many, but I prefer the second type of game. I'm giving several of these a shot, but given they're also somewhat involved, my bandwidth may only be one or two of them. Back in the day, when I was last playing PBM games actively, I used to enjoy a variety of more stylized games, like Adventurer Kings, Simcoarum System's A National Will, and Madhouse's Necromancer (sadly, Madhouse is still around, but no longer offer that one.) AK had characters, true, but it wasn't character/population center/army groupfocused. I guess I'd just like a greater variety of available games and for

someone to come up with a different genre apart from those two I've listed.

- --- Speaking of Adventurer Kings, Jonck van der Kogel and Richard Gray have put it up on AdventurerKings.com for people to run and play for free. I registered up for the site, but they are no longer actively running games themselves Jonck said he'd let anyone run a game, but they'd need some knowledge of Linux (not me, drat). There is a long list of players waiting for a new game to start. It may behoove you to contact him and perhaps recruit someone via your bully pulpit to jumpstart that golden oldie again. Not to add to the work pile in front of you.;)
- **4) Rated it a 10,** cuz I always enjoy these a lot. Might have gotten an 11, but you were a few days late feeding the beast.;)
- **5) Favorite PBM memory:** Probably crushing the field wire-to-wire in my last game of A National Will. I spent some time figuring that one out, and it was fun seeing the results match expectations. More generally, getting a big, thick rule packet in the mail, and curling up on an armchair to pore through it.;)

Well, sorry for the lengthy discourse. Use it as you like. I felt you deserved some response and feedback

rigarri, criarrico for your criores	Again,	thanks	for	your	efforts
-------------------------------------	--------	--------	-----	------	---------

David (BlueGolem)

As I continue to read over your magazine, I am actually shocked at the lack of MEPBM related material. I would have thought the game was still going strong and others would have contributed a fair amount of material. Rather telling, perhaps?

And no, thank you. You obviously have put a great deal of time and effort into your publication. You should be given some kind of medal, for even having made the attempt! But seriously, some of what you yourself have written is both uplifting and depressing to a guy like me just getting back on the wagon. I am actually pondering how it is the next generation might get hooked on the gaming genre... PBM can't die... it just can't. But it is tough to appeal to the fast paced gaming experiences so prevalent nowadays. And what with decline of D&D and tabletop gaming and all of its former magazines... as I recall, those were the old "gateway drugs"... what to do, yes?

Still, there are thinking kids out there just as there was 20-30 years ago. But, how does one reach them? It is something I am really pondering, since having read your stuff.

DJ Barry Jr

- **1. Galac-Tac nurturing the Roc eggs** because it is an interesting perspective that differs from mine in wargaming and, specifically, this game
- **2. WEB-BASED orders entry,** ESPECIALLY those with error checking -

OMG the cats meow I almost will not play a game without this thing.

3. Master of Orion weekly turns, graphical interface, human players, all kind of options from tech, to ship design, to espionage inflicted, to diplomacy inflicted, etc (by inflicted, it means that a successful action gives the recipient little choice but to accept the results - AKA there WILL be peace!).

**4.** 6

**5. Favorite memory** has to be terrorizing the entire game of Death By Starlight with a pair of large ships that were nicknamed by other players as "SupiTers". Many fond memories of that game, it is a shame it folded.

Hyborian War wiki - kinda tough to break into that group, isn't it? Went there as a new player and they were nice but not particularly helpful. So, do not really care about Hyborian War wiki, even though it was the game I thought I would come back to in PBM So my answer is a definitive NO.

Alamaze wiki - did not know, and I play Alamaze. Might be helpful to stress some of the lesser known aspects of the game. The turn based orders entry system currently being implemented will revolutionize playing Alamaze, learning to play Alamaze, and new player retention for Alamaze.

Rick should try running new players' first game for free, to get them hooked, especially now that he has a web based turn entry system, but what do I know about marketing? <G>

**Middle-earth PBM forums** make me want to punch babies. Too many Ricks, with a silent P. Ugh! Never again!

Cheers,

Panda

#### 1. Favorite article from issue 9:

I very much liked the Galac-Tac and Alamaze articles, because they focused on getting new players up-to-speed quickly. And I liked The Caliphate and Hidden Elements for getting us into the nuts and bolts of Phoenix and Hyborian War -- very interesting even though I don't play those games. I will always be a fan of Jim Kemenv's memoirs of Ultima Online. Sometimes the subcultures of these games outshine the games themselves. And the other in-game fictional pieces were engaging and spirited. But generally, as each new issue comes out, I tend to read Charles' incessant ramblings first. They provide a touchstone for the PBM community atlarge, I feel.

#### 2. Best thing in PBM gaming lately:

Aside from S&D? I think the boys running Alamaze are close to hitting the nail on the head in terms of running and continuously improving a modern PBM game. And Harlequin is to be commended for launching their new Legends module -- a huge undertaking. My home-genre is space-empire gaming,

so I continue to be interested in the Cluster Wars alpha test, and am considering Galac-Tac once my schedule opens up.

## 3. What should the next PBM-type game be?

I want to be able to study my position and tweak my orders on my freakin iPhone. Maybe every game should have this.

#### 4. Rate this issue:

7 -- The quality of articles is going up, and the massive injection of graphic advertising really adds to the experience.

#### 5. Favorite PBM memory?

I once played in the massive team-based predecessor to Cluster Wars, called Empyrean Challenge. Our team had a number of deeply committed players, who didn't always see eye-to-eye. At one point, a simmering disagreement over near-term strategy erupted a bit on the team-newsletter I published each turn. Tension, possible hurt-feelings, etc. So my brother drew up a four-panel comic strip for our next issue, crafting caricatures of each player that just killed me. It was absolutely hilarious, though I doubt anyone outside our team would get more than a mild chuckle out of it. Even some of our team-members found it -- befuddling. I recently found it while cleaning up my office, and it remains one of my fondest PBM memories...

