Because Play-By-Mail gaming refuses to die!

PBM ZOMBIES

ISSUE
1

October 1st, 2025
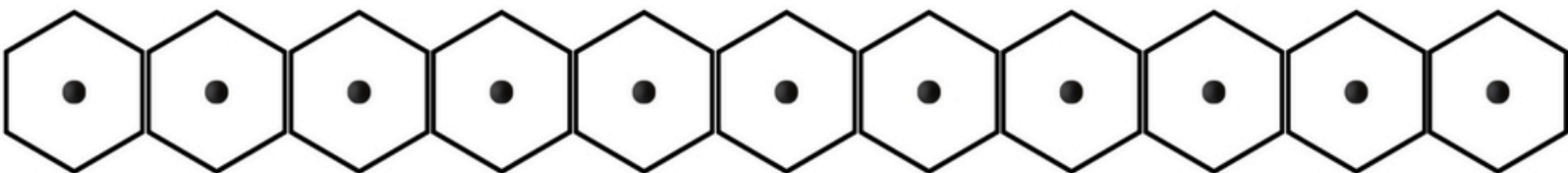
PlayByMail.Net

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IN THIS ISSUE. . .

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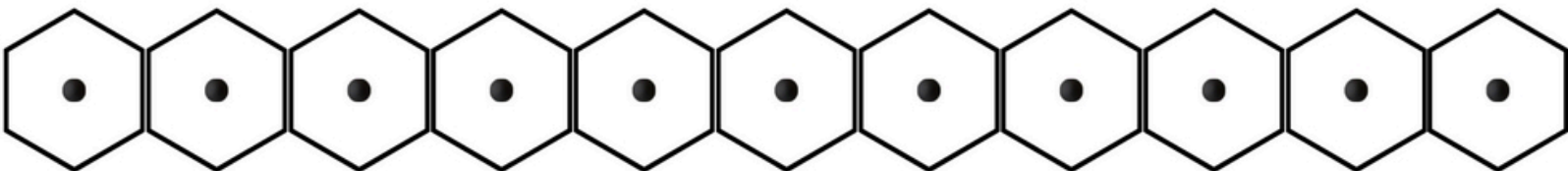
Star Fleet
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Strategic Campaign in the High Arena

The Feds
Klingons
Romulans
Hydrans
Gorns
Lyrans
Andromedans
all await you!

Franz Games

DEADitorial

On behalf of the PBM Zombies roaming the streets of the world, right now, I extend greetings! We've been looking for you.

Worse than fending off any horde of zombies has been trying to re-learn old tricks that I already knew, where Canva is concerned. Canva served me very well, previously, when I used to publish PBM Unearthed, so I opted to return to it in my bid to begin publishing PBM Zombies.

As I gradually reacquire skill sets grown rusty, future issues of PBM Zombies should come out looking more alive, as far as the look and the layout of this magazine goes.

Click on the green PBM Zombies on any page to return to the Contents page.

As I sit here the day before the publication date of October 1st, 2025, I find myself feeling like a zombie. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I don't know where I'm going, nor where I've been. Just endlessly ambling forward, wherever this journey takes me.

And like a zombie, there's this unknown - *and unknowable* - sense of purpose that just keeps on animating me with something resembling a sense of life. This sense of purpose ceaselessly drives me onward, ever onward - in spite of the obstacles and the difficulties and seemingly senselessness of what it is that I am doing, here on the PBM publishing end of things.

You are hereby cordially invited to join me on this journey to wherever PBM Zombies magazine takes me. If somewhere along the way, you amble off in a different direction, then that's perfectly fine. At some point in life, we all end up going our own way, anyway. Who knows? Maybe the PBM Zombie life isn't for you. *To each their own.*

As much as any zombie, my mind wanders. Ever roaming, but never headed in any particular direction. Maybe PBM Zombies magazine is a place which can serve as a sort of final resting place for certain of my thoughts - the ones about play by mail gaming.

