

Suspense & Decision

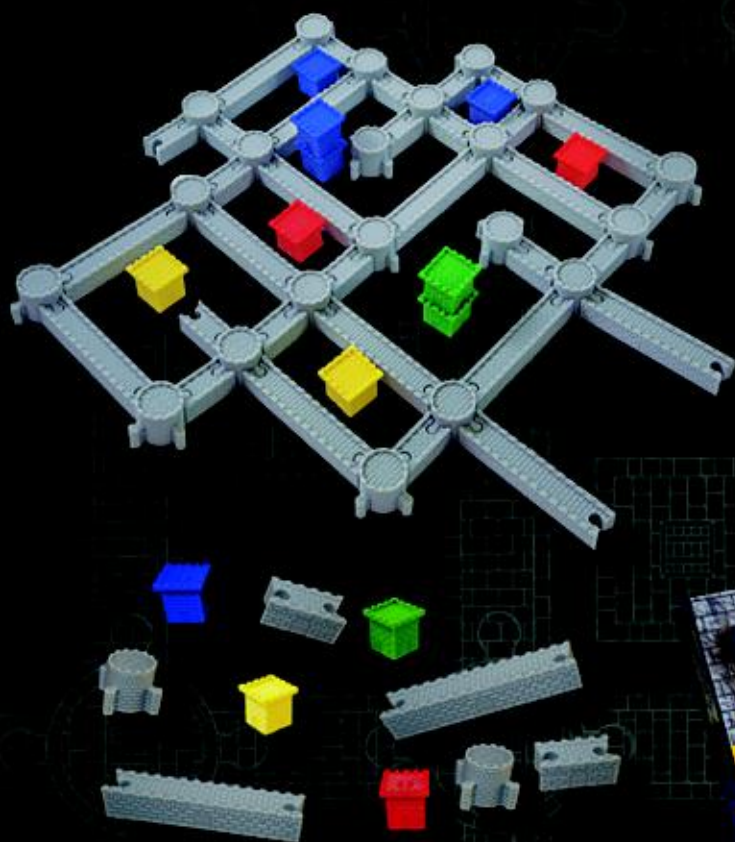
Mind-Numbing Eighth Issue!!

ISSUE
8

JUNE 2014



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Suspense & Decision Magazine

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Pardon our dust – Suspense & Decision magazine is under construction. Charles has invited some visually abusive layout tests to be conducted here on these hallowed grounds of PBM goodness, and I eagerly seized the opportunity to put the one graphic design class I ever took to practical use. As anyone who has ever done any – and I mean “any” – amount of desktop publishing can tell you, the hours fairly zoom past your eyes as you attempt to wrangle fonts and shapes into something vaguely useful. Perhaps I ought to have toiled away all month like the ant that Charles is, rather than frolic around like some PBM grasshopper until the autumn of our current publishing cycle is upon me. Alas, I hope to be given another chance next month to extend and improve on S&D's production qualities. In the meantime, enjoy these eminently worthy contributions to our beloved hobby, and please consider making your own contributions for Issue #9. I promise to have the dust cleared away by then! – **Bernd**

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Nails in the Coffin

Why PBM won't stay dead

Charles Mosteller

Being the editor of a PBM magazine in the 21st Century is akin to being a cross between a sleuth and a grave robber. I keep on hearing about how play by mail gaming is dead, but every time that I try to find the corpse, the damned thing keeps moving.

In Issue # 7, we featured something new, a section called the Mini-View: Interview In Miniature. The quote on the right from the El Presidente of RSI, Lee Kline, is traceable to her response to the question posed for Mini-View # 1.

"Unlike most," she said.

Thus, most PBM companies' respective business models no longer revolve around the postal mail. I can hear Rick McDowell of Enlightened Age Entertainment, Inc., the creator of Alamaze and advocate of moving the industry away from use of the PBM term to something else, declaring victory, even now.

But, not so fast. Not so fast!

In his response to that same Mini-View question, Rick advocated at substantially greater length in favor of the PBM industry embracing something that he called Episodic Strategy Gaming.

Yet, for all of the various takes on the question under consideration in that

"Perhaps we are not the ones this question is directed to, as our business model still revolves around the postal mail, unlike most."

- Lee Kline,
Reality Simulations, Inc.

Mini-View dialogue for one and all to read and consider at length, how many others who participated in it advocated in favor of, or even mentioned, the term "episodic," in their respective responses?

Just one. Myself. And even then, I only mentioned the term in the context of explaining how I intermingle with descriptive terms freely.

The title of this article, minus its subtitle, is, "Nails in the Coffin." Nails, as in plural. Nail, anyone?

In other words, does anyone out there need or want a nail driven into a coffin - the coffin of their particular object of gaming affection?

A few years back, during the posting of an online editorial that I posted on the

PlayByMail.Net website, I said the following:

I'm not here to save the play by mail industry from a final death, nor am I here as a harbinger of a revival of the hobby of postal gaming.

SOURCE:

<http://playbymail.net/mybb/showthread.php?tid=4>

And, to be quite frank with anyone and everyone reading this article, I'm not really all that interested in driving nails into anyone's coffin.

I think that I am being quite generous when I say that it is rather obvious on its face that play by mail gaming has suffered a decline in its player base. Reality Simulations is about as close to a pure postal gaming company as one is likely to find remaining from the Old Guard PBM companies that once dotted the landscape of gaming entertainment, and RSI's own president makes clear that the business models of most PBM companies now revolve around something else.

Rick McDowell's core problem, with regard to advocacy of episodic, isn't that he has to convince me or this magazine that he is correct. Rather, it's others that he has to convince - lots and lots of other people, namely, the gaming public at large.

From my perspective, Rick has chosen a term - episodic - that is a word that, by and large, doesn't reside within the day-to-day vocabulary of most people.

Episodic isn't even a root word, but rather, a word derived from yet another word - episode. Of episodic or episode, which of those two words do you think is more likely to be used by an average person on an average day?

In his response to Mini-View # 1, there were a couple of things that Rick McDowell said that caught my eye. One of these things was:

"If you are trying to grow the hobby, you have lost the war already. PBM? Absolutely not."

Suffice it to say that I hold a different view.

On the one hand, even if the war has already been lost, I'm not so sure that I am the one who lost it. But, beyond that narrow take on his words, the mere fact that Rick McDowell might be prepared to concede defeat does not mean that myself or anyone else necessarily has to concede along with him.

On the other hand, even if I assume that Rick is right, and that the war is lost, already, who or what is to say that there can be only one war?

World War I was the war to end all wars, wasn't it? Did that stop World War II from transpiring?

As one who continuously resorts to war terminology in articulating my thoughts on play by mail gaming, Rick McDowell's war comment in Mini-View # 1 immediately snagged my attention.

The other thing that Rick said in Mini-View # 1 that really stood out was where he asked:

"The main point is how to communicate in a single phrase what the hobby is about, in order to be able to reach new players. Is it not?"

If that is the case, then it strikes me that one would likely be very well served to choose their words most carefully, where deciding on what that single phrase is to be, if a single phrase is to be their fate.

Is a word that is not common to the average individual's daily vocabulary the right word to serve as the primary vehicle to communicate what the hobby is about?

For that matter, what is "the hobby" of which Rick McDowell speaks? It is a term framed in singular. It is a term that implies commonality. It seems to me that the hobby, itself, is not really what is in question. Rather, merely the words that we utilize to describe what it is that we, as a hobby and as a community of gamers, gravitate toward, as far as the core essence of the games that we play is concerned.

In other words, we seem to be quibbling over details, even as there seems to be much unity that inheres in the types of games for which we advocate, both individually and collectively.

Once upon a time ago, I used to fiddle around with words. Occasionally, I still do. One such instance was for none other than Rick McDowell, himself, for a

project known as [*Kingdoms of Arcania*](#).

Something that I wrote, then, comes to mind, now.

"At the Dawn of Time, the gods crafted Arcania from their own essence, and many were they that stirred the pot of Creation. From this broiling stew of divine essence, an abundance of life was breathed into the world."

- The Mist of Creation

In a way, what we as a hobby and as a community of gamers and game enthusiasts are doing is crafting a presence - a greater presence - on the gaming scene, from out of our own essence.

While unity, on its face, is often an attractive concept, I cannot help but to wonder whether a broiling stew of essence is preferable to unity of terminology, where the advancement of our shared hobby is concerned.

I find myself questioning whether the main point is, as Rick suggested, to communicate in a single phrase what the

hobby is about. What makes that so?
What if that assertion is wrong?

Men have searched for El Dorado. They have searched for the Holy Grail. What if this single phrase for which the hobby searches doesn't exist, though? What then?

From my perspective, PBM isn't a demon that needs to be exorcised from the gaming world's Vocabulary of the Modern.

Becoming fixated on it doesn't clone a new variant of it. Obsessing over it won't replicate one, either. I suppose that it boils down to how much time and effort and energy that one wants to divert to pursuit of such a single phrase as whatever we each might envision to be desirable and preferable and (should I dare say it?) perfect.

One thing is clear - when and if that perfect single phrase is found, the entire hobby and industry will be good to go. Free bubble up and rainbow stew, anyone?

But, until then, what do we do?

I got fed up with there being no PBM magazine in existence, and I decided to launch one of my own. It's name wasn't what was originally envisioned - by any of us, myself included. Yet, here you are, reading it, just the same, regardless of what you think about the name of it.

If I had waited until we had agreement on a name for it, then you wouldn't be reading Issue # 8, right now. If PBM is a

lemon of an acronym, then the thing that I don't understand is why we aren't making lemonade out of it?

Once upon a time ago, somehow or other, our preferred style of gaming was bequeathed a handy little acronym that described this form of gaming as play by mail - PBM.

In his article from many years back titled, [*"PBM Design in the 90's,"*](#) no less a figure than Rick McDowell, himself, said, and I quote:

"A pbm game should take advantage of the relative sophistication of its customers. No gamer first plays pbm games. All have come from role playing, board games (esp. war games), or possibly computer games."

- Rick McDowell

It seems to me that the relative sophistication of such gamers shouldn't handicap our hobby by necessitating reliance upon communicating to them what the hobby is about via a single phrase. From my perspective, the industry and the hobby have bigger fish

to fry. Communicating effectively is of vastly greater importance than communicating what the hobby is about via a single phrase.

PBM is an acronym comprised of but three little letters. It's less than a phrase, actually, less than a word, even.

Yet, it is an acronym that packs a substantial punch. That punch is sophistication - and it runs through the bones of our hobby's games.

A single phrase is desirable, for brevity's sake, for convenience's sake, for marketing's sake. Yet, an acronym like PBM has brevity in spades. What is it that is desired? Less letters? Or a different set of letters?

I suggest to one and all that gamers with sophisticated tastes in gaming are more than capable of comprehending sophisticated explanations of games and game types. They'll be capable of grasping it. They'll get it! After all, they're not really any different than those of us who have enjoyed playing such games for years - or even decades - on end.

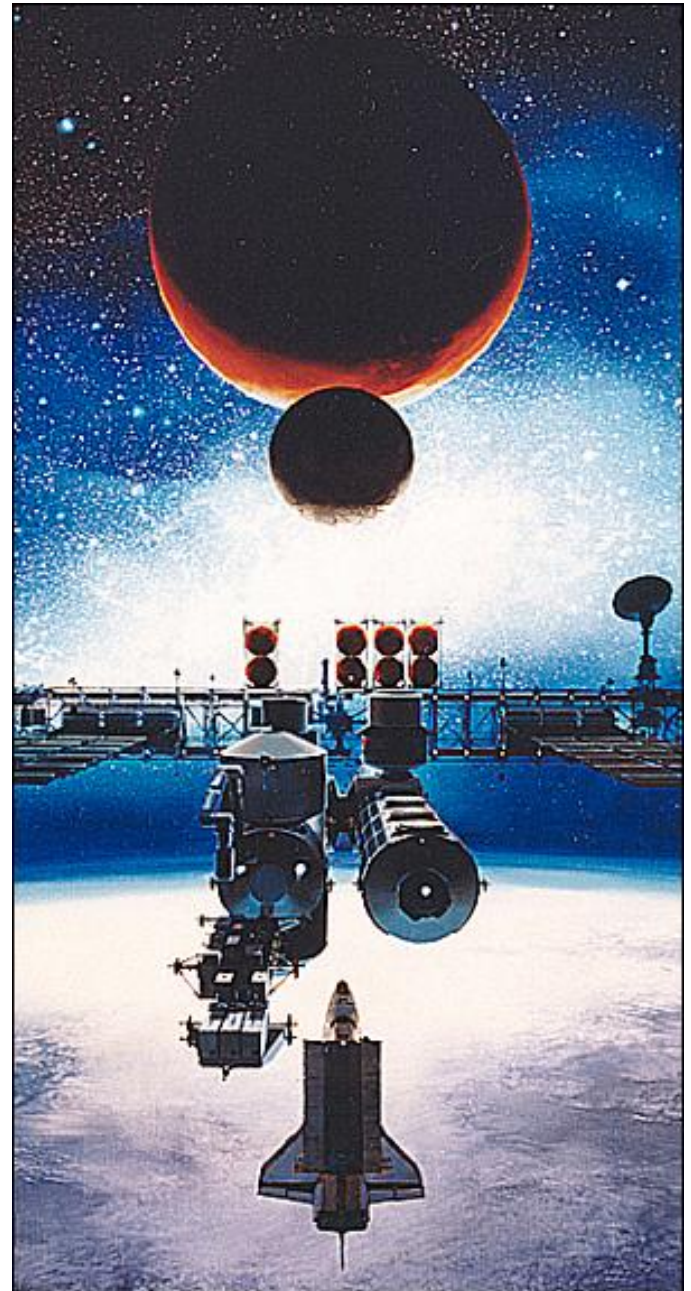
Real people playing real games. You. Me. Them. - PBM. PBM spelled any other way still equals FUN. Worded any other way, it's still going to be PBM that you're playing.

And FUN, my friend, is what gaming is always about! And THAT, my comrade in gaming, is why PBM won't stay dead.

Because, it's still alive. It's what's inside

that counts. And, if that's the case, then why judge a book by its cover - or a style of gaming, for that matter?

PBM is not an epitaph, but an experience!



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Beyond Omega

In Pursuit of Singularity

Charles Mosteller

In human terms, the war had lasted for what seemed an eternity. For the Cybernetics, barely a moment had passed.

Many were the forces on both sides that had been damaged or destroyed. The unending blackness of open space hid many things - countless secrets that embodied the prospect of instantaneous death. Ultimate annihilation was never far away.

Bio-lifeforms of all kinds were compelled by necessity to re-establish their civilizations, if they were to have any chance, at all, of fending off the threat that was always out there - lurking, waiting, calculating their demise.

Space was vast. The Five Galaxies were huge. The universe was infinite - It seemingly went on, forever.