- Bernd

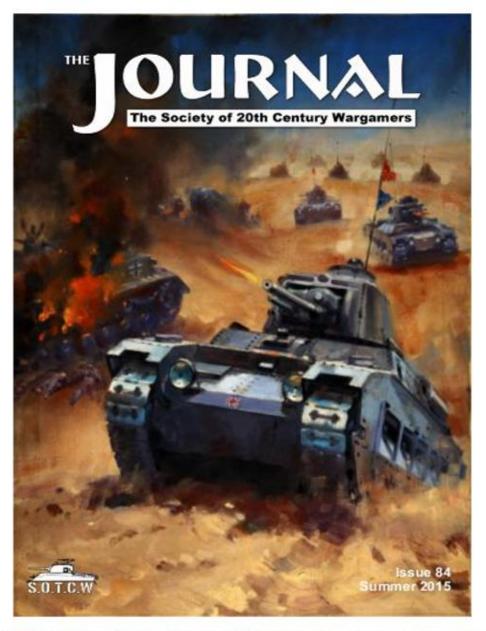
Suspense & Decision	A PBM Magazine for the 21st Century!  I have enjoyed reading all of the			
=======================================				
Hi There	previous issues and look forward to this one.			
From Issue 9 the following from your Survey	- Silverlord			
1. Best Article - Has to be from	=======================================			
Alamaze. Really good game to play as there is so much variants it could be	Good to see you back on the radar.			
difficult to choose which is best for you.	- Mica Goldstone			
2. Best Thing in PBM Recently - Have	=======================================			
joined Fallen Empires, and its an addictive game! There is so much to do with your little settlement/City/Sea	Good to hear that you are back in action and wish you the best.			
Tribe/ Land Tribe etc Very hands on, and the GM's are very friendly with your	- Russ Norris			
idea's.	=======================================			
3. What should be the next PBM type game: I would like to see a wargame set	Glad to hear you are getting back in the saddle.			
post WWW 3 where its the survival of your gang during the rough times.	- Rick McDowell			
4. Rate this issue: I'd say 8. I like the	=======================================			
adverts in the zine, so that I can plan the next games to join. I also like reading	Congratulations on (almost!) making double digit issues quite a landmark!			
about how people are actually playing the games.	- Richard Watts			
5. What is one of your favourite play	=======================================			
<b>by mail memories:</b> Has to be a game call Whitegold, which I played 20 odd years ago. The diplomacy was obviously	You never give up do you! Looking forward :)			
done mostly by letters and telephone	Makis Xiroyannis			
calls. The game mechanics itself was well thought out and the detail was great.	=======================================			
Best regards	Love what you are doing - I found you at issue 6 or 7 and it brought pbm back to			

Colin Danks

me from long ago. =)

- Eric Carver

## The Society of 20th Century Wargamers



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## First Contact (Parts 3, 4, and 5)

Action Code 2 Location#1 XYZ12311

James MacKinlay, David Williams (editor), Gregory Stephenson (artwork)

#### Part 3

The light emitting diodes on the environmental suits gave enough light to navigate through the tunnels but not enough to make the Captain feel comfortable. He was much more at ease in the blackness of space than buried under a million tonnes of rock. Looking back at his Sensor Officer he watched her tapping continuously on the datapad. Her eyes had barely left it since they had entered the series of tunnels. First it had been to get geological readings, then plotting a course through the warren of tunnels, then scanning for the random bug creatures patrolling the darkness. At least in the tunnels the suit respirators could finally cool the air so they were not sweating all the time the Captain thought to himself.

"Looks like some type of opening up ahead, a large cavern or something... maybe" Mendez stated with her eyes still on the holographic screen, its data continuously changing with every step down the tunnel.

The two Usul crew members killed the lights on their environmental suits plunging them into pitched darkness. Switching first from night vision, then to thermal imaging, Mendez did another sweep up the tunnel before creeping

forward. The two Usul crew members could see an eerie glow ahead. As they cautiously approached the tunnel started to get brighter. First it was just enough light to see outlines of rocky shapes in the tunnel, then the rocks themselves. Finally, it was almost the same light as the bridge of the Usul. Mendez had been right, the tunnel ended and opened up into a vast dimly lighted cavern with an alien city occupying both banks of an underground river. The random rock walls of the tunnels and cavern turned into elaborate structures with rounded spires depicting elaborate hieroglyphs and intricately carved oval entryways. Every so often bug creatures could be seen scurrying into and out of the structures.

"Sir, this is it. The scanners are showing no interference now. I'm showing a massive power source, a highly developed shield, weapons arrays, and sophisticated digital communication relay stations. There must be a larger entrance because I'm even showing what appears to be some type of a space port!"

"I think we've seen all we need to Mendez. Let's get back before we are discovered and Charlie takes off without us, or we end up as a meal for those bugs." Just then the pad in Mendez's gloved hand began blinking frantically "Hold on..., we've got company coming."

The two crew members took cover behind a loose pile of rocks just in time to see a couple of the two storey tall bug creatures come into view. The two creatures stood there for a minute with their limbs and antennas waving as if they were having a conversation without words.

"What's this all about" the Captain muttered softly under his breath.

"Look, it's a runt" Mendez said as she pointed towards a third bug coming into view. This one was much shorter than the other two, standing only about 8 feet tall. However, it was wearing some type of bioengineered metallic body armour and carrying what appeared to be a laser rifle in its clawed limbs.

More limb and antenna gestures continued with the third bug before the larger two moved off. The "runt" stayed just out of earshot but well within sight of the two hidden crew members.

"What now?" Mendez whispered into the mic of her environmental suit, as if she feared talking.

"I guess we have no choice," was the Captain's reply. "We wait."

----

"Twah" Charlie murmured in his sleep. He awoke with a start. "Was that a noise? How long have I been asleep?" he thought to himself. He checked the chronometer on his suit. The Captain and Mendez should have been back twenty minutes ago. "Now what" he spoke softly to himself. The Captain had left orders but should he wait a while longer or try to get them on the suit radios? As he tried to make up his mind he could feel some dried saliva on the side of his mouth. He desperately wished he could wipe the drool that would show he had been sleeping before the others arrived but the environment suit prevented that.

Looking back at the mountain to double check the crew wasn't on their way back he noticed a light appear in the sky. The light turned into a magnificent narrow beam of fire burning across the sky. "Just a meteor burning up in the atmosphere" Charlie thought to himself. He watched the beam of fire split into pieces. "Must be breaking up" Charlie thought. Then the pieces changed course towards him.

Charlie had piloted a Fighter before in space but had never seen one do a high speed sweep of a planet from the ground. Now he got to see four of them, totally different from the Maru FTR models he was used to, their weapons ports clearly visible. These resembled the "bug" that had appeared out of the cave entrance... metallic, insectoid, and deadly.

The Usul was a sitting duck on the ground, especially with no crew on board. The camo tarp they had thrown

over top would hide it from a cursory sweep but if those Fighters were using active scanners... Charlie had to get back to the ship!

Picking himself off the ground he turned around ready to sprint back to the ship, but he found his path blocked. Three six limbed bug creatures were standing watching him, all armed with laser rifles and wearing armour. These were not as big as the one Mendez had seen but they were still taller than any man. Charlie reached for the pistol blaster in his holster only to find his gloved hand grasping empty air. It was then he saw his weapon tucked into the belt of the lead "bug".

Letting out a slow breath, his shoulders slumping, Charlie slowly raised his empty hands. Without hope he said, "I surrender."

#### Part 4

Mendez and the Captain were both starting to get a bit nervous though the "runt" didn't appear to notice the two humans watching it. It did however maintain a vigil over the area preventing the Usul crew members from getting back to the tunnels and the safety of their ship.