Teeming hordes of gamers are out there in the gaming world at large. They're everywhere. They're all over the place. They love playing games more than zombies like chowing down on brains. Why, then, is it so seemingly difficult to get them to amble on over to PBM?

Isn't that the sixty-four thousand dollar question?

After all of this time, after all of the time that I've been writing all kinds of different things about PBM gaming, is there even anything left to be said that hasn't already been said?

Oh, sure there is. Things that matter to me in PBM, things about PBM that I care about, will always be subject to me revisiting them in my thoughts and in my words and in my own pace. That's the way that it is for a lot of us on a lot of different things in our lives that have meaning and value and worth to us.

And like a zombie, I like to eat brains. No, not in a literal sense. Rather, I want to devour your thoughts about PBM. It's quite the tasty treat, even if you don't find the thought of sharing your thoughts about PBM to be very appetizing.

Which creates quite the conundrum. Fans of PBM games want there to be PBM magazines and the like, but they seldom want to send in contributions of their own thoughts about the subject, in order that such PBM publications can survive and thrive. Just look at the recent episode of the Monster Island Monitor. Joe Franklin shut it down.

But that particular PBM publication shutdown didn't last - *and thank goodness for that!*

Joe probably suffers from a different strain of the PBM Zombie virus than I do. Similar, certainly, yet noticeably different. I say this, because Joe Franklin is a monster on Monster Island, and I'm not.

Even as I write this, the first two PBM Personality columns have been claimed. This represents your place in the PBM Zombie Horde. PBM Hammer has claimed PBM Personality Column #1, and PBMer Adam Warlock has laid claim to PBM Personality Column #2. *Most excellent, gentlemen!*

Any future issue of PBM Zombies that publishes, their PBM Personality columns will always be at the head of the rest of the horde, in terms of where their PBM Personality columns are located within the pages of each issue.

Even should they fail or forget to send a few sentences in for any given future issue of PBM Zombies, they'll retain their column numbers for the PBM Personalities Speak section of the magazine. These PBM Personality column slots are available on a first-come, first-served basis. *So be sure to grab yours, today!*

The more that participate and contribute a few sentences about PBM each issue, the more likely that it will be that even more will participate and contribute. And as the PBM Zombie Horde grows, each issue of PBM Zombies magazine will become all the better for it.

This approach is intended as a "low impact method" that can work with anyone's schedule, even the most hectic of lifestyles. Three or four sentences and a whole month to jot them down and send them in - now *that's* a really manageable approach to doing things.

I will *always* welcome articles, be they long or short in length, or anywhere in between. But what PBM needs, and what PBM Zombies is going to need, is more participation by more people, and "high impact methods" just won't work for most people.

I am trying to tailor participation in PBM Zombies so that it can fit into pretty much anybody's life or schedule. That's really the best that I can do, insofar as I am aware.

People not participating just doesn't work. It's not an efficient way to put together and publish a PBM magazine with any sort of depth or longevity to it.

Nobody has time. They never do. They never will. I don't have time to do any of this PBM stuff, either, but here I am, just the same.

Lots of stuff in life doesn't work out - *but we try, anyway.* Why should our efforts that revolve around PBM be any different?

To get people off of the sidelines of PBM and participating will require both effort and persuasion. Maybe that "P" in PBM needs to stand for persuasion, huh?

Easier said than done. No doubt about it.

And some will likely not become participants in our efforts, here, no matter how hard that we try. In the old days, even during play by mail gaming's golden era, most PBM gamers did not subscribe to - *nor read* - any PBM magazine, at all. That old reality will likely always be a part of the new reality that we face on the PBM scene.