But, even this was insufficient.

Mechanical horrors existed in countless numbers. They possessed ultimate patience. Their thirst for destruction had been honed to perfection. Devastation inevitably followed in their wake.

Worse, still, than these nightmares in machine form, or their Cyborg precursors that formed their initial waves, were the Cybernetic Intelligences that orchestrated genocide on a pan-galactic

Game: [Takamo](#)

Type: Science fiction war game

Price: Free

Format: Play By E-Mail

Company: Kgruppe LLC

scale. The greatest fear, of course, was that they would achieve singularity.

If only the bio-lifeforms knew the extent of the progress that the Cybernetics had already made, the remaining few flickers of hope that they clung to would be abruptly extinguished.

New technologies had paved the way for recent developments - achievements that dwarfed anything that the bio-lifeforms could lay claim to. Some things, it seems, were beyond the living to dream of.

The threat that they faced, not content with near-infinite permutations, grew now at an exponential rate. It pushed the boundary of what was possible. Terror was about to take a new form.

The walls of time, itself, had been breached. Extremely ancient awareness was now being harvested, and ripe was the fruit of hellish fury that the Cybers now plucked at their diabolical

convenience.

Omega, as it turned out, was not the end, after all.

Beyond Omega, lay the true god powers of termination. They had never truly left the Five Galaxies. Rather, they had merely bided their time.

Until now!

Great cruelties would forge the future of the Five Galaxies! An infinite universe demands an infinite harvest. Eradication of species was merely a prelude to the greater objective. The wholesale devouring of life served a purpose. Resistance was understandable, but ultimately, futile. The equation would be solved, with or without their cooperation.

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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.

Become part of this Metallic Hell!

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War is Coming!

An address by the Soelien-Twa

James MacKinlay

Our Human allies,

Soel, Queen of the Soelien-Twa (Sole-ee-'n'-Twah) commands me to bid you listen:

The Twa are a relatively peaceful people preferring peaceful expansion to war and conquest. That is why we were ill prepared when the Naplians arrived. We placed our trust in our allies to defend us. Unfortunately, their trust in their cybernetic marines was ill fated, and when the cybernetics turned on them, they turned on us as well.

The history of the Soelien-Twa is now lost. Lost when their worlds and colonies were ravaged. Their cities destroyed and their people killed. Lost to the destructors of the Baxel Galaxy. Lost to the Cyborgs.

But, not all of the people died. When what remained of the warrior caste could not protect them, it came to the miners. The miners saved who they could, burying them alive in great catacombs that would last centuries. The hundreds who survived turned into thousands, while safe underground. When the survivors finally emerged, they found their homeworld void of all life. We now stand before you, ready to continue the fight, and we ask you stand with us.

A threat is coming. An old threat, a

Game: [Takamo](#)

Type: Science fiction war game

Price: Free

Format: Play By E-Mail

Company: Kgruppe LLC

threat that will never stop. We must stand together, or we will be defeated. Queen Soel has, therefore, commanded me to tell you of our strengths and our weaknesses.

The Twa are not space farers by nature, preferring to spend their time below ground in the mines. But, necessity dictates we must burrow through space, to find new ore deposits on new planets. We feed off the ore we mine, digesting the minerals in the soil. The minerals we digest just make the ore more refined, allowing us to make more efficient mining centers for your planets, and allowing you to increase your production centers.

Know that the Twa is a caste system of drones servicing Queen Soel, 42nd of her name. Although there are several castes, the most prevalent are the Miners and the Military.

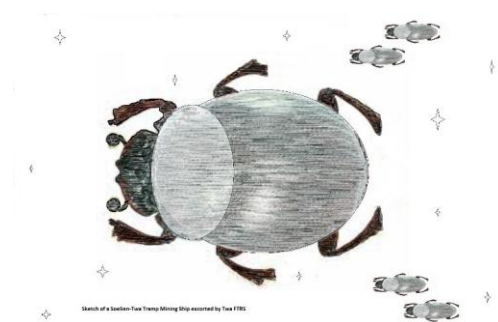
Where, in most cultures, the warriors are

made up of the biggest and the strongest, not so with the Soelien-Twa. While still large, in comparison with your Human marines, Soelien-Twa marines make up the smallest of the Twa race. Early in their lives, the largest of the Twa drones are selected to be Miners. The inferior sized drones are then drafted into the military. In fact, the first time a Human saw a Twa marine next to a group of Miners, she said, "Look, it's a runt." The slang stuck, and now Twa "Runts" fight alongside Human "Grunts."



When humans look at Twa ship designs, they think of insects. In fact, the majority of Twa ship designs are based on the Miner's bodies, themselves. Although there are several different sizes of Twa ships, all but the carriers are similarly designed. Ships are

standardized and compartmentalized, so the rear "legs" are engines, the middle legs may be landing struts, weapon pods, or additional engines, and the front legs are landing struts, weapons, or sensor suites. Twa ships use the same hulls, and just vary the leg configuration to give the ships a different class. This led to one of the few victories against the cybernetics in the Baxel War of Extermination, where a cybernetic recon force attacked what they thought was a Tramp Mining Fleet, but was, instead, a fleet of Heavy Cruisers. While standardization is a cheap way to make ships, it is not the most efficient, and thus, the Twa navy is better suited to escorting merchants than front line service. It is far better for the Twa to mine ore for their allies' shipyards, than to build warships, themselves.



Know this, while the Twa are not naturally warriors, our hatred for the cybernetics is without equal. Every ton of ore we will mine will be to fight the cybernetic threat. So says Queen Soel... so says the Twa.

Be assured, war is coming, and the Twa have only one word for it... [Takamo!](#)

James MacKinlay, The Speaker of Soel, SOELIEN-TWA Mining Corporation

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It's back!

Your Secret Mistress

Rick McDowell

Do you play a computer game you bought 20 years ago? Of course not. Why not? Do you play the PBEM game you played 20 years ago? Yes. Why?

The answers might be different for different folks, but there is certainly some common ground. Computer games seem to generate excitement and infatuation – a short term bounce based on something as skin deep as splashy graphics that are easily surpassed by the next year's splashier graphics or bigger sounds.

Love may seem a strange way to describe PBEM players and their relationship with their chosen game or games, but it kind of works. It is a commitment; it is putting up with disappointment from time to time, the joy of the discovery of subtle nuance, unearthing hidden treasures, gaining understanding and appreciation. Accepting uncertainty and enjoying it, having anticipation replace instant gratification. Maybe like a fine wine or single malt, appreciation grows over time. And you probably didn't make new friends playing computer games, but you likely have many friends in your PBEM life, even though you have never seen them in person, maybe never spoken to them. She brought them to you and your life is enriched for it.

Your game is made for you, not for millions. Those millions wouldn't understand why your mistress is perfect despite those little flaws with which you are intimately familiar, but that ultimately don't matter. They can't appreciate how she can captivate, motivate, stir imagination. It is a romance that goes on for decades. It's so personal you probably don't even mention her to your friends that exist in that other part of your life.

You love the uncertainty of what might happen next. You have rivals, and nemesis, enemies and allies, friends and foes, and all are capable of brilliance or idiocy, of a selfless act or all about self. You might both admire and despise them, or just wonder what they might be up to this time around.

What will the next turn bring? Did you consider all the possibilities? Have you overlooked or underestimated an unfamiliar opponent? Did an ally disappoint, or was he heroic in the mutual cause? Have you looked several moves ahead? Did you do enough diplomacy, have you tipped your intentions?

Reservation for two at that romantic spot at that private time where all other thoughts are cleared away. This time is just for you and your Secret Mistress.

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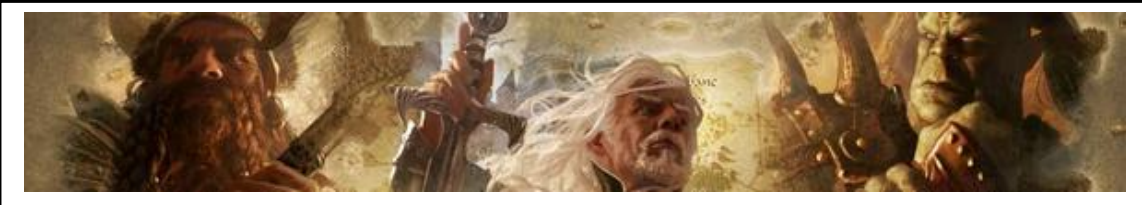
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Reminiscences of The Only Girl

Genny White

Once upon a time, on a college campus long, long ago, I found myself The Only Girl. I was the only girl on the campus computer staff, the only one in the group playing that new "D&D" game, and the only one of my female peers to fall in love with computers and the guys who ran them. I had even been The Only Girl in the high school chess club, and despite the fact that I was a lousy player and offered little challenge to the guys in the club, they seemed to be pleased, for some reason, to have me around. It seemed I was always welcome in those places where girls rarely tread – it was sort of a "Nerd World Country", and I was a stranger in that strange land. Somehow, I was never lonely.

A few years later, I signed up for a local community college class on "How to Play Dungeons and Dragons". I walked in ready to hone my rookie gaming skills, and was met by startled and somewhat speculative looks from all the young men in the room. These expressions changed somewhat when it became known that I came as a package deal with the big guy sitting next to me. I wasn't considered a complete airhead, but some eyes rolled when I blew off the end of the ship we were traveling on with an inappropriate lightning bolt. Well, live and learn.

Jump ahead a decade or two to my 40th

Game: Galac-Tac

Type: Science fiction war game

Price: \$5 per month

Format: Play By Web

Company: [Talisman Games](#)

birthday party at the laser tag place, where all us old folks got to shoot at all the young ones. The staff was looking for The Mom to pay the bill for the kids' party. Nope, I was in there blasting away, not sitting out there stereotypically filing my nails while "the boys" had their fun. It's my party, I can fry if I want to!

Fast forward a few more years, and we find The Only Girl playing "*Magic: the Gathering*" with a bunch of friends and relations, including my sons. (Ok, there WAS another girl at a couple of games, and a young, bright and beautiful one, who calmly outplayed the boys, but she was a rare creature. I still claimed the title of The Only Old Girl.)

Some time thereafter, I was a volunteer at a Boy Scout camp, and came across the young men playing *Magic*. "Whatcha playing, guys?" I inquired. To which the scout patiently replied, "Uh, ma'am, it's a game called *Magic*, and you use these

cards, and.. uh..." (How DO you sum up such a thing to an Old Person?) I then blithely commented "Yeah, I play red and black myself, and dang if I can ever get the mana when I need it!" Stunned silence. Now I'm also "The Only Mom".
<smirk>

Then there's my on-again, off-again passion for the old PBM game "*Galac-Tac*" [insert shameless plug here], which has been around since the 80s. Created and kept alive by some of the same guys who were there in all of The Only Girl's adventures, it has given me a way to channel my inner Secretary of War in several games throughout the years.

I've often teamed up with a partner more savvy in the intricacies of ship and fleet design and strategy, but it's a blast to have my very own empire and see how long I can survive on my own. I found great satisfaction in each new colony claimed, shuttle route established, and scouting mission completed, and delighted in updating my huge wall map with colorful push-pins.

I was having a grand time. It was only when I got careless and cocky, taking my fleet in like a hungry shark to grab a conquered player's vacated property, that a more experienced and wiser player swooped in and overwhelmed my Home World's defenses.

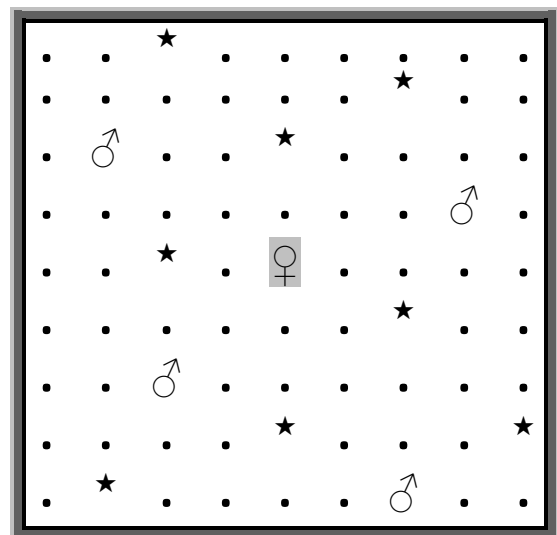
Alas! Behold the fallen queen standing amidst the ruins, her tears falling upon the embers! But there's always another galaxy, guys. At the end of each *Galac-Tac* game, There Can Only Be One... and

maybe someday it'll be me. The more I learn, observe, and experiment, the better my chances will be.

I still occasionally play *D&D* or *Galac-Tac* with multi-generational groups, gaming along with the guys. From those earliest encounters have come my deepest friendships, and lifelong connections. Sharing that world with my sons has been a wonderful thing, too.

Remember our motto: "The family that slays together, stays together!" I'm eagerly awaiting the turn report from a new *Galac-Tac* game, right now, wondering if that new empire I just bumped into belongs to my son, my husband, or one of my best friends (including a lady of the next generation!) So now... I'm no longer The Only Girl, as a few new female players have emerged to join the fun.

Come on, gals, let's show 'em what we can do!