"Sir, it is past time Charlie was supposed to wait for us."

"Yes, I think we may have to shoot our way out. But, that laser rifle its holding is going to make it tough as we are

severely outranged if we try to rush it. We'll have to..."

"More movement coming" Mendez interrupted, tapping the data pad. "Half a dozen bugs and... no..." she muttered... "one human lifesign!"

The two crew members suspected who the human lifesign was even before he came into view. Flanked by a squad of similar sized bugs to the "runt" was a very forlorn looking Charlie. The "runt" they had been watching fell in with the squad escorting the young pilot and the group continued down the path toward the centre of what appeared to be the bug city.

Seeking a better vantage point in an outcropping of rocks, The Captain's eyes lingered on the spot where the escort squad disappeared from sight, a million thoughts rushing through his mind. In a low voice he asked the sensor officer, "Can you track them?"

"Already on it Cap'n. Half a Klick and increasing. Straight towards the centre of the city. Are we going after him?"

The Captain hesitated for a moment, lost in his memories. "I won't leave another crew member behind to be slaughtered," he said still staring towards the centre of the city. He slowly turned his head towards Mendez and said "Let's go get him back!"

----

Charlie was confused, during all those boring Xenobiology classes at the

Academy and all the mundane moments sitting behind the controls of the Usul, He had never fallen asleep on duty before. Why had he fallen so deeply asleep and how had the "bugs" gotten his weapon?

Every so often the small troop would gather up another heavily armed bug so his escort now totalled seven, all armed with laser rifles and sporting sleek bioengineered body armour. He had yet to hear them utter a sound and any communication seemed to be through limb and antennae gestures.

Initially he had a thought that Mendez and the Captain might rescue him in the tunnels. But, his hope had been dashed when he and his escort had used a different route and were now marching down the streets of a large underground city. Their entry into the bug city only served to reinforce the idea that these were going to be his final hours.

----

"There he is," the Captain indicated pointing towards the group of bugs and one Haiken Maru environmental suit disappearing into the largest structure they had seen in the bug city a large elaborate mound. The Usul crew had turned off their active sensors for fear of being discovered and instead had been relying on Charlie and his escort continuing on the same route he had been from the time he entered the city. Using alleys and back streets, and staying in the shadows, the crew had made their way into the centre of the city

without being noticed. The Captain had climbed a short tower just to get some perspective and it was reassuring to see Charlie ahead of them, even if it was only for a few seconds.

After spending a few minutes surveying the mound type building Charlie and his escort had entered, the Captain joined Mendez on street level. "I have an idea," he said before leaning in and explaining to the sensor officer what he had in mind. They double checked their weapons and headed towards the building Charlie had entered.

----

Static filled Charlie's ears as his pupils returned to normal. They had been glazed over and he once again felt like he was waking from a deep sleep.

"Charlie," a voice came through the static. It seemed to be a voice he should know. "Charlie," the vaguely familiar voice repeated.

Still groggy, his heart pounding in his chest, Charlie looked around the dark cavernous room but saw no-one. The only sound being the static coming through his radio.

"Charlie," the voice repeated more urgently.

"Yes?" Charlie said uncertainly.

"Charlie, its Mendez. The Captain and I are here to rescue you," the voice said through the static.

"How... wait... where are you?" Charlie asked the voice.

"Close. I'm jamming all frequencies and sending this on a tight band frequency. We don't have long. What can you tell us about where you are and how you got in?"

Charlie briefly summed up to Mendez everything he could remember going over which rooms he had entered, the halls he had gone down, and where the guards were that he had seen.

"Sit tight Charlie, we'll be there soon." Mendez's voice said right before the static stopped.

Charlie was left alone in silence. His eyes started to glaze over. "No not again," he muttered before he lost consciousness.

----

Between the description Charlie had given them, and the sensor "snapshops" Mendez had gotten by turning on her active sensors briefly every few minutes, the two Usul crew members managed to get to the door of the chamber Charlie was being held in without running into any of the patrolling guards.

The door had been secured by a simple latch on the outside. Being careful to disable the latch, so as to not lock themselves in the room, and so the latch would still appear locked Mendez opened the door. Looking left and then right Mendez and the Captain darted inside. Charlie was standing in the center of the

room, arms hanging limply at his sides, his face down. The rest of the room was shrouded in darkness.

Seeing Charlie, Mendez turned on her active sensors to plot the three of them a route out.

"Charlie," the Captain whispered. "Charlie?"

Raising his head, "Char-lie..." the young pilot said, looking like he was trying to remember. "Yes, that was our name" he said softly. He turned to face the other crew members with glazed over pupils. "My name is Charlie Stephenson" he said with conviction, "First Speaker of Soel, Queen to the Soelien-Twa, and you are our prisoners!"

#### Part 5

The Captain did not know if he was more surprised by Charlie's words or the squads of "runts" appearing from the darkness with the laser rifles at the ready. Looking over at Mendez he could see her analyzing her datapad, its active sensors on full.

"Active camouflage Captain. I'm only showing sensor shadows where they are. Lots of sensor shadows... and more behind us... I'm pretty sure they knew we were coming."

"Please drop your weapons," Charlie said in a monotone voice. "We mean you no harm."

Mendez looked up from her datapad and met the Captain's gaze. Slowly shaking her head she said, "There's just too many."

Again Charlie's monotone voice said, "Please lower your weapons. We mean you no harm."

The two Usul crew members lowered their weapons to the ground. "What now?" the Captain asked.

"You will be allowed to go of course. But I have a message for your leaders..."

"How could you be a spy Charlie?" Mendez interrupted.

"A spy?" Charlie questioned. "No...
Charlie was not a spy but we do need to keep him." Charlie said.

"I don't understand" Mendez said.

"We need Charlie," Charlie said. "He will be well looked after as First Speaker of Soel. I need a voice and Charlie will be that voice."

"Wait a second..." the Captain blurted out. "If you are not Charlie, who are you?"

The previously unseen lights in the room came on and the far wall started sliding up to the roof. Behind the wall a gargantuan sized bug, slightly different from the rest was staring down at the humans.

"We are the Twa," Charlie's monotone voice said "And I am their Queen."

# FLEET HEADQUARTERS HAIKEN MARU HOMEWORLD STARDATE 3188.1

"So let me get this straight" Commander Wilcox said yelling at the two Usul officers standing at attention in front of him. "You encountered an alien race of giant telepathic bugs, found out they are the best miners in the galaxy, and have untold riches in ore deposits. You then left one of your crew members behind to be a mind controlled slave to their queen just so you could return with offers of diplomatic relations with said race?"

"Yes sir" Captain Monkman said looking sheepishly. "But, the Twa don't consider it slavery. Each drone exists to obey the will of the Queen. Queen Soel considers Charlie to be another drone, existing to service her will."