On that note, PBM Zombies is now on the march. **Grow the PBM Horde!** *Join us!*
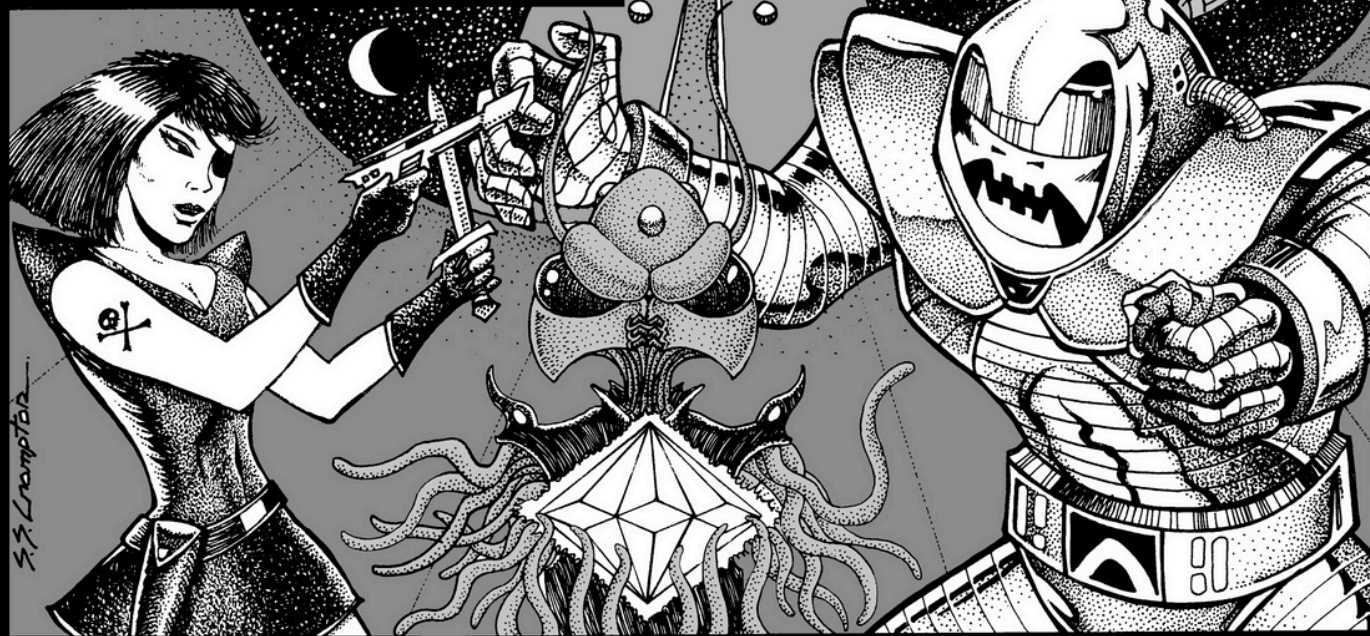
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PBM Personalities Speak

PBM Personality Column #1
Hammer Hype

I recently had the opportunity to become One of Ten Play-Testers for a Unique Game called **Gravenheim**. After creating your Character, each Player submits online-details on a Discord Channel of what they intend for their Character to do Each Day for Seven Days!

This is a "Living Story" where the GM sends you the results of what your Character did for Seven Days!

There are both Rewards and Consequences for Your Character's Daily Actions!

I have found this to be Very Entertaining!

The following are excerpts from the description of Gravenheim, which you can further explore by journeying to **www.gravenheim.com** for further information:

Gravenheim is a city that squats on the banks of the River Schaal like a stone gargoyle, half-ruined and half-magnificent, a frontier between the wild and the civilised, the holy and the damned. Its alabaster keep rises pale against a smoke-choked sky, and the bells of the Cathedral of the Veiled Saint toll over crooked alleys where merchants, mercenaries, spies, and pilgrims jostle for place.

The mood of Gravenheim is one of Gothic High Fantasy: *grandeur sliding into decay, hope knotted with dread. Think Gormenghast, the Citadel of Gene Wolfe, or the Holy Roman Empire at dusk.*

When you step into Gravenheim, you are not only entering a city—you are entering a story of ambition, betrayal, and the long twilight struggle between light and shadow.

#####

For PBM Gamers who would rather wage war in an Outer Space Fantasy Game that is now available to play online, you may do so by journeying to **www.talisman-games.com** for further information!