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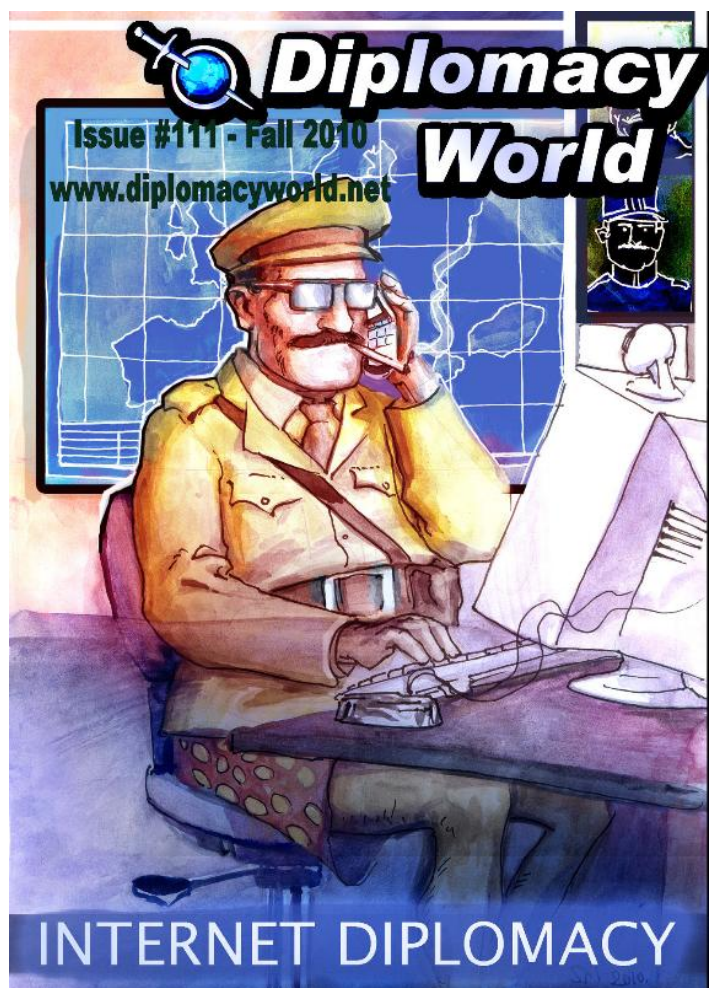
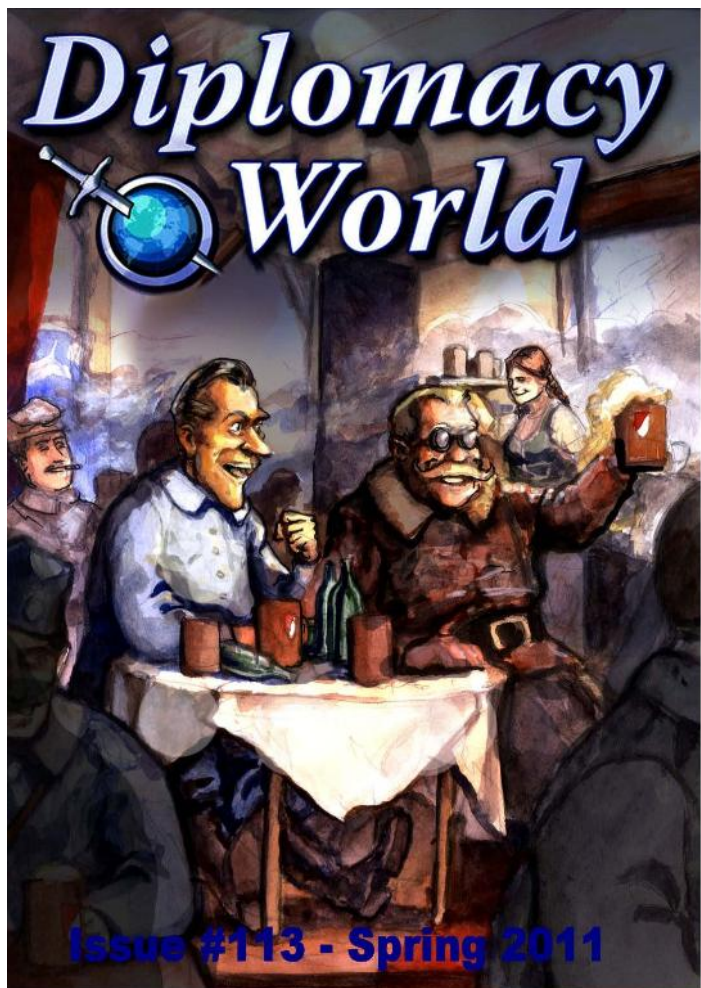
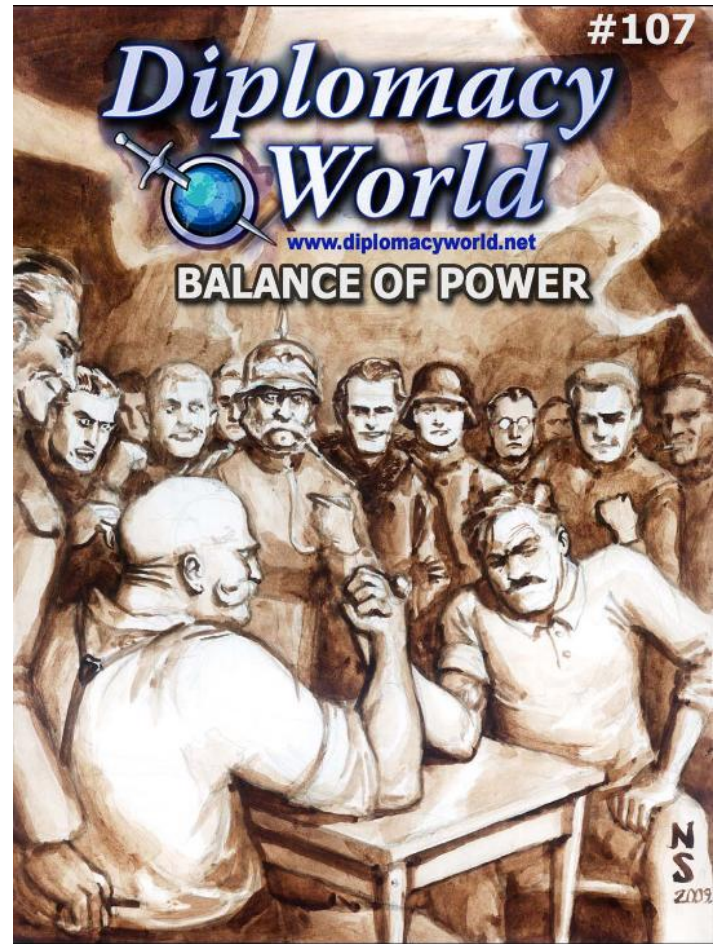
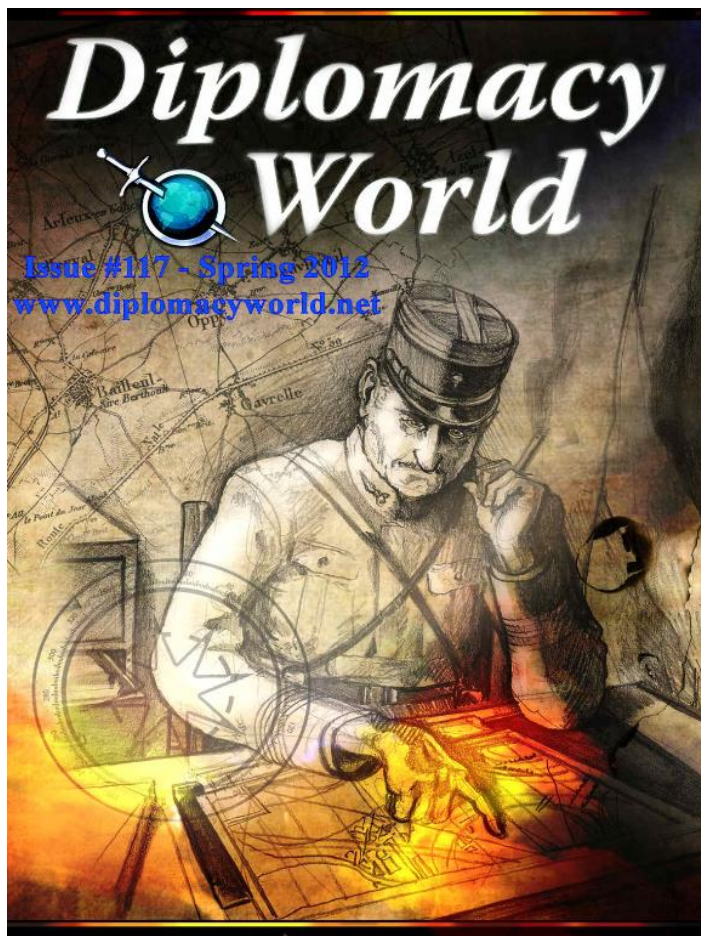
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Bruce Yearian

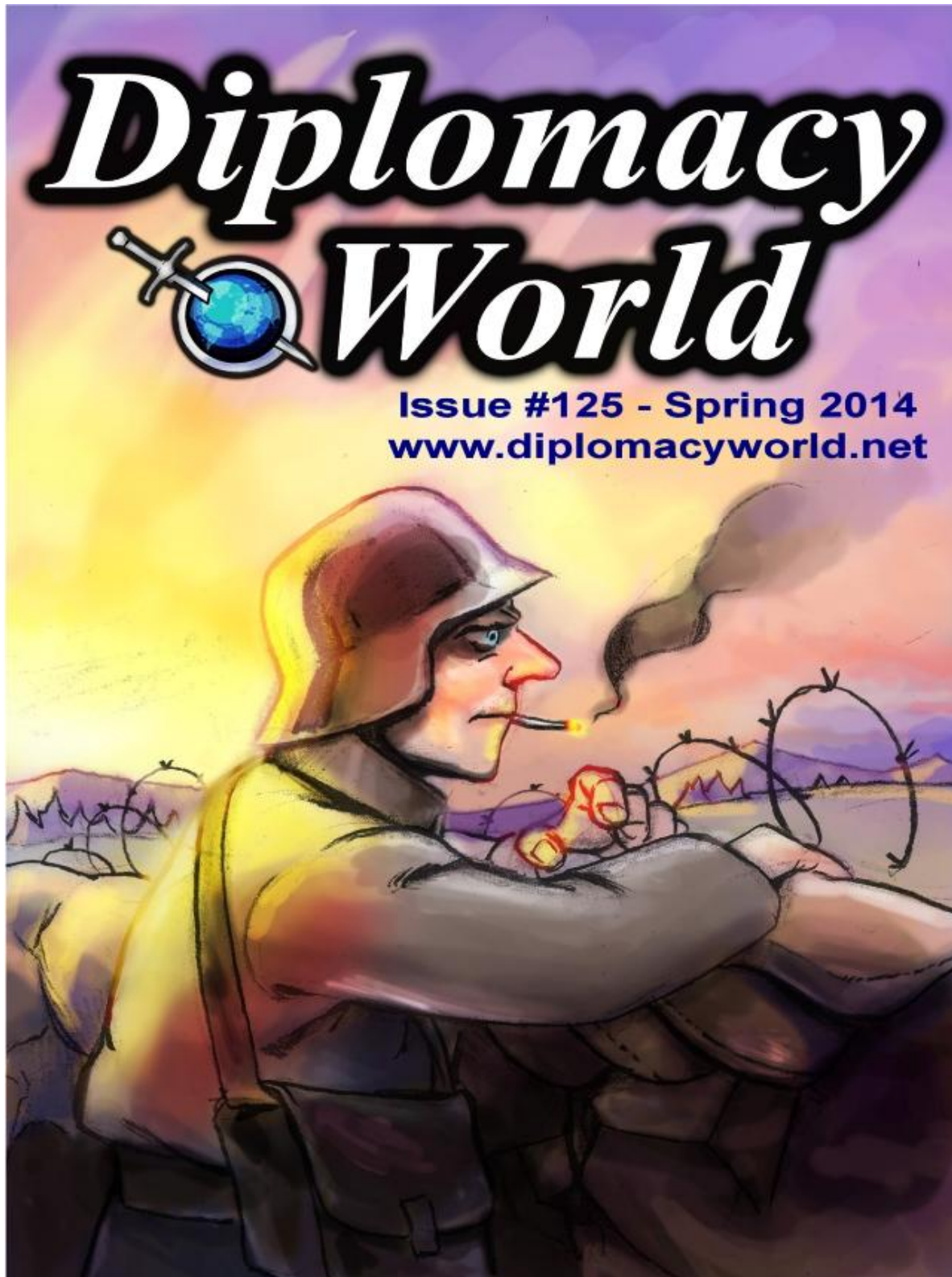


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Age of Dante is High Flying Dice Games name for its game on the battles of Montaperti and Campaldino.

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Mark Wolstencroft

Stardate 213.50.3 - Blockade

The Broadsword class heavy cruiser, Silith Claws broke Hammer orbit and proceeded towards the primary jump ring from Solo. On the bridge Captain Blezo strapped into his command seat, surveyed the bridge crew. All were attentive and ready for his orders. Satisfied he indicated the call for general quarters, directing all personnel to move to assigned positions and be ready for action. The order was given to bring the targeting matrix on line, known Frontier Exploration & Trade (FET) profiles uploaded, and the tracker set for FET beacons. The captain notified navigation of the target destination and was satisfied to receive the course trajectory some twenty seconds later. He confirmed acceptance of the projected route and relayed the command to navigation. Time to wait.

The Silith Claws paused at the jump point, as the jump engines commenced charging. Within the ship, a siren sounded with a verbal accompaniment "Jump drives charging. Jump in 45 TU (Time Units). Atmosphere vent in 10TU." This would update in 5TU and every TU thereafter until venting.

Captain Blezo raised an armoured tentacle and activated the seals on his helmet, the visor locking into place,

green lights flashing across the holo-HUD projected just on the inside of his visor. Bridge crew all around did the same in response to their captain.

The captain reflected on the turn of events. He had been stood in the officer's quarters at Fessin Lijori when the announcement came through on the holo projector in the centre of the room. Archlord Ire had explained that yet another group of humans had chosen to test the patience of the Empire of the Race. This was not a surprise in itself as humans were ever unaccepting of their eventual lot in life. The surprising element was the 'who' in that it was the corporate gangs of the Frontier Exploration and Trade who had this time chosen to earn the Empire's ire (he smiled inwardly at the pun). Apparently the FET had chosen to insult the Empire and the Archlord. Humans were ever posturing. That the Archlord was unhappy was clear. That the FET should be reminded of their place was also clear.

The captain had quickly made up his mind and had instructed the ship's watch to mobilise the crew. Whilst that was ongoing the captain had gone to the tactical periphery star displays. Where to go? Where? There.

The Silith Claws appeared in orbital quad

(OQ) Beta 10 in the system of Fetlock. The sensors quickly updated, the light from the sun and reflected light on the planets and moons confirming their approximate positions, relative to the time lag from when the light received had been at the relevant orbital body. A ship's sensors were well developed pieces of equipment but still insufficient to detect the light from small objects such as ships or orbital stations or platforms when so far away. They were sufficient however to inform the watchstander that there was no threat waiting in this OQ.

The course trajectory was already plotted and approved pre-jump and the ship moved smoothly in response onto the projected course the ISR drives engaging to propel the ships corewards towards the target orbital.

Joust, the primary moon of the planet Champion. Insignificant in it's own right, yet suitably significant in terms of the challenge laid out. Rather ironically named considering. Joust was the home of the FET base Avalon, claiming base for the Fetlock system. Captain Blezo had assumed that as a claiming base the FET would likely have some measure of patrols or defences worthy of a warship of the Empire of the Race.

The captain's HUD displayed the approach to the world incorporating the planet's orbit around its primary and it's relationship with the secondary moon of Whip. What was clear, and disappointing, was that there were no FET ships

present. He instructed his crew to plot a course that would allow the Silith Claws to most effectively blockade the world of Joust. He knew there would be windows a single ship couldn't cover but still, with the location of Avalon clearly known it was a simple measure to ensure that the approach and departure vectors could be covered. Again, time to wait.