The return of the Usul to Haiken Maru space had created quite a buzz of excitement through the empire. Unfortunately the "loss" of Charlie was not going well and he and Mendez were now facing a naval military courts martial on the charges of dereliction of duty and culpable negligence. Charges they suspected were to protect the image of the Haiken Maru Navy.

Three officers sat in judgment of their not guilty plea, Rear Admiral Osbourne and Fleet Admiral Anderson were well

respected officers that had risen through the ranks with valor. Captain Monkman knew and liked both men. Commander Wilcox, on the other hand, was an example that money could still buy position over competence. Wilcox had taken it upon himself to act like a tight arsed, pencil pushing prick (a position he took naturally to) criticizing every decision the Captain had made.

"How do you justify your actions Captain" Wilcox asked.

"If I thought we could have rescued him we were prepared to do so and would have done it. I stand by my actions at the time. I am responsible for all the members of my crew and take responsibility for leaving Ensign Stephenson behind. However, if the fleet is going to abandon contact with the Twa, risk interstellar war, and mount a rescue mission I would like to volunteer to get him back."

With those words the Admirals briefly looked at each other. Captain Monkman could swear they shared a thought that they would not vocalize before they quickly dismissed he and Mendez to await the verdict.

----

"We have a decision" Admiral Anderson stated peering down at the two remaining Usul crew members. "This Court Martial was convened to gather the facts concerning the crew of the Explorer class ship Usul and the events on planet B157. The circumstances have been

made part of the official record and the Fleet would like to make this statement." The Admiral paused before continuing, "So often a society in which governments have been replaced by greedy megacorporations or one in which each individual is required to be incorporated at birth, the individual gets left behind with little to no concern for human life or decency. Unfortunately sometimes the good of the many outweigh the good of the few. Ensign Charlie Stephenson's sacrifice will benefit the empire a thousandfold. The Ruling Council has decided the Soelien-Twa will take over and expand our Mining Centers, increasing their productivity. This will in turn allow us to increase our Production Centers to build more and bigger ships, increase our tax base, and give us access to intelligence for star systems we have not even seen yet." Again the Admiral paused, "As for your outcome Captain, the court martial finds that you performed adequately given the circumstances and no punishment will be awarded. You both will retain your ranks and continue to serve the Fleet."

"However..." Commander Wilcox added.
"Due to your abandonment of a crew
member..." The Commander paused
ignoring the glares from the two
Admirals. "...The Fleet has decided that
you will forfeit any and all bonuses from
the discovery of the Soelien-Twa. You
are reassigned to the Usul with a new
pilot and ship out for your next tour
tomorrow at 0800. You are dismissed."

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Sitting in the Captains Quarters aboard the Usul, Captain Monkman pulled a note out of his chest pocket passed to him by Admiral Anderson at the conclusion of the official proceedings. As he began to read it again, Mendez announced over the intercom that the ship was ready for departure. Captain Monkman folded the simple piece of paper, and placed it back into his pocket.

The note flatly stated: "We are sorry"

HAIKEN MARU MAPPING EXPEDITION UNCHARTED ASTEROID BELT DESIGNATED B342 STARDATE 3188.5

Captain Monkman looked over at the new pilot, Charlie's replacement. It wasn't that he was a bad pilot, he was even quite likable. But even after exploring planets, asteroids, and other stellar phenomenon for the last few weeks, the Captain thought to himself that the pilot would always be known as Charlie's replacement. "Sir, I think I have something on the Electromagnagraph" Mendez said. "Faint electronics... looks like a repeating pattern. Not naturally occurring."

The new pilot asked, "Should I give us a closer look Captain?"

The Captain and Mendez shared a look before the Captain spoke. "No just make a note of it and I'll include it in the next report."

The Pilot looked at Captain Monkman with a quizzical look, an unspoken question on his face.

The Captain's hand slowly came up and gingerly patted his chest pocket. The pocket that showed the small outline of a folded note within. The Captain wanted to say something. The emotional conflict he was going through showed on his face. He wanted to say he didn't want to lose another crew member. He wanted to scream he <u>couldn't</u> lose another crew member. But all that came out of his mouth was a whisper, "Take us to the next rock."

**End of Story** 

### **Takamo Universe**



Naplian tactical officer aboard warship.

www.TakamoUniverse.com

**Takamo Player Forum** 

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# Lost in the Gaming Wilderness? Searching for a game to play?? DON'T GIVE UP HOPE!!

And God said, Let there be Play By Mail, that mail might be good. And God saw that it was good.

And the evening and the morning were the eighth day.

And God said, Let PBM bring forth creatures after its own kind, games and Game Moderators and Players to play the games.

And God saw it, and it was good.

And the evening and the morning were the ninth day.

And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and mulitply, and fill the envelopes with stamps, that turn orders and turn results should flow both day and night.

And God said, Let there be a PBM list, that players should be able to find the game of their liking.

And the evening and the morning were the tenth day.

Greg Lindahl's

# The PBM List

### Have you visited these gaming communities?



# PBeM - Spiele Die Welt der E-Mail Spiele







# **Analyzing Progress - Part 4**Weighing Our Magazine's Success and Failure

**Charles Mosteller** 

It's been over a year, since the last issue of *Suspense & Decision* magazine was published. When that issue, Issue #9, was published, the intention was for Issue #10 to follow smoothly along the very next month.

Oh, sure, in Issue #9, I even asked, "If I were to shut this magazine down, tomorrow, what would likely happen?"

In an attempt to speculate on what would happen in that eventuality, I suggested that, "Somebody would carry on. Oh, sure, it might all boil down to a single, solitary individual, but my gut instinct tells me that a true paladin of the PBM faith would appear on the scene, intent upon restoring the spark of hope in the PBM faithful."

I further stated in that issue that, were I to cease publication of Suspense & Decision magazine, and particularly if I were to do so abruptly, "It would jar the senses and the sensibilities of the PBM masses that have begun gathering anew to rally around a PBM magazine that, for all of its many attendant and self-inflicted flaws, had managed to make a go of things and to get the PBM ball rolling, again."

Readers of *Suspense & Decision* know what really happened, though. The magazine did cease publication. The

march of words was halted. Suspense & Decision was suddenly no more.

The line in the proverbial sand had been crossed. That which was predicted was not to be forthcoming. Mired in my own words! Oh, the indignity of it all.

Of course, perspective is everything. At least, it can be. If *Suspense & Decision* magazine were truly dead, if it had, indeed, actually and honest-to-God died, then how do you explain what you are reading, right now?

I'm not the only one mired in my words, it seems.

Apparently, somebody did decide to carry on, after all. Issue #10 stands delivered into your electronic hands.

A whole year wasted! We could have been twice as far along, by now. If that isn't failure, then what is?