Galaxy #228 is currently available to battle for Supremacy in the Stars among 8 to 10 Players, which as of this writing only has One Spot Filled in a Dense-Star Galaxy setting!

#####

The next Regular and Slow Forgotten Realms Games still have positions to fill before starting!

For actual PBM Gamers who prefer a Fantasy Setting populated by Humans, Orcs, Ogres, Giants, Dwarves and Elves, plus other Races, can check out this particular Reality Simulations Game by journeying to **www.reality.com** and clicking on Forgotten Realms for more information!

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Hungry and Thirsty for More Play-By-Mail Information?

Send an Email to **playbymail.net@gmail.com** to subscribe for Free to PBM Chaos, which currently publishes every Monday, in a Labor-of-Love to Feed Your PBM Imagination!

Hammer

PBM Personality Column #2
Stamped & Deceased

Our first PBM Magazine since 2023 is now in your hands! What a great accomplishment. And what a great name. I've suggested to our esteemed editor & publisher that Halloween would be an excellent time to release issue 2, but I fear his trusty torch is being thrust my way – *Shut it, Adam Warlock, says he!*

As part of the active PBM community since February 2025 (with dabblings beforehand – see recent issues of PBM Chaos for my 3-part journey back & forth into PBM), I've had many ups and one large down. I started advocating for KJC's Monster Island game in a huge way. This paid off with an active Monster Island Discord community. We even have the creator of the game as one of our members! He watches from the shadows, but still, it's nice to have Jack on board.

About a month ago, I had a crisis of apathy. Does that sound familiar to you PBM Zombies? I bet it does. I stopped posting on many of my regular social media haunts and cancelled Monster Island Week 2025. *Ghastly!* I cancelled the only 21st-century-published Monster Island newsletter (The Monitor). *Obscene!* But I missed it. I've since produced two recent Monitors and have evolved Monster Island Week to Monster Island Day. We'll celebrate the day with an interview from Jack, a dedication, a special edition of The Monitor, and whatever else I can throw in there.

Oh, and for all you It's a Crime! fans, know there is hope! KJC responded to my note about the next game and promised to inform me before it begins. *Clean your shotguns now, hoodlums!*

Adam Warlock

PBM Personality Column #3
Reverse Grave Digging

Not to be intentionally macabre, but I was recently reading over the inspirational stories written about Rick Loomis after his passing. Turns out he was another one of those guys who picked up a shovel, started digging, and just wouldn't quit. The man had relentless drive and work ethic. He was flying to conventions every week for decades and cold-calling entire sections of the phone book to track down contacts. I think those of us interested in bringing PBM back need to tap into some of that spirit Rick had when the going gets tough. Granted we're not inventing the genre from scratch like he did, but a lot of dirt been thrown on top of us and it's going to take some shoveling to get out.

The Prospector

PBM Personality Column #4

Claim this spot!

PBM Personality Column #5

Claim this spot!

PBM Personality Column #6

Claim this spot!

PBM Personality Column #7

Claim this spot!

Grow the PBM Zombie Horde!

PBM Zombies, the magazine, could sure use your help growing the PBM Horde, and with making this a more interesting and anticipated PBM magazine for one and for all. ***Help us out by claiming a PBM Personality column in time for next issue!***

WHERE WILL NEW PBM GAMES COME FROM?

Because your turn results matter. . .

. . .more than most folks think.