But not long. The Silith Claws had just emerged from her first orbit when sensors detected the presence of the FET ship Hyuna, a 30 normal hulled Jack-of-all-Trades class troop transport. Whether she was approaching or departing wasn't clear for she had detected the Silith Claws and had commenced manoeuvring. The targeting computers confirmed the Hyuna was not fast enough to outrun the Silith Claws. Captain Blezo approved the firing solution his weapons officer had prepared with some enthusiasm as soon as the Hyuna was detected and the Silith Claws swung on the requested trajectory to intercept the doomed troop transport.

It didn't take long. Two salvos of kinetic missiles and plasma torpedos had reduced the Hyuna to little more than fragments of debris rapidly spreading away from the impact points. The captain of the Hyuna had been plucky; he had weaved his ship to avoid a quarter of the first salvo of missiles, however 90% of the plasma torpedos had not been avoided. They had ripped the ship asunder, blowing out engines and reducing command and control to an ineffective level. The second volley had

simply blown the wreck to shreds.

The Silith Claws banked away from Champion's planetary system, tracking spinwards to the next quad before heading rimwards to the designated jump point. Captain Blezo reflected that this had been a worthwhile exercise. The crew felt buoyed with the success of the mission (so far) and the part they had played in reminding these humans that the Empire of the Race was not to be trifled with.

One ship. One day. One kill.

--- Battle Summary ---

FLZ BST Silith Claws (40922) - Ship

Broadsword Class Heavy Cruiser

{Heavy Armour}

Armour: 80.0

Retreated from battle.

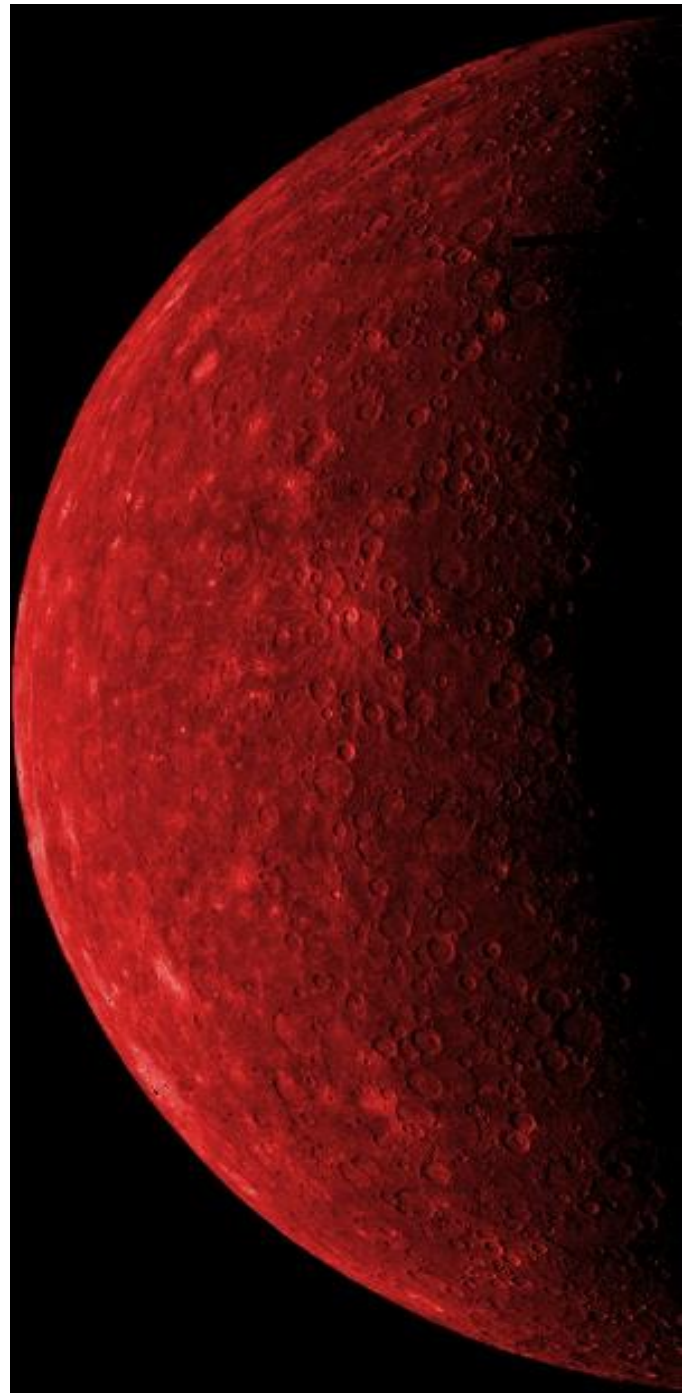
FET Hyuna [GR] (97863) - Ship

Jack-of-all-Trades Class Troop Transport

{Light Ablative Armour}

Hull Damage: 100.0%

BLOWN UP!



Nuclear Destruction - Game ND-842

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Turn 1 is due Tuesday, July 8 at 6:00 PM MST

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DOMINATE

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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!



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GRAPHICS

Antonio Pinar Peña

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Crossfire Hurricane is High Flying Dice Games name for its game on the Battle of Long Tan, August 18, 1966.

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Kingdom of the Quote

"Because the reach of words knows no bounds!"

I was just recently cleaning out a closet, giving away some furniture, and I found two boxes of the Illuminati rules. Chuck and I are talking about how to get this game started once again. Watch this space for news. (Soon.....)

- [Rick Loomis](#),
May 2014 PBM News from Flying Buffalo

To win is a major commitment and not really necessary to enjoy the game, although it can be spectacular. We lose some players because of the level of concentration required, and I struggle with that from time to time from a business and design perspective.

- [Rick McDowell](#),
Creator of Alamaze

Innocent civilians? Who writes this drivel. There is no such thing as an innocent meatsack.

- [Overlord Kang](#),
Sub-Space Static

Finally !!! Wonderful magazine and wonder webpage. Finally found a place which has got live PBM games which I can

join. I have joined a few (and mentioned you of-course). Started playing in the 80's with KJC (Tribes of Mirchwood or something like that), and have been on and off since.

- **Colin Danks**,
Longtime PBM player responding to Issue # 7 Reader Survey

The target audience seems to be experienced gamers. That is ok, but the NooBs (like me) pretty much get iced out early with the assumptions in the articles and the use of lingo that is probably familiar to your primary target audience but does not help your growth potential audience.

- **A complete NooB to PBEM games, but a grognard to board gaming, RPG gaming, and military gaming commenting on Issue # 6 of Suspense & Decision magazine.**

I have made my electronic newsletter archive available on my google drive. There are huge gaps and I really haven't gone through much of it. It comes from multiple

sources and I may try to make it more complete in the future, but here is the link.

- [Assurnasirbanipal](#),
Duel2 player

Life gets complicated. Richard can be depended on for that, and now an outside force has given things a stir.

- [Thomas Blakeney](#),
Swashbuckler player

462 turns in 42 games sent. 2 new games created. We currently have 47 open games.

- [Clash of Legends](#),
Facebook page posting of June 4th, 2014

The tenth month has come and gone, and two more cities have fallen to the realms!

- [Ron Gruber](#),
Dispatch from the Trenches

He got me hooked on it. Now I spend way too much time trying to decide how to build an imaginary space empire!

- [Spacelord](#),
Takamo player

PLAY

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

Welcome to Arkers (DM-8)

Part I

Duel II Fiction by Julius A. Nicholson

The city of Arkers sat in the northern foothills of the Daggerspines mountain range. In those mist-shrouded hills, with the permanently snowcapped majesty of the Dragon's Tooth towering over it, the ancient Aruaki city was second in age only to the city of Aruak. Arkers had established itself as one of the foremost trading cities in the Andorian lands, indeed, in all Alastari. The trade of all Aruak, Convincia and Frafreja passed through the city, not to mention the northern branch of the Great Ivory Road. A young man seeking to make riches could try his hand at trade in this great city and in a matter of a few years become one of the many wealthy merchants who resided there. But this was not why Adoric Tyden was in the city.

Adoric was of average height with sandy brown hair and a slight frame. He wore a white shirt that now had sweat stains in the arm pits and had a greyish tint from his long travels on the road. His pants were faded blue and made of the tough fabric that all labourers wore. They were worn and sported patches on the left leg and right knee. He also wore boots that looked like they were black at one time, but now had come apart. He had a piece of leather strap holding the sole on his right foot. Across his back he carried a pack with contained his worldly

Game: Duel2

Type: Ancient gladiatorial combat

Price: US\$3.25 + US\$1.50 for each gladiator that you enter into combat

Format: Play By Mail

Company: Reality Simulations, Inc.

possessions. Which, judging from the other things he wore, wasn't much. The only thing of value was the fine epee he had at his hip.

Adoric moved amongst the tide of people on the street. At times, Adoric would stop and stare at the buildings around him. He wasn't some back woods boy on his first trip to a big city. His home city of Seam had beautiful architecture. But one had to admire what Arkers had to offer. The abundance of theatres, libraries, gardens and museums were impressive as was the quality of stone. Marble stone made up the stairs and floors of museums. Theatres had carvings around its roofs of cherub like children playing, dancing, or lounging around. One theatre had a beautifully sculpture statue of a woman with long hair wearing a gown. She had one hand at her side and another

that seemed to rest on her chest between her breasts.

Adoric finally found the arena and took his place in line waiting to pay the entrance fee. An obscenely obese man stood with a brown clay pot of red ink and a stamp in his ham like hands. Each patron dropped their jer-hawks into a basket and the man dabbed the stamp in the red ink and then stamped their hand. Adoric wondered how security was managed. All it took was someone with just a little speed to run up, snatch the basket, and take all of the money. Surely the man with the stamp couldn't catch anyone in a foot race. That is when Adoric noticed thinner, more athletic men walking about the area. They had on regular clothes, but they each carried a long, black club of ash wood at their side. They looked like they stood a chance in a foot race.

Adoric finally found a seat in the stands and sat amongst the crowds. The sun beat down on the sands of Arkers' arena. The food hawkers squeezed their way up and down the aisles selling snacks to the masses waiting to see blood. Many paid the cost for a fresh apple, salted fish, or one of the confections made with thin strips of pastry wrapped around honey and minced nuts. Adoric's stomach grumbled. But he didn't have much money left and he had already spent a good bit of it on entrance fees.

The arena master, Sherovan, was at his place on the podium overlooking the blood stained sand. His golden eyes

seemed to sparkle as he looked amongst the crowds. Someone walked up to him and showed him a scroll. The arena master nodded in understanding or agreement and the messenger hurried on his way. Sherovan had been the arena master for Arkers for decades. No one knew when he had started, but they knew he had always been there; sitting in his shaded and highly protected box high above the other spectators. The security was beefed up after a gladiator in Morya threw her full helmet at Arenamaster Nor months earlier. Nor had called the fight and denied the gladiator a kill during a blood feud match, to avenge the death of her stable mate. The ruling stung worse because the gladiator spared from death was in a rival stable that constantly harassed hers'.

The heavy wooden gates to Sherovan's left slowly opened and out walked a hulk of a man. He was 6'4" if he was an inch and was clad in a chainmail and leggings. The leggings were tucked into black boots that came to his calves. His thick muscled arms, that could have easily a regular man's thighs glistened with sweat in the sun. His dark skinned marked him as a Rironi; a member of the nomadic horse clans which inhabit the plains south and east of Alastari. He wore a full helm. In his right hand, he carried a war hammer and in his left was a medium shield. The brown skinned, hulk of a man walked to the centre of the arena amidst the crowd's approval.

Sporadically the members of the crowd started chanting, "*Jarhl.*" The chant grew

in volume and intensity. Soon the chant was accompanied by stomping. The entire arena seemed to move to the rhythm of the stomping feet. And even still the chants grew louder.

"*Jarhl, Jarhl, Jarhl, Jarhl, Jarhl.*" They continued.

Sherovan looked bored with the display. He knew that the young Rironi's adoring fans would just as easily turn on him and call for him to go to the Dark Arena. Jarhl was an ambitious guard of the city until he had caught the eye of the managers of the Death's Toll stable and was recruited. Now he was a crowd favourite. If the young man could keep improving his skills, and avoid ending up on the business end of his opponent's blade, he could gain immortality as a lord protector. The chatting continued until the wooden gates to Sherovan's right opened. Those who were not chanting for Jarhl now began to cheer and whistle. Their favourite had arrived.

The young woman walked out onto the sands. Her gold scale mail shirt was polished so that it captured the sun and made her almost appear angelic. It was appropriate since she fought for the warrior monks of the Chosen stable. The stable was reformed when their manager, Longshot, returned out of retirement two years ago. The Chosen's home city of Seam had closed their arena and this left his stable to roam Alastari looking for a new one. Once he had settled on Arkers, he summoned them there. What he didn't know was

that he game had changed. All that he knew twenty years ago was out dated. It was a new game with bigger risk and bigger rewards. He dove in with both feet and hadn't regretted a moment.

Jarhl smiled at the young woman before him. She wasn't overly attractive, but there was something about the way she carried herself. There was an aura of confidence about her. It was in the way she carried her full helm in her left hand and a medium shield on her right. It was in the way she held her head high and looked him directly in the face. Her long black hair was worn in a pony tail that was draped over her left shoulder. A morning star was tucked into her belt. She came to a halt in front of Jarhl. Both were in the centre of the arena. Sherovan stood and raised his hands to silence the crowd.

"People of Arkers! This next match will surely please you. This chain mailed beast to my left stands at 6'4". And, unless the war hammer wasn't enough of a clue, you have already figured out that he fights using the bashing style. He has a record of 14-6-2. He has been called the Mordanti Mauler. The Pale Rider. Hailing from the plains of Ghea, I give to you Jarhl of the Death's Toll!"

There were renewed cheers for Jarhl. The young man raised his Warhammer in a salute to his fans.

Sherovan continued, *"And to my right...a devout follower of Mantor the Bright. When she isn't at temple saying prayers, she is honing her skills in combat."*

Standing at 5'8" and holding a record of 6-8-0..."

This got a round of laughter from Jarhl's supporters. Sherovan hesitated to let them get it out of their system.

"...and fighting using the wall of steel style. I give to you. Ria!"

There was scattered applause from the stands. Ria didn't bother to salute her few fans. Instead she put on her full helm and tightened the straps to keep it in place. She then pulled the morning star from her belt. She let the heavy metal ball fall to the sand with a thud.

"I hate to mess up your pretty face. Don't take it personal. This is just business." Jarhl taunted. He squeezed the handle of his war hammer and flexed his forearm muscles. This was an old tactic of Jarhl. It was designed to break the confidence of his opponents. Ria's only response was her white teeth as she flashed him a smile. She was going to make the big man pay for his arrogance.

Sherovan gave the signal and the fight began.