Gone for an entire year! Abruptly disappearing, leaving a trail of months with no issue to sate the thirst of the PBM hungry. Truly, how can that not properly qualify as failure?

What, then, should one make out of reappearing out of the blue? If that isn't success, then what is?

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. So, here we are - again!

Trying to hand the entire enchilada off to Bernd proved to be fumble - and fumbles come with a cost attached to them. Our readership paid the price. Suddenly and without warning, you were compelled by circumstances to find other things to do.

Won't you join me in burning Bernd in effigy?

The truth be told, though, the entire fiasco was more my fault than Bernd's. Not that I don't want to see Bernd burned in effigy, mind you, but there was just so much for our readership to gain from Bernd taking over the helm of this magazine.

He's young. His writing is splendid. His prose is energetic.

Statistically, he is likely to live more years than yours truly. That should matter to you, if you favor longevity, where the publication of this magazine stretching into the future is concerned.

No great conspiracy transpired to bring about an end to publishing of the magazine. People speculated various things, of course. Sometimes, though, the truth turns out to be a lot more mundane than the speculation.

The shutdown, if you want to call it that, was a good example of what can happen when you miss a deadline.

An ordinary little deadline.

What danger or mishap could possibly transpire from missing a publication deadline? If recent experience is any

indicator, quite a lot, actually.

Everyday life certainly plays a role in the outcome of things. It was no different, here. But, when I sit back and boil it all down to the bare essence, everyday life merely filled in the gap created by not holding to the publication deadline.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. Months, as it turned out, turned into a year. Unplanned though it was, Issue #10 ended up languishing in a state of suspended animation.

The hand-off of the magazine to Bernd was attempted, at all, because of the enormous positive potential that I saw in what that could mean for both the magazine and the readership. A fumble is a fumble, though, no matter what might have been intended or hoped for.

The fumble is history, now. It cannot be reversed. It cannot be undone. Suffice it to say that I was not content to let the magazine end like that.

Somewhere along the way, I became attached to it. I enjoyed seeing each issue come together. For all of its flaws and shortcomings, I still felt like something positive was being accomplished. Each month that it wasn't published, however, I felt like something was missing.

Thus, the magazine is now back!

But, it will be changing. It will continue to evolve, just as it has been evolving all along. For better or for worse, even the long lapse in publication is a part of that evolution.

It happened, so now the challenge before us is to figure out a path forward. Where do we go from here?

With that in mind, here are some of the things that I am considering, as we finally close this long overdue Issue #10 out, and head towards Issue #11.

#### **Incorporation**

The very sound of the word makes me lose my appetite. But, incorporating is probably a prudent thing to do, for a couple of different reasons.

One, for potential liability reasons.

Two, for potential tax reasons.

Incorporation is something that I think is probably in the best interests of the magazine, from a long term perspective.

On a purely personal level, though, it's just not something that I find to be particularly motivating.

Thus far, taxes have not been an issue for the magazine. It has no revenue stream, after all. But, heading forward into the future, developing one is something that is probably in the best interests of the magazine.

#### **Revenue Stream**

The magazine has been a hobby, of sorts, to me. I didn't create it as a business venture. Rather, I sought more to fill a gap. Paper Mayhem was gone. Flagship magazine was no more. I just felt that there needed to be something,

magazine-wise, to talk about and to promote PBM gaming.

The point of transitioning the magazine to where it develops some kind of revenue stream is not to generate a profit, per se. Rather, I need a way to fund art for the interior pages of the magazine.

Without more art, the magazine will remain very limited in what it can achieve. More art is necessary, in order to transform the magazine into something with greater entertainment value.

We want to regain lost readership, and we also want to grow new readership. A revenue stream will help facilitate accomplishing such.

With a revenue stream, though, tax issues suddenly become very relevant. I don't need any tax headaches, just as no one needs any tax headaches.

The magazine doesn't need a large revenue stream, but it can benefit substantially, I feel, from even a rather modest one.

#### **Crowd Funding**

The magazine has been a free publication for readers, since Issue #1. I have no intention of changing this. In fact, I think that charging for the magazine would be a very counterproductive approach, one that could greatly impede our ability to grow the magazine's readership base.

To me, keeping the cost of the magazine to the reader at free remains a nobrainer.

By maintaining the 'cost is free' approach employed, heretofore, the path to growing the readership base remains wide and unobstructed. I feel that more people are likely to give the magazine a try, if it is free to begin with, regardless of whether they end up liking the content or the coverage, when all is said and done.

Also, Suspense & Decision heretofore hasn't charged for ads. So, if you don't charge for the magazine, itself, and if you don't charge for ads, as well, then you can't convert either of those approaches directly into generating a revenue stream. The necessity to pursue other options quickly begins to manifest itself.

We could go the donations route. In fact, when I first started the magazine up, there were individuals who wanted to donate. But, I didn't want to deal with potential tax issues, so I tried to dissuade people from donating.

Not that the enthusiasm and appreciation for what we were doing was not appreciated, mind you. Nothing could have been further from the truth!

It's quite pleasant, flattering even, when people enjoy what you are doing so much that they want to donate, in order to help out or to keep things going.

Over the last year, during the time that

the magazine was not being published, one thing that I did spend a little bit of time doing was learning more about crowd funding.

I see crowd funding as holding enormous potential - not just to fund art for future issues of the magazine, but also as a way to re-grow the player base for PBM and other forms of turn-based gaming.

In a word, it's another way to go about networking with people.

Plus, it also provides a mechanism whereby the expense of funding art for the magazine (which will increase the magazine's entertainment value, which in turn will increase its appeal to a broader cross section of people, thereby facilitating growing the player base for such games as our magazine covers) can effectively be dispersed over more people than a donations-based approach would allow for.

I already know from my own previous first-hand experience that it doesn't take a lot of money to produce a PBM magazine in digital format. It requires more time than money.

Therefore, I think that such can and will work to the magazine's benefit, if and when we try to crowd fund future issues.

In other words, our approach and philosophy to date will make possible the setting of relatively modest, very achievable funding goals for crowd funding campaigns, if we pursue that route.

Even a modestly successful crowd funding campaign could conceivably fund multiple future issues of *Suspense & Decision* magazine. The more successful a given crowd funding campaign for the magazine turns out to be, the less often that we would need to pursue additional crowd funding undertakings.

Of all of the potential revenue generation methods for the magazine that I have pondered, crowd funding is the one that strikes me as being the most viable option to pursue.

The object is not to maximize revenue flow, but rather, to find a viable route to achieving a rather limited sub-set of objectives - namely, find a way to fund more art for the magazine, that its entertainment value can be increase by way of that mechanism.

Plus, being no stranger to the backer end of things on numerous different crowd funding campaigns, I think that my experience as a backer would complement my understanding of how to tailor things on the creator end of a crowd funding campaign. I like to think that I have learned something along the way, while backing a variety of different crowd funding project types.