Episode 62: Play-By-Mail Games

Roleplaying History Podcast Transcript

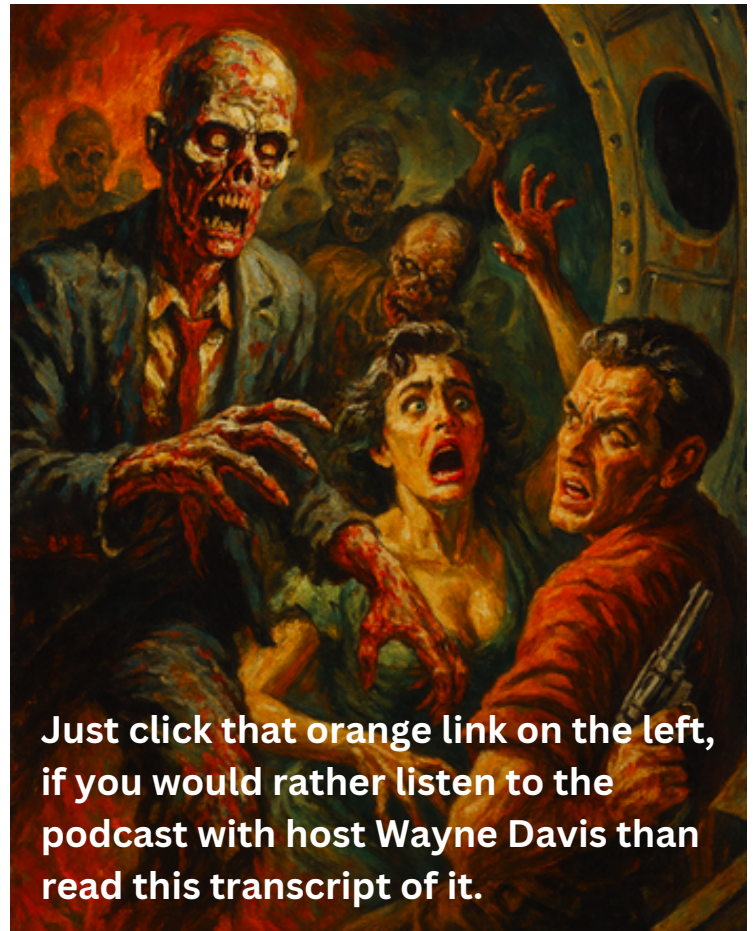### Wayne Davis

[You can also listen to the podcast!]

Welcome to Roleplaying History, the podcast where we explore the history of role playing games. I'm **Wayne Davis**, and I'll be your guide for today's tour. **Episode 62**, play by mail games. So last week, while we were doing our deep dive into **Flying Buffalo Inc.**, we learned that they got their start as a play by mail game company. Now, I know we talked about the games they ran, but I realized pretty quickly last week that most of us have probably never heard of a play by mail game.

So, I figured we'd need to deep dive that today. That being said, **Jolly Blackburn** knows about them, because he's had a character in nights at the dinner table for years who cut his teeth as a play by mail gamer. So everything I knew about it before today came from the pages of the comic book. Thanks, Jolly. And I'm actually gonna give you a two for one this week because in my research for play by mail games, I also learned about play by post games and we'll address those a little later on in the show.

That means we've got a lot of content to get in, so let's crank up the tour bus and check out our first subject for the day, play by mail games. Before we do anything, let's define what a play by mail game is. It's a game played primarily through either postal mail or email, though there are some who argue if you use another form of media, you can still call it play by mail. However, I consider play by post to be its own topic, thus its separation into its own category.

Just click that orange link on the left, if you would rather listen to the podcast with host Wayne Davis than read this transcript of it.

Now, you know me and my love of history, so we're gonna dig deep for the start of the history on this one.