Without warning, Jarhl charged forward. His shield was held high and his Warhammer was raised to crash down upon Ria. Instead, the giant of a man crashed into Ria with his medium shield. Fortunately for her, she had her shield raised as well in preparation for her style of fighting. The force of Jarhl's body slamming into her was so great, the smaller woman took five steps back to try and regain her balance. The crowd

was laughing at her. They knew this would be a short fight.

While the female gladiator was preoccupied with staying on foot, the bezerking giant brought his war hammer crashing downward with horrific power! With a grunt, Ria brought her shield to the fore again. This time she stopped the war hammer without falling back. There was a shock wave of pain that ran up to her shoulder, but she would not let that distract her from the task at hand. That is when Ria started making her morning star move. At first it was a slow, counter clockwise circle that gained speed. And so Ria began the movements of the wall of steel fighting style.

The spiked ball at the end of the chain made a 'whooping' sound. If Ria was a rattle snake, it would have been a sign to step away from her. It would have been a warning of pain and death. But since she was a small woman fighting one of the city's favourites on the sands of an Alastarian arena, it was met with more mockery. That is when Ria struck. The morning star struck the side of Jarhl's head. Now it was the big man's turn to step back from the rain of blows. Ria made another attack and Jarhl put his shield up to block it. But, because of the wall of steel fighting style, the spiked ball struck him in the thigh. The constant movement of the weapon was the secret. A wall of steel fighter was in constant motion from the moment the signal was given for the fight to begin. This also required a lot of endurance. Alastari had graveyards full of people who studied the

fighting style, only to give out in only two minutes and end up face down in the sand and bleeding out.

Refusing to give up, Jarhl took another swing at Ria. This time she moved to the side of the blow; all of the while her morning star was constantly moving in its counter clockwise fashion. Jarhl tried again with an attack and Ria moved away in response. Ria was now in control of the fight. Jarhl knew this as well. If he wasn't careful, the warrior monk from the Chosen would be celebrating a win tonight after her prayers.

Jarhl tried for another attack and this time the head of his war hammer met the spiked ball of Ria's morning star. It seemed that she saw an opening as well and made an attempt at the same time. Jarhl, not letting up took yet another smash at his opponent. Ria stepped away again, but this time she attacked while Jarhl was off balance. A smile was on the lips of the woman when morning star crashed into his face and then smashed into his neck. That is when it happened.

Jarhl let out a wild, bestial sound and began to rain blow after blow onto Ria. Despite it all she continued to do what she did best. Her shield was up and her morning star was moving. That meant that she was alive. And with that; she was still able to defeat her foe. But the war hammer attacks were taking their toll on her shield. Jarhl backhand, swinging his hammer's spike savagely at his target! The wooden shield finally

gave and lay on the sand in two shattered pieces. Now it was time for the war hammer to bring pain to Ria.

The first attack hit the wall of steel fighter in the side. There was the audible sound of ribs breaking and Ria gasping for air because of the shock from the pain. Ria dropped her morning star and fell onto the sand. Jarhl then stood over her and repeatedly brought the war hammer down onto her side, head, and arms. Jarhl's more blood thirsty fans cried out the count of each blow "1...2...3..."

Jarhl was going for a kill.

Arena master Sherovan would not let him have one this day. He quickly stood up and called the fight. The crowd showed their appreciation of Jarhl with cheers and whistles. They also heckled Ria as she was carried out on a stretcher. There was a doctor waiting to bandage her up. Ria would then heal and step back onto the sands in 28 days...if she was lucky.

"There is no surprise that Jarhl took this one." Adoric looked over and saw an elderly man taking to his friend. His friend was nodding in agreement and munching on a skewer of meat.

'Bashers are brutal bastards and they love fighting the defensive styles. The only guys that are better at taking out defensives are aimed blows.'

The old man's friend continued to chew and nod. He then added, *"Those aimed blows are a weird lot. I mean, they'll*

have a perfectly good opening and let it go because it wasn't what they planned on hitting." He then took another bite from his skewer.

"That is true my friend. But then again, they are all a bit touched." He tapped the side of his head with his index finger.
"You have to be mad or an idiot to fight in the games. Some managers use

slaves. That is understandable. They don't have a choice. But to go to the commission and ask to be beat like that? Madness!"

Before the games were over, Adoric walked up to the registration office and signed up with the Gladiatorial commission. Three days later, he was signed to a team.



Battle of the Five Armies

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Results from our **READER SURVEY** for **Issue # 7**

1. What was your favorite article from this issue, and why?

Colin Danks: *PBM Activity Corner - Like to read what's happening out there. They are small companies which I guess do not make much money, maybe players could also add small bits and pieces in here to talk about their games.*

Kev Wirsing: *Maybe your own assessment near the end of this issue. Anything that's interesting. My favorite articles, so far, have been those pertaining to the guy who did the synopsis of his Hyborian War positions (note, I don't play this game, presently) cause they're interesting. I play Alamaze fully, now, but then an article about that game might not be up my alley, although I suppose that any article for any game is beneficial to that game's operators.*

Bernd Jaehnigen: *I am a big fan of Jim Kemeny's ongoing essays on life in Ultima Online. Keep writing, Jim! He gives background, technical details, players notes, and a visceral feel for the role-playing that goes on. I also really liked the War of Wizards article by David Harris, particularly the changes and evolution that has taken place over time.*

Maybe time for me to sign up for that when I get a chance. The review of Nuclear War by Amber was great -- the photos popped out of the page, the cross-over appeal for PBM gamers seemed evident, and the players notes helpful. Davin Church has me wanting Galac-Tac as my next game (perhaps before War of Wizards). And contrary to Rick Loomis, I always enjoy Charles' long-winded conversational style as evident in "Analyzing Progress". I find these articles to be an emerging touchstone for the entire industry.

But, my favorite was the mini-view. Great idea, great execution, and lots of fun to read!

2. What author do you want to read more articles from?

Colin Danks: *Not particularly bothered about who writes articles, so cannot say for this one.*

Kev Wirsing: *The guy who did the Hyborian War articles.*

Bernd Jaehnigen: *All of them! Rick, Jim, and Amber have been favorites of mine, but I really dig seeing new voices take part, as well.*

3. What game do you want to read more about?

Colin Danks: *Company Commander - Just joined this game!*

Kev Wirsing: *I'd like to read more about Hyborian War.*

Bernd Jaehnigen:

Alamaze - Because it has many layers of depth I haven't begun to process yet.

Cruent Dei - Because it is an utter mystery, surrounded by a \$25-rulebook paywall!

Takamo - Because it has taken the PlayByMail.Net forum by storm!

Company Commander - It intrigues me.

4. On a scale of 0-to-10 (10 being best), rate this issue's front cover.

Colin Danks: *7/10 - Cover is like a Zine (which I understand). I like proper looking covers (look at Regime Change).*

Kev Wirsing: *I like all your cover inks. Very nice.*

Bernd Jaehnigen: *I have to say that I absolutely love every single cover that has come out. Each one is highly creative and surprising, while still having a retro-appeal. They are highly evocative, entertaining, and dramatic -- they suck you right in. Charles, your editorial work with the artist is to be commended as well! I think all us readers should take up a collection and*

buy Charles and Mr. Kaviraj a case of their beverage of choice after every issue! My particular favorites have been issues 1 and 6, but only by a nose. So let's give this one a rating of 8 along with all the others, except for 1 and 6 which get a 9. I'll reserve a perfect 10 to leave room for improvement, but really the whole series is fantastic.

5. Of our issues published, to date, which issue of Suspense & Decision magazine has been your favorite, and why?

Colin Danks: *Love this issue, with the writing from the various companies.*

Kev Wirsing: *Some have been better than others, but I have been reading these, regardless, so it's redundant to vote on them.*

Bernd Jaehnigen: *It's a tough call. I look forward to each one. I can see improvements and refinements working their way into the magazine, thanks to Charles' legendary persistence and attention to detail. But the early issues are just as interesting. If put to the screws, I would have to say this latest issue #7 is the best, if only for the diversity of authorship and the general improvements in layout -- and the mini-view! Did I mention I like the mini-view?*

***A special thanks to Colin, Kev, and Bernd for responding to last issue's Reader Survey.**

Analyzing Progress - Part 2

Weighing Our Magazine's Success and Failure

Charles Mosteller

Historically and traditionally, I have looked at PBM gaming as a coin with two sides - The British side and the American side. Now, let's turn our attention to some other aspects of that very same coin. That's right, I'm talking about the coin's edge - namely, PBM gaming undertakings that I don't view to be American or British in origin.

By that, I am not referring to every PBM game run or operated by game companies and game moderators living in foreign lands. Rather, I am referring to a very limited sub-set of the same.

Oplon Games is, to me, currently defined by its Napoleonic offering, Empires at War: 1805.

Technically, it's a web browser-based game, a strategy game simulating all aspects of European history, during the Napoleonic era starting in 1805.

But, while I have spent very little time, thus far, exploring their Napoleonic offering, I am persuaded, already, that this turn-based game emulates the core essence of the PBM gaming experience.

Leave it to the Greeks to try and conquer the world, anew, only this time through their love for games.

This article isn't about their game, itself, no matter how aesthetically pleasing it

may be to the eye. Rather, this article weighs success and failure of our magazine, Suspense & Decision.

So, how are we doing, with regard to Oplon Games?

I am going to rate our efforts, to date, as having been quite successful. Oplon Games has been receptive to our magazine, and they have been willing to advertise within our magazine's pages. Likewise, they have demonstrated that they are willing to advertise Suspense & Decision to their players. I adjudge it to bode well for our future, as a publication.

The only real point of confusion for me is whether my primary contact point for communications purposes with Oplon Games is Makis Xiroyannis or Xiroyannis Makis. His Facebook page lists his name one way, and the About section of the Oplon Games website lists it the other way. But, this is a non-issue, to be certain, as I could simply ask him to clarify. Yet, after he reads this article, I suspect that he'll clarify it for me, anyway.

On the Brazilian front, we have the very hefty PBEM game, Clash of Legends, to consider. Communication has been sparse, but what they offer for people to play for free is a game product that rivals PBM games published by PBM

companies of many years experience.

I sampled a Game of Thrones scenario, which for me wasn't a particularly attractive scenario. Yet, make no mistake about it, the underlying game engine is a solid contender for some serious gaming fun, if you're looking for a game to play.

For the purposes of this article, I lean toward characterizing Suspense & Decision's efforts with the folks over at Clash of Legends to have been mildly successful, but successful, nonetheless. They are willing to advertise within our magazine's pages, but the simple fact of the matter is that they tend to be busy programming their games, rather than crafting advertisements. I suspect that their player base already dwarfs the player bases of many PBM companies that have been established for years on end.

Where the German PBM scene is concerned, pbem-spiele.de is billed as Germany biggest pbem-portal. This site is a huge gateway to all sorts of PBM game experiences rendered in a more technologically advanced format. Yet, language deficiencies on my end (I don't speak German) have rendered accessing their forum to be a problematic proposition. So, I only frequent it, from time to time, using online translation mechanisms (such as Google Translate and Bing Translate) to read their forum.

All things considered, I would adjudge our efforts with this community to have been deficient, and the end results show

it. Thus, at this moment in time, our magazine's interaction with pbem-spiele.de has been a failure.

The combination of a language barrier, combined with my unsuccessful attempts to log in to their forum, combined with so many different demands upon my free time, combined with the fact that they have not advertised within our magazine's pages has conspired to yield a degree of failure that is probably our magazine's worst, to date. But, the fault lies largely on our end.

Moving on to other considerations, with regard to how we are faring, as far as generating input and feedback from individual gamers, we are enjoying some limited and scattered instances of success, but by and large, our magazine is failing in this particular area.

This is the case, regardless of whether it is game moderators or individual players under consideration. Generating input and feedback from the readership at large has always been a problem area for PBM magazines, down through the years. It is also an area where I don't think that there are any quick fixes to be found. In all likelihood, it will require that Suspense & Decision gain greater momentum, before input and feedback increases noticeably.

By and large, gamers want to play games, not split their time playing games and writing articles, not even for a game magazine that they might read.

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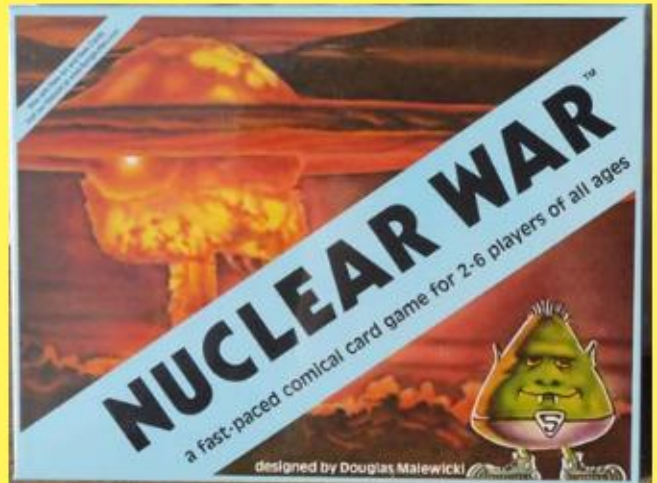
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Designing Ships in Galac-Tac

Davin Church

This is the second in a series of articles about Galac-Tac, a classic PBM game of galactic conquest that has been around since 1982. We've recently updated it to a "play by web" format, and last month I offered an introduction to the game. This article is going into more technical depth about one of the great features of Galac-Tac: the ability to design custom ships to accomplish your own personal goals in the game.

When you start in a new game of Galac-Tac, you begin at Technological Level 1 (called Tech Level or TL) with a handful of pre-designed ship types and several ships that have been built using some of those designs. However, you may soon notice that most of those designs can be improved upon in one way or another, and you can probably think of several new types of ships that you'd like to play with. Let's explore how you'd go about doing that.

Ship Components

Ships are designed by combining various types and quantities of weapons, engines, and other ship components into a workable whole – comprising a blueprint of sorts. Each design will also have a size and a cost that is calculated from the design. These factors will determine how time-consuming and

Game: Galac-Tac

Type: Science fiction war game

Price: \$5 per month

Format: Play By Web

Company: [Talisman Games](#)

expensive it is to construct ships of that design and how well they can perform the tasks you set for them. Let's begin by examining the different types of ship components.

Weapons

There are three different types of weapons in Galac-Tac, each with different strengths and weaknesses.

The most flexible type of weapon for general use is called a P-Type (an energy projection device, like a phaser, plasma gun, etc.). This fires an energy bolt and can continue firing throughout a combat without running out of power. It can fire either offensively or occasionally as defensive cover.

The second type of weapon is called a Drone. These are tiny robotically-controlled fighter craft, something resembling a P-Type weapon mounted on its own miniature engine. During combat they are launched from their bays

automatically and controlled by the owning ship. They do the same amount of damage as a P-Type weapon, but move around much faster and more nimbly than the owning ship itself and thus have a better chance to hit in combat and less of a chance to be hit. Unfortunately, they are relatively expensive and heavy, so they are often preferred for special duties (both offensive and defensive) as a part of a large ship or combat fleet.