Every crowd funding venture needs a crowd of its own, in order to reach its funding goal. Modest funding goals allow you to reach your funding goal quicker, and they increase your likelihood of succeeding in the first place.

Crowd funding would also allow us a

mechanism to showcase both the magazine, itself, and the games that we cover to people who otherwise might likely never encounter either the magazines or the games.

Because we would already have no less than ten issues, now, to list on a crowd funding project page, I think that having that experience and those accomplishments that we could visually show people would increase our prospects of success with potential backers.

Plus, along the way, we might just be fortunate enough to make some new friends, as well as tap into some new creative energies, for the benefit of both turn-based gaming and the magazine.

#### **Advertisements**

Advertising is a more complicated piece of the puzzle. On a purely personal level, I have no more desire to charge for ads run than I do to charge for the magazine, itself. Small or one-man game companies often have little to no budget set aside for advertising purposes, and particularly this is the case when they are just starting out and not yet had time to establish themselves in the market.

Compared to ad space in previous PBM magazines, or compared to ad space in contemporary gaming magazines, Suspense & Decision's ad rates are pretty generous, I think. They are in the advertiser's favor - since we don't charge anything for including ads within the pages of our magazine. We haven't to

date, yet, anyway.

One of the underlying reasons why I decided to not charge for ads in the beginning was to facilitate game companies being able to utilize the funds saved from advertising to create ads, or to have someone else create ads for them.

To the sin of being a PBM enthusiast, I freely confess.

Yet, in his article titled, "The Globalisation of PBM" that appeared in Issue #104 of Flagship magazine, the self-styled evil globalising genius of Harlequin Games, Sam Roads, proclaimed as part of his praising of the digital revolution and as part of his advocacy of the future of PBM being megacorporeal, "Initially the players were aghast. Their treasured home-spun, local, home-town, traditional, salt-of-theearth, still-does-things-on-386s PBM firm had been swallowed up by a hegemonic, culture-stifling, multinational, assimilating, Ronald MacDonald-loving UberCorp. However, with each passing turn they discovered a startlingly startling discovery - it was better this way! They got better service. They got code updates more often than once every eclipse of the sun. They got a PBM firm which wasn't about to fold. And perhaps most importantly of all, they got a firm with a bigger budget for advertising in leading PBM journals."

That was back in the year 2003, more than a decade ago. Here we are, some fifteen years later, and there aren't exactly a lot of PBM journals still in existence, the last time that I checked.

Since this PBM magazine doesn't bother to charge for ads in the first place, I'm not bothered by the prospect of bigger budgets for advertising being spent advertising in other magazines or in other ways. If it works for companies, all the more power to them.

Yet, I am all too aware of the dilemma faced by small or one-man gaming businesses. Not only may they have no actual budget to allocate funds for advertising in magazines or in any other medium, at least some of them may well face the double dilemma of not having any funds available to allocate to creating (or to having someone else create for them) ads for their games, as well.

These days, games are everywhere. They're all over the place. Independent game creators are alive and well, to be certain.

If you have a game that you want people to play, or which you at least want people to give an initial try to, then it greatly behooves you to figure out a way to make ads happen. In order to play your game, they have to know about it, first.

When all PBM magazines faded from the scene, previously, and I wanted there to be a PBM magazine in existence and thriving, again, I ultimately concluded that I had to find a way to make that happen.

To be sure, it has been an imperfect path that this magazine has tread. The horizon of tomorrow remains as uncertain, as ever. If nobody else would write articles, then by God, I would do it myself.

It was by doing it, that others then joined in. From nothing, ultimately came something.

As editor of this PBM magazine, I can tell you, based upon my first-hand experience to date, that the single hardest thing about advertising YOUR games is getting YOU to send an ad to ME.

Having created and run my own small scale PBM game once upon a time in the distant past, rest assured, my heart and my sympathies lie with small and oneman game companies.

You want someone to advertise your game. Me? I want to advertise your game.

You need advertising that you can afford. I provide advertising to you completely free of charge.

All things considered, I think that it's a pretty fair arrangement, one that holds a lot of potential to benefit both game companies and this magazine, alike - and gamers, to boot.

The never-ending quibble about what to call PBM in the modern day and age doesn't bother me - even though I do like participating in ongoing discussions on that subject. I am quite comfortable

debating the value of that term, and I am quite willing to engage in debate and discussion with those on all sides of this issue. In fairness, some consider it less an issue than a distraction. Fair enough.

Truth be told, there are far worse things in life than people engaging in extended discussion on topics of interest to them, regardless of what the rest of the world may or may not think on the very same subject.

But, where the PBM industry's current approach to advertising is concerned, I dare suggest that the industry could do far worse than to reconsider anew the ads that it has staked its outreach to the gaming public at large on.

If you view PBM to be dead, though, then why bother advertising a genre of gaming that you view to be dead, you might ask?

If you're still running PBM games, though, then it strikes me that you're continuing to run them for a reason.

When I flip back through old back issues of Flagship and Paper Mayhem magazines, do you know what really reaches out and grabs my eyes?

It's not the articles. It's the ads.

Back in the day, those ads were the face of play by mail gaming. In the golden heyday of PBM gaming, the ads were frequent, the ads were many, the ads were visually vibrant!

These days, a great fog of complacency

has settled all about the PBM industry. Has the industry grown so feeble, or has it become so detached from the games that it offers for play to the public, that it can no longer muster the will or the means to put forward a better face?

From a pure business perspective, it may not make good financial sense to have new advertisements crafted by artists for games that have seen both time and gaming tastes pass them by. I get that. I grasp that. I comprehend that point of view.

But, by the same token, how can one realistically expect for there to be a resurgence in PBM gaming, if those who form the PBM industry, itself, give up on advertising?

Suspense & Decision magazine is back, for the very simple reason that I didn't give up on it. It's back, because Bernd didn't give up on it. It's back, because you - our beloved and opinionated readers - didn't give up on it.

Honestly, I really think that the core problem isn't so much that PBM is any less valid a gaming medium, than it once was, or that play by mail games are any less entertaining a gaming experience, than they ever were. Rather, I think that the PBM industry invests very little of itself - in terms of time, energy, and money - in the advertising component of the PBM equation, currently.

As always, there exists a multiplicity of competing interests. Many things compete for a game moderator's or a

game company's finite set of funds.

Hand-moderation is as tedious and as time-consuming as it ever was. Programming to achieve computer-moderation still doesn't come cheap. Plus, unsurprisingly, it remains time-consuming, too. Businesses, even game businesses, can't afford to simply stand still, while both time and technology, not to mention gamers' tastes, pass them by. They must improvise. They have to adapt.

PBM gaming had a good long run at it. Why not let it rest in peace? Why not just enjoy the memories of it that we do have, and call it a day?