Buckle up. Gaming historians and writers credit some of the first examples of play by mail games as being **Chess** and **Go**. As both of those are two player games, it's assumed both players had a board set up at their house to keep track of the moves. Moves were made by each player mailing their move to the other, then waiting for the response. Lather, rinse, repeat.
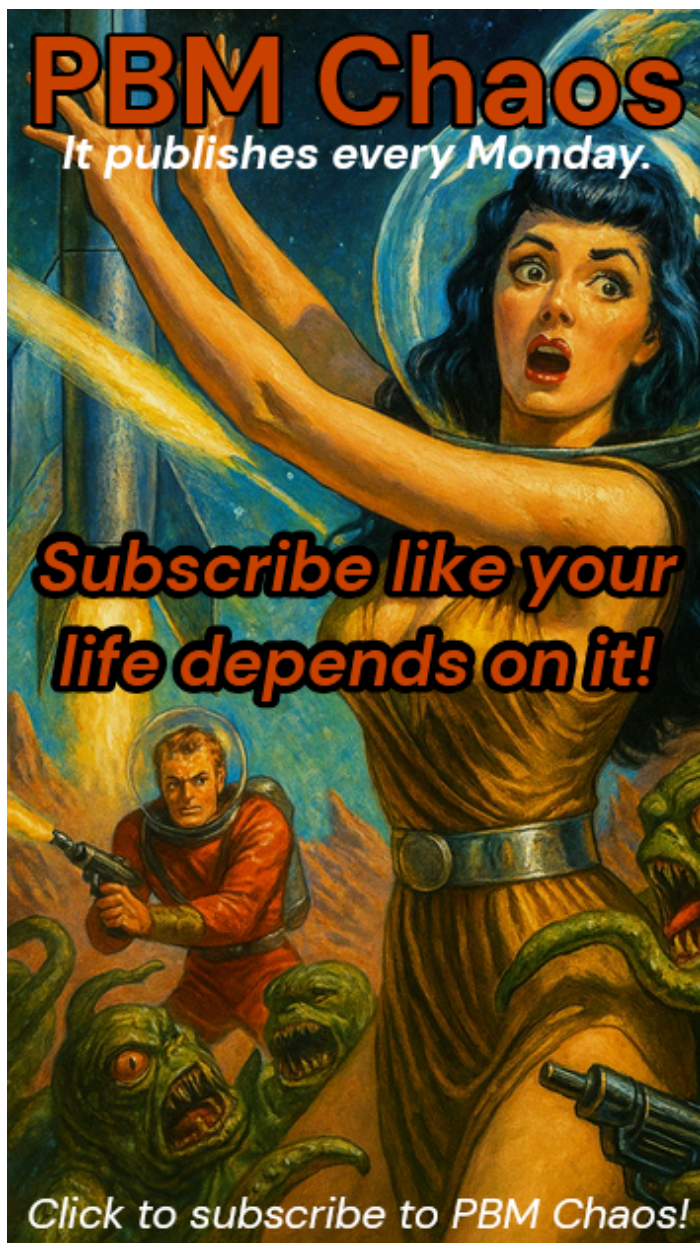
And if you know Chess or Go very well, those are games that can last for hours when the players are in the same room. So, imagine how long a play by mail game for either of those would last. Hey, if that's your style, go with it. I just know I don't have the patience for it. Now later on, multiplayer games began to show up in the play by mail genre.

Diplomacy is considered by most to be, if not the first, certainly among the first of the multiplayer games to arrive on the scene when it began in 1963. The idea behind a multiplayer play by mail game is that there's a central game master who manages the overall game but doesn't play in it. The game master accepts moves from the other players, makes notes of those moves so that all of the other players are made aware of them, and makes decisions as needed per the rules or to manage disputes between players. And again, this was all done by mail. Referring back to our game historians and writers, most agree that there wasn't a whole lot of different play by mail games going on in the nineteen sixties and information about exactly how many players were playing during that period are sketchy at best.

However, it should be added that some miniature war gamers started getting in on the trend by the end of that decade playing **Stalingrad** by mail. As we learned last week, the play by mail game was changed forever when **Rick Loomis** started up Flying Buffalo games with his business partner. We also discussed that he had a multitude of games going on at the same time which necessitated the purchasing of a computer to manage all of them. Both the creation of Flying Buffalo in 1970 and their use of a computer starting in 1971 changed the business forever as professional game moderation became a thing.

Skipping ahead for just a second, I wanted to mention that by the late nineteen eighties, all play by mail games were computer moderated.

Alright. Going back to the nineteen seventies. Our historians and writers agree that from 1970 until about, early nineteen seventy six, Flying Buffalo was the play by mail company in the United States. Sure, there were others, but Flying Buffalo was to the play by mail game what **TSR** would be for the fantasy role playing game. In early nineteen seventy-six, **Schubel and Son** joined the race with their game, **Tribes of Crane**.