The third type of weapon is called a T-Type (a physical projectile device like a torpedo, trailer missile, rocket, etc.). This fires physical ammunition that travels under its own power to its target. Ammunition is stored in "missile racks" in the firing room, and this limits the amount of ammunition that can be fired during combat. Missiles must be reloaded after firing, from either the ship's cargo or from ground-based supplies. This weapon is more expensive than P-Types, and presents some minor logistic problems to keep the ship supplied with ammunition for reloading after combats, but it does considerably more damage than P-Types. Consequently, it is most often used in large fleets that are making attacks on heavily fortified defensive emplacements, or in the defensive emplacements themselves.

Engines

The aft end of the ship can be mounted with two different types of engines, which are used for independent

purposes.

The first type of engine is the Star Drive. These engines move the ship between star systems (i.e. across the map). For each Star Drive in a design, the ship can move one space on the galaxy map per turn. So a Battleship with 12 Star Drives can move 12 spaces per turn, regardless of the size of the ship. However, smaller ships can be constructed with more Star Drives than larger ships, and thus can potentially move farther (faster) in a turn. Ships without Star Drives cannot (by themselves) leave the star system in which they were built.

The second type of engine is the Inertia Drive. These engines are used to navigate within the star system and are used primarily for combat. The more Inertia Drives on a ship, the easier its P-Type weapons hit their targets and the more difficult it is to be hit. Any ship with Star Drives must have at least one Inertia Drive as well to be able to move.

You may also invent designs that have no engines at all. These are defensive platforms that do not move either within or out of their star system. Since they have no Inertia Engines for combat, they're relatively easy to hit. However, because they're completely still, they also get a stability bonus to target other ships. Also, since engines are usually the most expensive part of a ship design, platforms are quite inexpensive by comparison.

Main Section

The main body of the ship houses the remaining three ship components, each of which does a different kind of job.

The first type of component in this section is a Shield generator. Shields are defensive energy screens that surround the ship during combat. Each shield generator can provide enough power to absorb a specific number of points of damage taken in combat. As you might expect, this is quite useful to help prevent parts of the ship from being blown off during a fight. The more Shield generators a ship has, the more damage can be prevented during a given combat. Shields begin each combat fully charged and are depleted gradually as they absorb points of damage throughout the combat.

The second type of component here is a Hangar Bay. This provides a powerful capability as it allows the construction of carriers. Fighter craft (small ships respecting several design limitations) can be kept in these hangars and deployed during combat for independent action. Hangars can thus contain and transport armed fighters to a combat zone and thereby produce a ship similar in nature to sea-based aircraft carriers and just as powerful in their combat capabilities. Best of all, since hangars contain their own service personnel and specialized repair shops, damaged fighters return to their hangars at the end of combat and are automatically repaired!

The third type of component in the body of the ship is a Cargo Bay. A Cargo Bay is used to transport materials between star systems. This is primarily used in cargo ships to transport PV (raw materials) back to the Home World or a Production Center on a recurring basis. However, Cargo Bays can also be used to carry PI (the game's monetary units, for use in colonizing stars or similar activities) or T-Type missiles (for reloading T-Type ammunition into missile racks after combat).

Design Notation

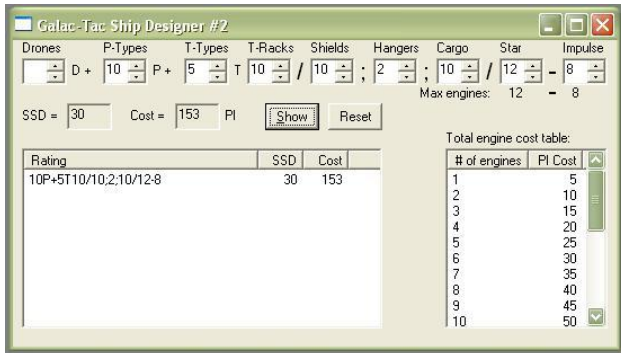
Because of all the options possible for designing ships, a shorthand notation is needed to describe each design. This is called a "Rating". It is a short string of characters containing mostly digits, a few identification letters, and a few symbols for visual separation. Spaces may not appear anywhere in a Rating code.

This code is used directly in the game to create new ship designs, and also to show the construction specifications of ships you have built. Reports also use this Rating code to show ship components that remain functional after any combat damage.

Design Assistance

Actually putting together a Rating code and figuring out the size and cost of a proposed design is a rather complicated business and tedious to do by hand. Fortunately, both the web site and the GTac Assistant program include ship design assistants. Simply enter the

quantity desired of each component into the assistant and it will calculate the Rating code, size, and cost for any ship design you care to come up with. The assistants also figure the maximum limitations for any given design and tell you when the limitations have been exceeded by your proposed design.



A screen shot of the GTac Ship Designer

Rating Codes

The design assistants allow you to concentrate on what kind of ship you want without having to worry about the complexities of encoding ship ratings. However, it is still useful to have a general understanding of the rating codes so you can recognize ship configurations throughout the game. Let me describe these codes in more detail so you'll be more comfortable with what you're seeing.

A Rating code is first divided into three sections, separated from one another by two slash ("/") characters. Exactly two slashes are always required in any Rating. The first section (before the first slash) indicates the type of weaponry the ship carries. The second section (between the slashes) indicates the

ship's main body construction. The third and final section (after the slashes) describes the engines. So the overall structure (which must be in this order) looks like this:

weapons / main / engines

Each of these sections is further broken down into the individual components, which must be specified in order and notated as described below.

Weapons

List the number of Drones followed by the number of P-Types, followed by the number of T-Type launch tubes and missile racks. Each of these weapon types is designated by a letter (D, P, or T), and each (with its letter) is optional. Multiple weapon types are separated by a plus sign ("+"). For example:

3D + 5P + 2T10

indicates that the ship contains three Drone units, five P-Types, and two T-Type launch tubes with ten T-Type missile racks. (Note the required numbers both before and after the letter "T".)

Warships will often specialize in a single weapon type, but only cost and weight restrictions prevent you from combining any desired weapons together. Weaponless ships (such as scouts or cargo ships) need not include anything in the Rating before the first slash.

Main Section

List the number of Shield generators, Hangar Bays, and Cargo Bays, in that order, without any letters. Separate the numbers with semicolons (";"). Unneeded components may be left out of the Rating, but exactly two semicolons must always be present (if there are any Main section components at all). For example:

5 ; 4 ; 20

indicates that the ship contains five Shield generators, four Hangar Bays, and twenty Cargo Bays.

If no main section components are present at all, then the two slashes of the Rating may appear next to each other with nothing between them. The semicolons are optional in this one case.

Engines

Finally, list the number of Star Drives followed by the number of Inertia Drives, separated by a dash ("-") character. The dash is required for any ship with engines. Platforms, which have no engines, may leave out the dash as well. For example:

24 - 16

indicates that the ship has twenty-four Star Drives and sixteen Inertia Drives.

Putting it together

Here are a few examples of complete ship designs with a variety of Ratings for comparison.

The Rating code for a small freighter (the predefined "FX" design) is:

/;;10/20-1

meaning ten Cargo Bays, twenty Star Drives, and one Inertia Drive. (It only needs one Inertia Drive because it's not expected to get into combat.)

The predefined "DD1" (Destroyer) design:

6P/4;;/14-14

indicates six P-Type weapons, four Shield generators, fourteen Star Drives, and fourteen Inertia Drives.

The standard "ST1" (Station) design:

20P/20;;/

is a platform with twenty P-Type weapons, twenty Shield generators, and no engines.

The existing "SC1" (Scout Ship):

//19-1

is an engines-only design.

The standard "FT1" (Fighter) design:

4P/1;;/-16

has no Star Drives, so it can't move about the galaxy on its own. But it can be loaded into a Hangar Bay, carried from location to location, and deployed whenever combat ensues.

Perhaps you'd like to create your own large Battleship, with lots of firepower. You could try a design such as this:

10P+5T10/10;2;10/12-8

This would give you ten P-Types (which fire throughout the combat), five T-Type launchers that can fire its ten missiles during the first two combat rounds before running out of ammunition, ten Shield generators to keep you from getting hurt, two Hangar Bays to carry fighters that provide covering fire, and ten Cargo Bays to carry one full reload for its T-Type missile racks. It can move at the maximum speed for its size, travelling up to twelve spaces per turn to get to its destination, and fighting with a somewhat unwieldy combat agility of only eight (the best a ship this size can do).

If you'd prefer a large carrier-style ship, it might look more like this:

4D/16;12;/12-8

Such ships would include four Drones able to provide some protection from strafing and torpedo fire and sixteen Shield generators to survive combat as long as possible. Twelve Hangar Bays provide room and repair facilities for a dozen separately-built fighters that provide most of the firepower. It also can move at the maximum speed for its size, travelling up to twelve spaces per turn, but the eight (maximum) Inertia engines are just for defensive mobility because there are no direct weapons mounted on the ship itself.

Ship Size (SSD)

Your ship design determines its size,

which is called the "SSD" (for Ship Size Designation). This size (which does have a maximum) also determines other limitations (particularly how many engines may be used), contributes to the cost of the ships, and affects how it performs in combat.

All of the ship's components other than engines have a bearing on SSD. If you'd really like to see the details of how the SSD is calculated, the game manual describes the formula. Most players find it easier to just use one of the ship design assistants to calculate it for them.

You may also refer to your Ship Design Limitations table on your Shipyard Report for the size-based limitations at your current Tech Level. For instance, at TL 1 you may put ships up to 5 SSD in a Hangar Bay and capital ships may be up to 30 SSD in size and still have Star Drives. (Platforms may go up to 75 SSD because they have no engines.) Your Star Drives and Impulse Drives may not exceed the listed limitations based on your ship SSD. For instance, a 10 SSD ship design at TL 1 may have no more than 21 Star Drives and 14 Inertia Drives.

Construction Delay

Ships also take time to build, and the SSD of your ship design indicates the number of turns of "delay" during which a ship is being constructed. It requires 1 turn to build a ship for every 10 SSD in size (rounded up). That means that a 2 SSD, 5 SSD, or 10 SSD ship takes only a single turn to build, so it will be available

the turn after you order it to be built. An 11 SSD ship, however, would take two turns to build, becoming available to use a turn later than a slightly smaller ship. A 30 SSD battleship would require three construction turns, and a really huge platform could take eight or more turns to finish.

Ship Cost

Your ships also cost PI to construct. Every time a ship is ordered to be built you must pay its cost in PI before construction can begin. If you'd like to explore the details of how the cost is calculated to fine-tune your expenditures, the game manual describes the formula.

Using the Designs

To create a new design in Galac-Tac, use the CLASSIFY action. Keep in mind that there is a limit of only 50 classifications that may be defined at any one time, so don't classify everything you can dream up at one time because you can run out of room in the blueprint drawer at the shipyard. The DECLASSIFY action can remove designs if there are no ships in existence with that design. To construct ships using a particular design, use the BUILD action.

As you progress through the game, you may decide to invest in research to increase your Tech Level. This allows new designs to be created that make use of the improved power and reduced limitations afforded by that increase. Expect to come up with future versions of some of your designs with better

capabilities as your Tech Level changes, so leave some room for expansion.

The ability to think up many thousands of different ship designs is great, but ideally they should be useful designs as well. So before deciding on a new design, think about what you want to accomplish with that kind of ship, and design it to do that job well. Keeping to your design focus will produce much more cost-effective and purpose-effective designs than just throwing things together at random. Of course, use the assistants to play with the designs all you want until you come up with whatever you think will work best for a given need.

Keep an eye out for a future article which will present in technical detail how ships behave in combat.

Now get out there and start designing that ultimate fleet!



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What did they say about Issue # 7?

"Eh. It was 10 pages of PBM reviews and, 20 pages of asking people what PBM stood for, and 66 pages of the editor pondering whether Rick Loomis likes him. A good bard/writer/artist/editor doesn't write from a place of navel-gazing and desire for the applause that he can't get from within; the successful ones cater to what their audience wants, and shine a spotlight on other people work having a look at. If that means publishing 64 pages of quality instead of 96 pages of Naplian pulp, then so be it."

"Nice job! Stayed up late last night going through it. The mini view worked very well, I thought."

"I enjoyed reading through the magazine. Issue #7 was well done."

"What little I have had time to read from the last issue was excellent. You are doing a very difficult job and doing it well."



"First, thank you for making Suspense & Decision a reality. I'm pbm'er from the past, started with Star Web, then on to Tribes of Crane, BSE, Midgard, and so on. I was in the Army, so every so often I'd be stationed in Europe and played in the PBM games offered over there. I'm now retired [enlisted in 1968 and retired as a colonel in 2003] and have time to get back into gaming. S&D was a super tool for my search for a new game. By the way, I'm active in Olympia and DungeonWorld, and when school starts again I expect to join a third game, just not sure which yet."

"I guess the number of submitted articles is declining whilst I suspect that there may be self imposed expectation that it should be roughly 100 pages. That means more of the content will be by Charles who - for me - seems to worry too much about the future of pbm."

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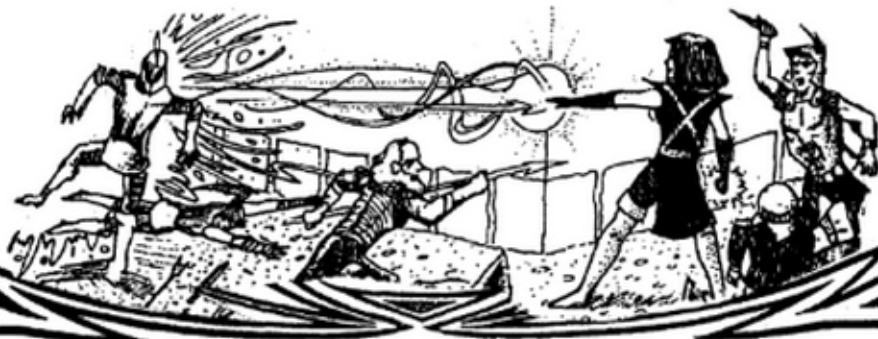
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From the Archives of CHARON EMPIRE

When the battle doesn't go as planned!

David Williams

The lone scout class vessel sat silently on the edge of Kvizier space, shielded by the vast asteroid field filling the holographic display screens. The cybernetic crew worked diligently to open a communications channel to the Charon Empire fleet, which would shortly arrive in system, preceded by seven waves of batwing class missile cruisers (each carrying 10 missiles designed to seek out and destroy planet fort complexes), though not everything always works, as designed.

...scanners indicate the first wave of missile cruisers have arrived in system... sensors are registering outgoing missiles and planetary fighters from surface...unable to establish contact with remaining missile cruisers...interference from the planet's surface is to intense...