Besides, what difference can just one person make? Whether that one person is me or whether that one person is you, ultimately, what real difference does it make? We can't turn back time. We can't undo technology. Things change. Change is one of the few constants in life.

I have sit and 'listened' to lectures in writing on the subject, down through the years. With each flip of the page of an old PBM magazine, I run the risk of encountering the mantra that PBM is dead.

You know what, though? It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter.

It may well require a miracle to revive an industry that has allowed itself to fade. It wouldn't be the first industry in need of reinventing itself.

New advertising for an old industry isn't

a panacea, by any stretch of the imagination. Make no mistake, new advertising, alone, isn't sufficient to remedy what ails this old girl of a profession.

But, then again, maybe what play by mail gaming needs isn't so much an actual honest-to-God miracle as what it needs is just some good old-fashioned hard work, dedication, and innovation.

If advertising isn't key to grabbing people's eyes and gaining hold of their attention, then it really shouldn't matter if this magazine continues to embrace free advertising - or any form of advertising, at all.

If your games that you continue to offer to the public at large to play are outdated, or if they never were really all that much to begin with, then it probably makes no real sense to advertise them, at all, any longer.

In Issue #104 of Flagship magazine, Sam Roads said something else. He said quite a few things, actually, things which I thought were interesting, but he made a particularly salient point, when he said, "And, worst of all, gone the thump of turn hitting the doormat after the postie has finally decided to let you have your turn."

Worst of all, huh?

Anyone who thinks that I occupy my time pleading for a renaissance of PBM's previous golden era is in for a rude shock. That's not my goal. That has never really been my goal. That will never be my goal.

I have no power to raise a dead PBM industry from the many graves that it has dug for itself. Far be it from me to stand in the way of game companies and game moderators that wish to persuade and to convince the gaming public that the gaming product that they have on offer, at present, is dead.

The Age that came before can never be reclaimed!

In spite of the passage of many years - decades, even - I remain wholly unpersuaded that the postal medium of gaming has been fully explored, much less fully exploited.

The Internet is the new norm.

From my perspective, that is to PBM's advantage, not to its disadvantage. It posits the possibility of postal gaming becoming a new kid on the block - again.

Entire generations of gamers have never experienced the joy of the turn hitting the doormat. Who knows? Maybe actual physical turn results haven't lost all of their magic, just yet.

Boxing isn't just about your own strengths and weaknesses, as a boxer. Part of the challenge that a boxer faces lies in discerning the strengths and weaknesses of his or her opponent, and in figuring out how to overcome those strengths while simultaneously exploiting

those weaknesses.

PBM, as a medium of gaming, has its own share of strengths. It has its own weaknesses, also, yet so does the Internet. But, as long as you look at Goliath, and all that you see is an unassailable giant, then that's a fight that you can never win - that you should never expect to win. That's a fight that you can't win, not because Goliath is unbeatable, but rather, because it is a fight that you don't have your heart in. Goliath doesn't have to defeat you, if you resign yourself to defeat.

It is up to us - to you and to I - to carve out of nothingness a New Age. To Hell with renaissance! Let us build something new from scratch - together.

The lack of a PBM industry didn't stop Rick Loomis and others, back in the day. It shouldn't stop us, now.

If we dream the impossible dream, so be it!

From my perspective, the current status quo of the PBM industry - the state of the industry, so to speak - is of substantially less importance than the availability of building blocks to forge a new future out of. Compared to the nothingness that Loomis and his contemporaries of that day and age were faced with, building blocks of success are plenteous, today.

If I could create a small scale PBM game using a 386SX personal computer with one megabyte of RAM and a dot matrix printer, why couldn't the vastly more capable computer and color laser printer

that I possess, today, yield something at least as interesting as what I was able to wrought back then?

The potential for exploiting the postal medium as a medium for active gaming extends far beyond just what I, as one person, could potentially do, were I to set my mind to it.

No medium of gaming occupies the entire field that is entertainment in game form. Internet gaming may be dominant, in terms of sheer numbers, today, but even there, it is actually a collection of a vast array of different gaming mechanisms. The Internet hasn't made board gaming any the less enjoyable. Likewise, it hasn't made a game of cards, nor face-to-face role playing games less enjoyable.

Why, then, should I believe that the Internet has somehow negated the postal medium's ability to deliver an enjoyable and viable gaming experience?

Quite plain and simply, it hasn't.

If that's the case, then why am I not playing in any PBM games, currently?

That's a fair question.

IF PBM is truly dead, though, then why should I - or anyone else for that matter - bother with trying to play games that the PBM industry currently believes to be effectively dead and not worth the bother?

For that matter, why bother with publishing a PBM magazine, in this day

and age, if the PBM industry, itself, can't be bothered to make advertising of its games a priority? Why bother with resuming publishing a PBM magazine, after an entire year's worth of hiatus, if complacency is to continue to reign across the realm that is play by mail?

Defeatist thinking won't fix what ails the industry, whether on the game side or on the publishing side.

And on the publishing side of things, here at *Suspense & Decision*, we fell off the track.

But, we're back!

The question that remains, though, is: *Are you?* 

Are our readers back? Is the PBM industry, itself, back? Is everyone ready to move forward and try to put the spark back into games that one captured the imagination - and sometimes still do?

This article is growing long, and I sense that Rick Loomis is already reaching for the duct tape. Enough, already! Just conclude the damned article, already!

Success takes many forms, as does failure. Getting people onboard - whether they be game companies, game moderators, even seasoned PBM players - is hard. It's difficult. It's time-consuming. It tires you out.

Issue #10 includes within its pages some success. Sure, it mentions failure on numerous different pages, and in various different ways. But, failure is par for the

course in life. None of us are a stranger to it.

Which makes me wonder, anew, why the PBM industry has allowed itself to lose some of its once mighty swagger? That swagger, that unmistakable sense of confidence, is not something that I can pull from my pocket and hand it to you.

Mining for success is a lot like mining for gold. Sure, we would all like to hit the mother lode, where PBM gaming is concerned, but one thing that has become obvious to me over the last ten issues of publishing this magazine is that we're more likely to encounter gold dust than gold bars.

The glint of success takes many forms. In Issue #10, we finally see someone from *Rolling Thunder Games* send us something to print. Such a pity that so many other game companies and game moderators did not follow Russ Norris' lead. A few did, but look at who all did not. To work, the PBM Activity Corner needs to be active. *It needs YOU!* 

I would like to build on this, if at all possible - both with Rolling Thunder Games and with others.

Rolling Thunder offers a game for play called *SuperNova*. NASA says that a supernova is the explosion of a star. It is the largest explosion that takes place in space, and that supernovas are often seen in other galaxies. Seen by whom, though?

Advertising allows your games to get seen. Won't you join us?