The first thing that we should know about Tribes of Crane was that it was a human moderated game, which automatically made it different from Flying Buffalo's offerings. Second, Schubel and Son introduced innovations to the fee structure. Basically, what this did was allow players to pay for more options or special actions not covered in the rules. Think of it as a loot crate in a video game. And just like a loot crate, it meant that the player with money to burn had the opportunity to pick up advantages over their fellow competitors.

And I'm certain the players who didn't have the money to burn felt the same way about that as I do about loot crates. They suck. My opinion, yours may vary. The two horse race for play by mail players soon became three as **Superior Simulations** released **Empyrean Challenge** in 1978. Now there's not a lot of info on that game that's readily available, but when **Jim Townsend** reviewed it in the **PBM Corner** for **White Wolf** magazine number 11 in 1988, he called it, quote, the most complex game system on Earth, end quote.

He noted later in the article that there were some large position turn results that were a thousand pages in length. And while I couldn't confirm it, I I have to believe that that means Empyrean Challenge was a computer moderated game. I mean, I get tired of scrolling through **Facebook** for a couple of minutes. Trying to wrangle a thousand pages return results, that's brutal. Backing up a bit on our timeline, we need to show our friends in the United Kingdom a little love.

While they could play games by mail, they didn't have their own commercial play by mail system until after a fellow named **Chris Harvey** started **ICBM**. In about 1971, Harvey had been in the US and had played **Nuclear Destruction**. Harvey liked it so much, he'd gotten in contact with Rick Loomis. Loomis suggested that Harvey should start up a game in the UK, and Flying Buffalo would provide the computer moderation for it. So in creating ICBM, Harvey basically created a secondary market for play by mail games as he not only published Flying Buffalo's games, but also those from **KJC** and **Mitre Games**.

What he did basically was publish the games and get players involved. He then relied on the computer moderation provided by the companies he was licensing from. Pretty smart deal if you can get it. And not all that different from third party publishers creating content for games like **D & D**, if you think about it. **Wizards of the Coast**, well, they create the system and then third party publishers can produce their own adventures for it.

Of course, that example sounds a whole lot better than the way I presented Harvey's deal, but, hey, I'm not knocking either one of them.

By the early nineteen eighties, the number of players playing play by mail games was growing. It was noted in the **Space Gamer** in 1980 that the number of play by mail moderators was, quote, plentiful, end quote. However, despite the large number of players coming into this section of the hobby, there weren't a lot of whole play by mail companies. There were two big ones, Flying Buffalo and Schubel and Son, and a handful of others trying to work their way into that top tier, like Superior Simulations.

And that split shows in the two most popular games of 1980, Flying Buffalo's **Starweb** and Schubel and Son's Tribes of Crane. So with that many players out there and so few companies producing games, there was bound to be some unhappy players. There were, and rather than complain about it, they decided to take action. A group of them decided to launch their own company called **Adventures By Mail** around 1981. The game they launched the company with was beyond the stellar empire and it immediately became a hit with play by mail gamers.

With the success of Adventures by Mail, other players and creators got the idea to start their own play by mail companies. However, Jim Townsend noted in the same **White Wolf** article we referenced a moment ago that quote, in the late seventies and all of the eighties, many small PBM firms have opened their doors and better than 90% of them have failed. Although PBM is an easy industry to get into, staying in business is another thing entirely. Literally hundreds of PBM companies have come and gone. Most of them taking the money of would be customers with them.

End quote. In another article he wrote for White Wolf magazine, this time in February 1989,

Townsend laid out the risks for the play by mail industry. Quote, the new PBM company has such a small chance of surviving that no insurance company would write a policy to cover them. Skydivers are a better risk. End quote.

He wasn't the only one with concerns. In fact, seven years before Townsend's article, **W.G. Armintrout** wrote an article for the Space Gamer magazine where they offered their own advice to companies considering getting into the play by mail field. They suggested that the company should spend the time playtesting their games so they could work out as many potential issues with them as possible and thereby mitigate their risk of failure. By the late nineteen eighties, there were more than 100 play by mail companies in existence, but most articles from that period have noted that the majority and by majority, I mean very large majority of those companies were hobbies, which meant they were never intended to make money. Rather they were run either for fun or for the love of the game.