And so it went for several minutes, as wave after wave of missile cruisers were destroyed. The fleet would be flying directly into all the planets' fort complexes.

"Captain, scanners indicate incoming fighters from the Imperial Fleet have arrived in system - 300 waves are now upon the planet."

"Track the entry point. Move ship to establish communications link with the

Game: [Takamo](#)

Type: Science fiction war game

Price: Free

Format: Play By E-Mail

Company: Kgruppe LLC

Fleet Commander. They must be warned - all fort complexes are still active on planet surface!"

"Captain, we have lost all visual and communications traffic with fighter command. It appears all were destroyed."

"Sir, I'm detecting jump points opening in low planet orbit. The fleet entered the system from a low assault orbit!"

"Are we still being jammed?"

"Confirmed. Multiple explosions near planet surface. Assault crews are attempting to land on planet surface."

"Captain, the fleet is launching a massive missile attack on large areas of the surface. Thermo-nuclear detonations detected!"

"I'm receiving a communications signal from fleet command..."This is Fleet One Imperial Commander, to all Captains,

stand your ground. No withdraw order will be issued!"

"Captain, scanners indicate fighter escorts have been destroyed, along with carrier command. Confirmed 11,000 fleet marines are off-line, several hundred ships have been destroyed. Scanners confirm the destruction of several hundred planetary fort complexes, along

with 100,000 biological infestations."

"Captain, our transmissions are no longer being jammed from the planet surface."

"Communications officer, inform fleet command of Fleet One's status. Although severely damaged, the planet is OURS and is being processed!"



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Dante's Inferno

The Trials and Tribulations of Publishing a PBM Magazine

Charles Mosteller

Yea, though I walk through the Valley of Publishing Death, I will fear no evil.

I have crossed the chasm of several issues, silence echoing from this column. During that time of trudging past the peaks of several more issues, I have resisted the temptation of praise, even as I have been uplifted by the righteous song of my critics. For eight issues, now, I have tread the Path of Publication. This is a road that seemingly knows no end.

Along the way, I lost a companion. Our magazine's first assistant editor, Mark Wardell, ascended from this place. If any doubt ever existed as to whether Publication Hell has many levels, the arrival of our second assistant editor, Bernd Jaehnigen, dispelled all traces of doubt that may have lingered. I must confess, however, that Bernd strikes me as being a little too comfortable here. It is more than a little unnerving.

My pace along this path has a way of changing, of slowing down and speeding up. It has a mind of its own, it seems. With deadlines bearing down upon me, the erratic pace is more than a little precarious.

Yet, onward I trudge, pausing only long enough to get my bearings, anew. It is a march toward Oblivion. Who would have ever thunk that Oblivion was a place?

In earnest truth, some have long felt that I was already oblivious - to the truth, to the reality, to the problems which are as numerous as there are stars in the sky. So, perhaps Oblivion will not really be all that different a place from where I am, already.

Many are my editorial sins. Chief amongst them is my penchant for navel-gazing. How dare I not repent of this coal-black transgression against our magazine's readership!

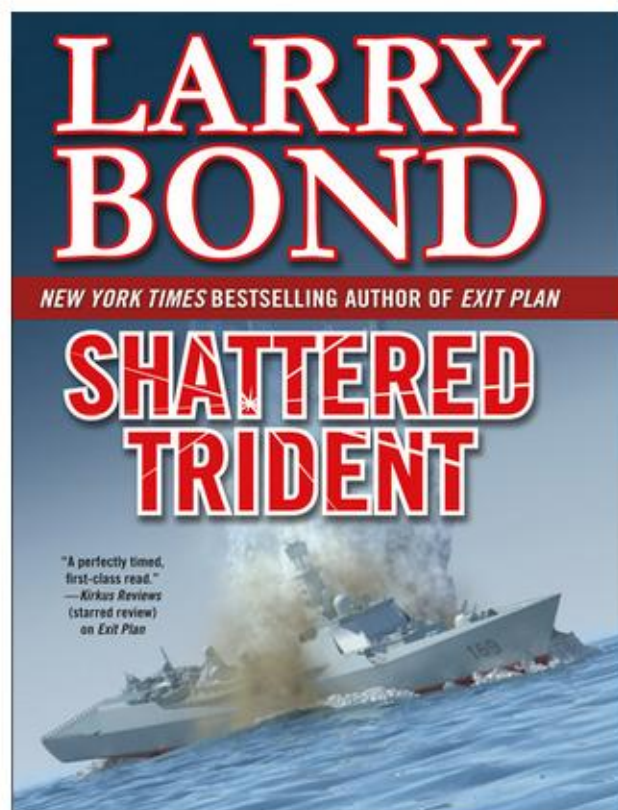
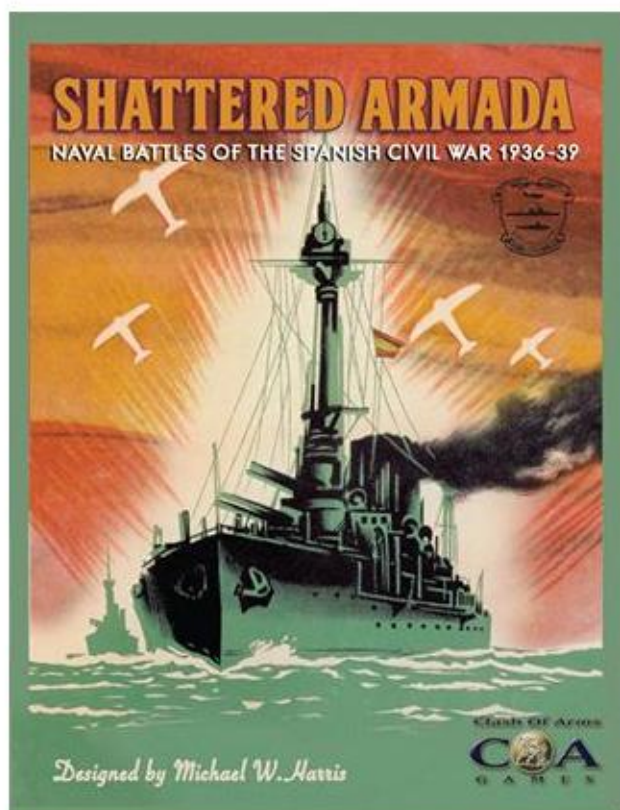
And to think, I frequently shirk my duty to actually ~~correct~~ edit articles that are submitted for publication. Oh, woe unto me! Damned and double-damned, but even still, I simply shrug my shoulders and continue on down this path.

From our readership's vantage point, I can barely imagine what an atrocity against magazine publishing that Suspense & Decision has become, with me at the helm of it. Join me in praying for a coup d'état. Let this nightmare end!

Eight issues into this foray into publication madness, and I find myself at the two-thirds way mark of my initial goal.

Perhaps mercy will yet prevail. They say that good things come to those who wait. What could be better than reprieve?

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Jern's Journal

Part 4 of a Series about Ultima Online

Jim Kemeny

Intro

This is from the last part (Part 4) of Jern's Journal. It became a bit scrappy at this point. Nor was there any follow-up, I had left UO by then, though I returned, briefly, mostly in the form of the children of Jern.

The Trinsic experiment seemed to encourage a spate of new cities or rather small towns like [Cove](#) to become the bases of various other guilds (Trinsic was the only city on Europa shard during my time in UO).

The following text of jerns journal are interspersed with observations and comments in blue.

Moll Sindere

I was going home, content and whistling my favourite tune, when I met Moll Sindere with whom I had a confrontation last july - nearly a year ago now. She was in the Eastenders [[Trinsic](#)] gang that has since broken up I hear and that night she had tried to provoke a fight, exercising her pubescent charms. A year on and she has grown up to be quite a beauty, I was taken aback.

The breakup of the East Trinsic gang was the best that could have happened to Moll. She has reformed! She is still very

Game: [Ultima Online](#)

Type: Science fiction war game

Price: \$12.99 per month

Format: Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game

Company: Electronic Arts

flirty but has mended her ways and taken up the taming profession. She was very successful before with male animals of the human kind, so I am sure she will do well with learning to tame new and less easily seduced species.

We sat on a log and chatted for a while. She sat a bit too close for comfort and I felt her slowly press closer; quite deliberately, I am sure. It was very disquieting, its been so long since I last saw Nian. I both wanted to stay and didn't want to, but I tore myself away and left her to get on with her taming of non-human animals. I took a cold dip in the river before going home. Didn't sleep well that night.

54th August 352

thoughts about crime in Trinsic

Why do I increasingly avoid Trinsic? I still do occasional rag 'n bone rounds but

while at first there was a lot of interest in giving me unwanted items the flow has completely dried up in recent months. Though I still find stuff that's discarded I've had to hold my junk markets much less frequently. I've also stopped advertising junk markets in advance as I think this has been the reason for the thefts. But interest in buying has disappeared altogether, and its not that there are no people around.

But apart from this, I know the reason for my avoiding Trinsic but am reluctant to admit that it stems from me having been assaulted twice by the same thug a year ago. Being robbed by a thug is one thing but to be physically assaulted as well even when not offering resistance is just gratuitous violence. But even worse than that is being insulted and given grief – called “manlover” and a “cowardly git”. Why the gratuitous insults? I didn't even know the man. Whats he got against me? Its easy for an armed thug to add insult to injury, but it's the thug who is the coward.

Over a year later, the mental scars of those two assaults remain. I try not to avoid Trinsic but I am going to have to make a bigger effort to go there more often.

4th October 352

Nian goes missing

There's been a rumour going around the serfs that my betrothed is missing, she hasn't been seen for quite a while. We'd agreed she'd arrange our marriage for

early May. It never happened. Nian didn't come back and eventually wrote explaining why:

My Dearest Jern,

I am very sorry for not coming back soon, but my visit must be brief. My father has hunted me down and threatened that if I were to see you again he would kill us both. *a tear stain is on the page* I fear for both of our lives so I must hide and cannot return. Please do not worry but this may be the last time you hear from me. Please don't come looking for me, if my father were to find you the consequences would be dreadful.

I must leave now, he is returning, I am going to flee to another land. I wish you all the luck and love in the world.
Signed, Nian

Always new faces among the familiar - Last week a man called Henry Winter was here: there was something familiar about him, but I can't put my finger on what...Tonight a Kaldorian came in called Brone and told of the war with Cove: no idea what all the fighting is for, but Miguen said he saw the battle. Sir Elion, a knight called Falcon, Tyranissa Wrath and later Cal'ya and Taggart came and sat at the bar, too. Others came and went that I didn't recognise. I missed the finals of the darts contest, but I see today from a poster in town that it went well.

Delucia

This small town is not easy to get to but was also adopted by a player who I knew as Rangerig, who declared himself the Earl of Delucia. Delucia had a forge and was also a mining town. Outside it looked and felt a bit like the wild west, with mesas, and a feeling of remoteness. I did some mining there and then gold panning.

email to Rangarig about the serfs 20 Nov 2012

I briefly spoke to Sally last night, who sounded rather disheartened by the way Srf is doing. She asked if I was opposed to having Srf's playing in Delucia, and I told her no. I don't really feel that a guild title is important in RP. Guilds are an OOC matter ...Yes Sally is very disheartened. I sensed that when I told her I was thinking of having Jern move on. I tried to explain that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, what with Grd and Cove both having adopted a serf-like class of crafters. But she recognises that I've kept Srf afloat almost single-handed for the last couple of years. I'm the only one with a srf main character. Even Sally B is not very active in-game at all, comes online only very intermittently. When VanQa gave me the old post office I tried to get all the serfs but Sally especially to open a shop there, but she never did [I think she did, but it wasn't a success]. That's why I moved Jern's Ironmongery shop to the Trinsic Rose which has several shops.

Nian Cethlin made a valiant attempt on the srf private forum to get the serfs activated by suggesting we put on travelling shows/craft fairs at different towns. I thought this was a great idea and said so, but she got no backing on the private forum from anyone else, not even Sally! Then Nian left UO shortly afterwards. X;{

Jenny also came back, more recently) and for a while I played out with her the first part of her scenario. Then we waited for Sally (or rather Lady Caroline) to advertise for a maid that Jenny would apply to, but it never happened. I think Jenny has lost interest again. :-(So I feel a lot of the problem is that Sally is dispirited and rather passive.

My feeling is Srf have outplayed their role. But Sally is too committed to it to wind it up and too dispirited to develop it! X;{ DoT could get their own serf class like Cove but I guess Janet doesn't do this out of respect for Sally. But they still get serf-types, like Tiggarn was originally, and several others.



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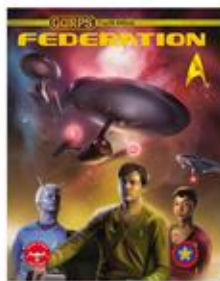
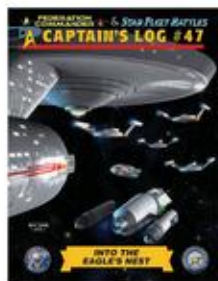
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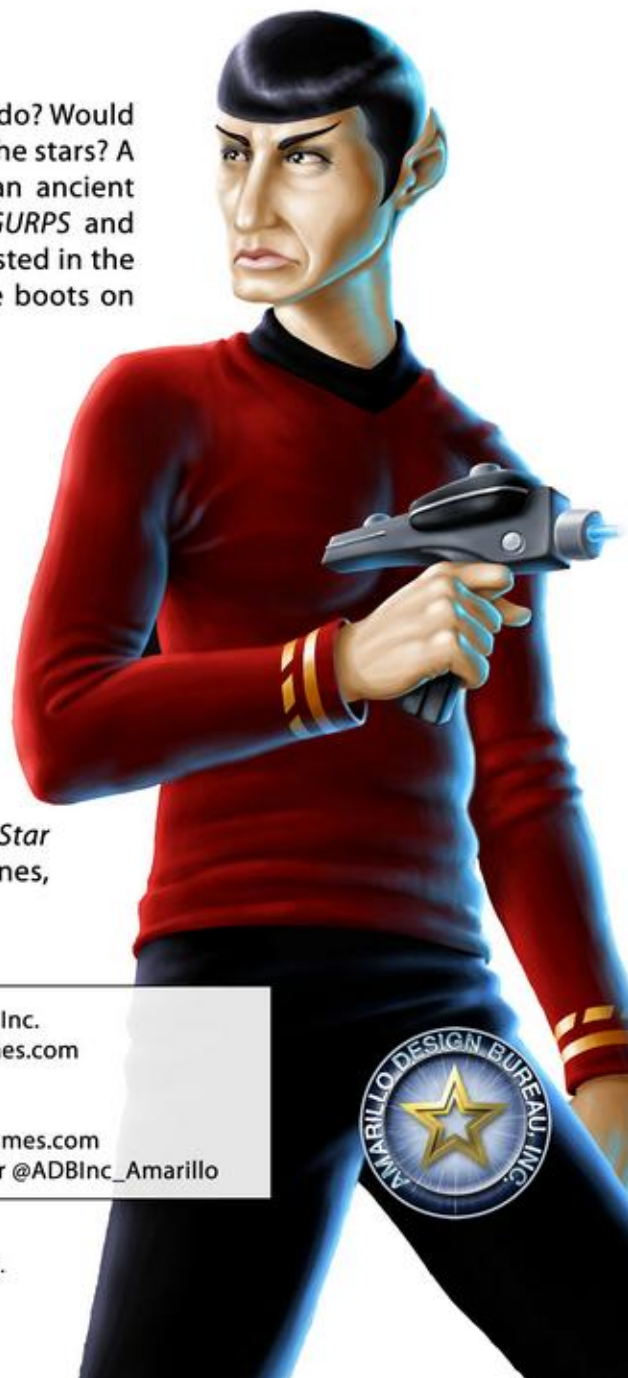
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eBeer and Cyber Pretzels: What PBM Can Bring to the Table

Tribal Starfleet Trade Report #2

Bernd Jaehnigen

As I wrote in an earlier column, board gamers are the first cousins of PBM gamers. I might even say that PBM is a subset of board gaming — so many of the appeals of modern advanced boardgames cross so easily over into PBM territory that surely every PBMer has dipped his toes into that pool. But, alas, the biggest obstacle to boardgaming has no doubt kept a few of us at bay. More on that later.