## **PBM HIVEMIND**

## Where PBM Players Gather

#### **PBM Forums**

- Agema Publications
- Alamaze
- Briny en Garde!
- Cruenti Dei
- Duel2
- Empires at War 1805
- Fallen Empires
- Fall of Rome
- Fantasya
- Far Horizons
- Flying Buffalo Gamer
- KJC Games
- Lords of Conquest
- Madhouse UK
- Middle-earth PBM
- Midgard
- Midnight/MU
- PBeM Spiele
- Phoenix: BSE
- Rimworlds
- The Road of Kings
- Rolling Thunder Games, Inc.
- Takamo Universe

### PBM on Yahoo! Discussion Groups

- AtlantisDev
- Cluster Wars
- DungeonWorld
- Forgotten Realms
- London EnGarde
- Legends PBM
- Midgard
- Olympia
- The Tribes of Crane

#### PBM on Google+ Discussion Groups PBM on Facebook

- Galac-Tac Alamaze
  - Clash of Legends
  - <u>Diplomacy on</u> USAK
  - Duel2
  - Empires at War 1805
  - Fallen Empires
    PBE
  - Flying Buffalo, Inc.
  - Forgotten
     Realms
  - Galactic
     Prisoners
  - It's A Crime
  - <u>Phoenix:</u>
     Beyond the
     Stellar Empire
  - Rimworlds
  - Rolling Thunder Games
  - Starweb
  - <u>Takamo</u>
     Universe

### PBM on Facebook Discussion Groups

- <u>Duel2</u>
- <u>Fallen</u><u>Empires Chat</u>Room
- Fall of Rome
- Hyborian War
- Lands of Nevron
- <u>Legends</u>
- Middle-Earth PBM
- Phoenix: BSE
- Play by Mail
   Games
- <u>Postal</u>
   <u>Diplomacy</u>
   Zine Archive
- Science

   Fiction Writers
   and Artists
   Group for
   Takamo

   Universe
- Star Fleet Warlord

Play By Mail - In pursuit of imagination-based gaming!

# Where We're Heading...

Houston, we are at T plus ten. I say, again, T plus ten. Do you copy, over?

Houston, we have a problem. We have experienced a loss of thrust, Houston.
Situation has begun to stabilize. Please advise.

Wow! What do I write? What do I say? Where do I even begin?

At long last, we have arrived in orbit around our double digit destination. It's taken substantially longer to get here than we initially planned for. Yet, we have made it ten issues in, now, in spite of the delay incurred in getting here.

But, we do not have touchdown on Issue #12, yet. Still, we have reacquired the target. We are now a mere two issues away from the goal of a dozen issues, but we are light years away from making that target within a single year's time. The time frame for arrival at the objective has doubled. The cause? Human error.

Nonetheless, Issue #10 marks the arrival at the double digit milestone of this mission. In the greater scheme of things, it is but a single milestone out of many. Let us celebrate this achievement, nonetheless! We have arrived here, together.

Where do we go from here? Where are we heading?

Well, now that this issue is finally out the door, we focus our efforts anew, and we try to reach that goal of a dozen issues.

And then?

And then we head off into deep space, into territory that will, for us, be uncharted space. My personal hope is that it will be more of a freewheeling sort of

adventure. We're either going to find life out there, or it's going to be a lonely journey.

I don't know what our assistant editor has in mind. Bernd may be thinking of mutiny, for all that I know. But, that's what they make airlocks for, isn't it?

Some gave up on us, no doubt. To them, we became lost in space. Danger, Will Robinson!

Hell, I'm sure that we, ourselves, felt like goners more than once, in the last year. We were stranded.

Fortunately, though, our collective sense of genius saved the day. Hip hip, hooray!

LORD knows that it is only in the collective sense that we would have any claim to any form of genius, at all. Individually, all that we really have claim to is

that we let our readership down.

As the captain of this ship, I have the conn. I also had the conn on that fateful day - the day that we got blown off course by a solar storm of incredible not-so-incredible magnitude.

Of course, we could sit and dwell on this failure for another year, to pay it its proper due, or we can try to regain our composure and head on our merry way.

I like the sound of that our merry way.

After all, we've had a little fun on this little journey of ours together, so far, haven't we? I like to think that we have.

To be certain, there is some degree of work involved in putting a magazine together, issue after issue. But, that work is merely a means to an end.

If the end isn't fun, if there is to be no sense of enjoyment on this trek together, then pray tell me, what is the whole point of it all? So, I've decided to not be too hard on the crew.
Other than Bernd, I won't be making an example out of any of them.

Come, Bernd, and don the red shirt. We all know what happens to the guys wearing the red shirts, right?

When I sit down to write these things, these articles for the magazine, I never really know what I intend to say. Rather, it's mainly an exercise in jabbering off the top of my head.

We're going to need to take an inventory, of course. There will have to be a head count, just to see who is still with us for the long trek that still lies out ahead of us. What I'm supposed to do, if some heads are missing, I haven't a clue. But, you heard the captain - Headcount, people!

Sound off!

I spent the bulk of yesterday, which was a Sunday, trying to repair this ship, so that this issue could finally make

its way to you, our readership.

Coincidentally enough, yesterday was the last day of my vacation. I had taken some time off. I didn't go anywhere. I had intended to just relax. I will be damned, though, if yesterday didn't end up tiring me out.

I started early. I stayed up late. The ship was in a sad state of repair. But, as you can see, we managed to get things cobbled together.

I'm not sure what you waited a whole year for. Was it worth the wait? Probably not. But, then again, maybe not everyone shares that sentiment.

The tone of our criticism in our articles may seem a bit combative, at times, but make no mistake about it. Ours is still primarily a mission of exploration.

PBM - the final frontier. We are Suspense & Decision, and we have returned. We come in peace. *Prepare to be boarded!* 



### Ever wonder who these two guys were?

How did the cover artist come up with them?











What kind of front cover

## would YOU draw

for Suspense & Decision magazine??



# READER SURVEY

- 1. What was your favorite article from this issue and why?
- 2. What's the worst turn-based game of any kind that you've ever tried and why?
- 3. Should an awards system for PBM or turn-based games be implemented?
- 4. On a scale of 0-to-10 (10 being best), rate this issue.
- 5. What era/time period would you like to see a new play by mail game created to cover?



- 6. Who is the best game opponent that you've ever faced in your favorite PBM game?
- 7. What would make you want to write articles for Suspense & Decision magazine?
- 8. What's your favorite card game and why?
- 9. What's your favorite board game and why?
- 10. What's your favorite role playing game and why?

Send your Reader Survey responses for this issue to:

**GrimFinger@GrimFinger.Net** 

DON'T DELAY - *RESPOND NOW!!* 

**Have you visited the Phoenix: B.S.E. Forum?** 

# Suspense & Decision

www.PlayByMail.Net