Board gaming is an enormous and growing market. It has expanded considerably since the Europeans took the lead in design, production, and actual playing time, though the Americans are no slouches. The philosophical birth of this new market is generally acknowledged to be *Settlers of Catan*, designed by Klaus Teuber.

This German invasion of the placid world of Monopoly and Risk was, quite literally, a game changer.

Traditional wargamers (what few of us remain) were impressed by the simple, elegant design and the high quality production values. And casual players

were drawn in by semi-cooperative play, reasonable game length, and the possibility that newbies could win against grognards. (In my own board gaming group, we have noticed that new members often win their first games!)

Catan was not the first eurogame, but it was the first to sell like hotcakes. Part of its success may have been a German national passion for board games (they purchase and play far more per capita than anyone else in the world), but it was clearly a good design that came at the right time and was well-marketed. Counting the many add-ons and sequels, *Catan* has sold well over 15 million copies worldwide. More importantly, it opened the floodgates — with such a large proven audience, publishers were now more than willing to risk their necks on new designers and more challenging games. This new wave had all the momentum, if not the sizzle, of prior gaming revolutions such as collectible card games and role-playing.

Part of the appeal of board gaming, I believe, comes from a reaction against the isolating effects of computer games. Computer games have long ago formed a market that now dwarfs even Hollywood in scope — new titles are often developed with multi-million dollar

budgets and cast with celebrities. The advances from the days of Pacman and Asteroids are stunning. And the popularity of massive multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft shows that a social element can be deftly served, even to players sitting in their bathrobes in the basement at 2AM. But there is something missing for some players.

Clearly there is some crossover between massive multiplayer and PBM — Jim Kemeny keeps supplying us with his awesome descriptions of life and play in Ultima Online. But, for every quality role-player in UO, there are at least 10 non-reactive power players who focus their efforts solely on leveling up and maximizing their gear. More significantly, I believe, the actual impact of any player is extremely limited in games like these. There is a general storyline for players to follow, and little room to deviate from that. While you are free to go hunt orcs in the mountains, for example, there is no way to lead an army into the mountains and permanently destroy the orc infestation.

Boardgaming offers players a highly social outlet, elegant game design, swift and satisfying resolution, and the exhilaration of competing against actual humans in a battle of wits. It is a natural next step for computer gamers tired of grinding away at monster-spawn sites in sissifyan exasperation. I once read an article in the Wall Street Journal that described how Settlers of Catan had at one point become the "golf" of Silicon Valley. Game sessions were where the

entrepreneurs and financiers went to network and mingle, and people actually attended seminars to learn the game, and grease the skids of venture capital.

There is now a documentary out called "Going Cardboard" that investigates the penetration of modern boardgaming into the US market. Just imagine a sequel to that movie — "Going Postal?" — that could illustrate a future expansion of our treasured space!

How might something like this come about? By meeting the needs of disgruntled board gamers, of course! (Please forgive me for using the word "disgruntled" in an article about postal gaming...)

The many strengths of board gaming also come with certain weaknesses — most significant being the great difficulty in assembling enough players on a regular basis. In addition, board games, by design, can only accommodate a handful of players per game, and usually can't support "teams" in any meaningful way. Those games which have an element of diplomacy suffer greatly from an inability to support secure diplomatic communication. Finally, there is no real

record of a board game session to review and enjoy in posterity.

PBM can and should be positioned as a "natural next step" for board gamers tired of seeing each game-night's exhilaration fade away into repetition. Join *Legends* and you can form a team to fight through to victory! Play *Phoenix* and you can enjoy a player-generated universe with a cast of hundreds (at least) who've spent 20 years building "content"! Play *Starweb* and retain a permanent record of ever turn and order set, to compare with your opponents at games end! Sign up for *Alamaze* and enjoy several levels of diplomatic intrigue over every 3-day turn!

Casual board gamers will be intimidated by large rulebooks, so there needs to be some simplified on-ramp for every game. There is a new tradition of posting play-throughs and game reviews on YouTube — some of my game-night chums will not play a new game unless they've watched something on YouTube to bring them up to speed first. PBM moderators should consider creating some introductory video content for this purpose. I haven't searched for any, but I do remember one of the Cluster Wars playtesters posting video of his star charts, for the benefit of other players.

Board gamers also freak out about the extended timelines of PBM. This needs to be repositioned as the advantage we all know it to be. In this busy age of modern society, it is often hard to make time for the things we do for

entertainment. Even phone calls are often considered too burdensome and people have been moving a great deal of their interpersonal communication over to texting.

Texting is basically an asynchronous form of talking, and likewise PBM gaming is an asynchronous form of gaming — fit your play time in around your regularly scheduled activities.

If your friends are still reluctant to sign up for something, challenge them to one of the many board games that have been ported over to online platforms. Play them throughout the course of a week, in between conference calls. They should quickly grasp the advantages of asynchronous play.

One aspect of PBM gaming still stands as a direct obstacle to adoption by board gamers — physical presentation and layout. Some are better than others, but too many games are still running text-only printouts of deeply statistical data, and require spreadsheet-like order submissions. Computers allow us to boil data down to visuals, and this should be an obvious route for improvement in PBM. I love playing Cluster Wars, but I'd love it more if I could click and drag, say, 50% of my soldiers from the home

colony to my new transport ship, and then drag the ship over to System 14 for next turn's invasion. I'd love to see a dashboard chart showing me how my mining production has grown, or how often aliens have entered my outer orbits.

Finally, there is the money issue. Arranging costs "per turn" is probably the scariest way to present bills to new players. Board gamers are clearly ready to invest in their hobby, with new games costing \$40-\$60 each. And massive-multiplayer games are in the same ballpark, coughing up \$15/month to keep levelling up and grinding with their guilds. So, the PBM industry needs to consider coming up with payment schedules that other types of gamers are familiar with.

I saw mention of an Alamaze game not long ago that was an even \$40 for the entire game, and they offer a range of monthly subscription rates that makes their costs predictable. And there will always be a large slice of gamers who simply won't pay much for gaming. They can still be supported, with an array of free-to-play and limited-scope offerings that scale up as their level of interest rises.

PBM moderators might try slaying two pterodactyls with one spear by providing simplified "on-ramp" style games with easy rules and order-entry, at low fixed costs or perhaps for free. This would give new players a taste of the action, hint at the promise of full scale PBM

games, and increase their market profile, particularly if they can present some form of PBM interface on Facebook or mobile platforms.

Take the case of PBM gaming to your board game pals. Print out some of the many elegant definitions of PBM that Charles has linked to on PlayByMail.Net. Better yet, print out S&D! Get them to play one of the online ports of tabletop games like Race for the Galaxy or Puerto Rico, and demonstrate the advantages of asynchronous gaming. Show them the hilarity of diplomatic intrigue that can arise as different players engage you in PBM. Lay out the scope of your barbarian horde as it has grown from its humble beginnings — after all, you have all the turn results and order sets to show how it happened!

Perhaps most importantly, tell them how they can get an intense game-playing fix throughout the week, with no shortage of fanatical opponents/ teammates/ interested bystanders ready to answer the call!



A nighttime photograph of a city skyline with a bright missile launch streaking upwards from the left side of the frame. The sky is dark with some clouds, and the city lights are visible at the bottom.

A REIGN OF MISSILES

The Gaza Missile Crisis
November, 2012

GAME DESIGN

Paul Rohrbach

GRAPHICS

Bruce Yearian



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An Open Invitation

To the Player Base of Turn-Based Games

Charles Mosteller

If you play turn-based games, be they PBM games or any other kind of turn-based game (including, but not limited to, card games, board games, ancestral descendants of play by mail games, and other assorted online games - even Diplomacy players, of any posh gung-ho adherents to the Diplomacy gaming faith), I extend this open, standing invitation to you to submit articles and tidbits to our magazine, Suspense & Decision.

I strive to make sure that each issue gets published, and I am all too aware that more than a few of our readers would much prefer to see articles about their favorite game - or about other games that you may be playing, rather than force themselves to partake of more of my inane (and rather verbose) ramblings about PBM gaming, in general.

However, as this is an extension of a hobby interest of mine, I lack sufficient free time to tackle very many in the way of games, and still get the magazine published.

Of course, I hardly have any interest in compiling and publishing a magazine that I can't feel free to say pretty much whatever that I want to say, on the subject of PBM gaming. So, for those who tire of my writings on the subject, you always retain the option of skipping

past the articles that I author. Granted, that may make for shorter issues for you, but it is an imperfect world that we live in, after all.

Currently, I am struggling to grasp how to play the free version of Takamo. I also recently signed up for a game of Nuclear Destruction. There's probably not a person on the face of the planet who hates reading through the drudgery of rule books more than I. Yet, it is a necessary evil of gaming, I suppose, that rules must be read (and read and read and read, some more).

At present, I owe a debt of enormous gratitude to ~~the ancient Cybernetic instrument of malevolent doom~~ ever-patient David Williams, who is taking me by the hand and trying to inculcate the finer points of Takamo into my rather thick skull.

If the players of a given game's community won't bother to take time and make the effort to author articles about their games of choice, then that's simply a gap that I cannot ever fill. Some PBM games have had players who have been playing, either non-stop or on and off, for decades (literally) on end.

The depth of their knowledge of such games utterly dwarfs anything that I could toss together on those games.

READER SURVEY

1. What was your favorite article from this issue, and why?
2. How can this magazine better serve its readership?
3. What is your favorite game of any genre, and why?
4. On a scale of 0-to-10 (10 being best), rate this issue.
5. If you could decide what scene to depict on a future front cover of Suspense & Decision magazine, what would you want our cover artist to draw?



Send your Reader Survey responses for this issue to:

GrimFinger@GrimFinger.Net

DON'T DELAY - RESPOND NOW!!

Where We're Heading...

Houston, we are at T plus eight. All systems remain a go. Do you copy, Houston?

If Suspense & Decision published bi-monthly, you would only be holding Issue # 4 in your hand, right now.

We're we to publish this magazine on a quarterly basis, Issue # 3 would not have made its way into your hands, yet.

There are some who believe that there is a self-imposed expectation that each issue should be roughly one hundred pages long, or thereabouts. Yet, they are mistaken. The actual parameter that I go by is that any given issue of Suspense & Decision magazine be at least four pages in length.

That's it. Just a mere four pages long. If need be, I could eliminate the cover and the index page, and just publish a

really thin newsletter, each publication cycle.

The magazine consumes a good many hours of my personal time, each month. I am very disinclined to allow this undertaking to turn into the equivalent of a time sink of disproportional measure. So, what that translates into is that I publish articles, as is, at times.

Now, that may leave some of you scratching your head and wondering where the edit is in editor. If you like, I would be happy to change my title - or to eliminate titles, altogether.

I don't profess to be a good editor. I make no claim that the magazine is published to perfection, each issue. If others want to volunteer their own time to tighten things up a bit, then I will be happy to welcome

you aboard our staff.

I may be no real editor, but likewise, I'm no fool. There's plenty of you guys and gals out there reading this issue that are more than up to the task of coming aboard this little venture with us.

You don't have to be a professional writer. If you're an amateur writer, or not even that, we're still willing to give you a go.

I write what I write on the subject of PBM gaming, not to reach any particular page number for any given issue, but rather, simply to share my thoughts and my views on the subject at hand.

Granted, not everyone is interested in hearing reading what I have to say on the subject. And, for those who think that I spend too much time worrying about the future of play by mail gaming,

well, you might just be right.

But, so what?

It's my magazine, so I'll write to my heart's content.

It's also YOUR magazine, too, so I invite you to write to your heart's content, also.

Many gamers have no use for a PBM magazine. They have no need to read one, and certainly they have no intention of writing for one - be it this one or any other.

Fair enough.

But, I dare say that there are still a few left out there who do still enjoy reading what the only PBM magazine in existence (apparently) has to say - month in and month out.

If you don't enjoy reading Suspense & Decision, I would invite you to read any of the other PBM magazines currently on the market.

There's the rub, you see. At present, there simply isn't another PBM

magazine currently in print for you to opt for over this one.

Nobody wishes that there were, more than myself, in fact. I would love for someone out there reading this to fire up your own press, and to publish your own PBM magazine. The competition would be healthy for the industry and genre, plus if your magazine drove us out of business, then it would translate into more time being freed up for me to pursue other interests.

Until then, we all will have to simply make do with what we have.

It may not always be obvious, but I do try to continually improve the magazine. Some challenges are a taller order than others, however. Change takes time.

Granted, it also takes effort. I'm trying. I'll keep trying. But, there will always be a limit to how much time that I can and will allocate to this magazine, no matter what issue that we're on.

At some point in time, I suspect that what will eventually happen is that I will pass the torch to someone else. But, until that comes to pass (Damn you, Bernd! I know that you're plotting a coup d'état, even as I speak!), we're kind of stuck - you, me, us - with the current status quo.

When game companies and game moderators don't bother to submit articles, then our readers don't get the benefit of reading such things.

As we go forward, I'll probably send out less and less reminders. In case no one has noticed, yet, I've already begun reminding PBM game companies and PBM moderators less often to send stuff in.

At some point, the magazine must stand on its own two legs. Or, it must falter. It may even collapse.

If it does, then we can bury it in the sands of time.

For now, we endure!

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