In White Wolf magazine number 12 in 1988, Jim Townsend estimated that in the year 1988, there were quote about a dozen profitable PBM companies in the United States, a few more in the United Kingdom, and about the same number in Australia as in the UK, end quote. Many writers noted at the time that nearly all of the play by mail companies in the world were English speaking located in countries where English was the primary language. There were a few non English companies, but so few that their numbers barely impacted the overall numbers of the play by mail games overall. While the number of companies worldwide were shrinking, the number of players playing by mail were increasing worldwide. **John Tyndall** stated in 1992 that the number of play

by mail gamers in Australia was increasing, though he noted the numbers were smaller than the rest of the world, though he also reminded readers that the percentages in numbers would be smaller due to the smaller market base Australia has as opposed to Europe and the United States.

In 1993, **Nick Palmer**, who was the founder of **Flagship** magazine, noted that play by mail gaming had worked its way through Europe to the point that as of his comments there were thousands of new players enjoying the play by mail style of game. In 02/2002, a listing of a 182 primarily European play by mail publishers and magazines dedicated to the hobby was released by Flagship magazine. In the article that accompanied it, the magazine listed only 10 non UK based companies. One each from Australia, France, Greece, and the Netherlands, and six in Germany. So with trends covered, let's get back into the historical timeline.

Into the mid to late nineteen eighties, play by mail games tended to come from multiple sources. Some of the games were adapted from games and systems that already existed, like D & D and **Shadowrun** and the like like that. Other games were specifically created and designed to be played with the play by mail system. Speaking of those already existing games adapted to the play by mail system, in 1985, **Pete Tamlin** wrote in an article for flagship issue six. Titled **Adapting Games for Postal Play**, he noted that pretty much all of the popular games for the tabletop had already been adapted to play by mail.

The results, none of them had ever been as successful as diplomacy. However, Tamlin noted that experimentation and adapting games was still ongoing and that he determined that it wasn't the adaptations of the game that

were the problem. In fact, he noted that pretty much every tabletop role playing game on the market could be played by mail. He noted that these games would be somewhat easier to run since their reliance on a game master meant that a human could manage all the turns and moves. And since those were simpler by design anyway, the results could either be mailed back or published in a fanzine for the entire group to see.

The games created specifically for the play by mail system, however, were much more complicated. We'll use the example of a thousand possible moves in an earlier point, but that's not the only game nor the only example of complex maneuvers possible in games. And because of that, the games created specifically for play by mail tended to require a computer to keep track of all the action. As the number of play by mail companies increased in the nineteen eighties, the opportunities for newsletters and magazines dedicated solely to play by mail games was increased. As of 1983, the **Nuts & Bolts of PBM** was considered to be the primary magazine in the market.

However, in July, **Paper Mayhem** entered the fray with an initial newsletter publication of a hundred. Flagship joined the party in October 1983. A UK based magazine, it covered the action in the UK, but also provided news on games hosted in the US. In November that same year, **Gaming Universal** printed its first issue in the United States. Within a couple of years, play by mail games had attracted the notice of the more mainstream gaming magazines like White Wolf.

These magazines began carrying articles for PBM games as well as advertisements for them. In 1984, PBM games were even featured in **Games** and **Analog** magazines. Our friends in

Germany got their own play by mail magazine in the early nineteen nineties. **Martin Popp** based in Sulzberg began releasing a quarterly magazine called **Post Spielbote**. I think I got the pronunciation right.

However, writers and historians agreed that the two preeminent magazines of this period were Flagship and Paper Mayhem. Historically, we've seen that as a style of gaming gains traction with the public, an association is eventually formed to support the hobby. Tabletop role players had done so with the **RPGA**, and war gamers had formed multiple societies and associations going back to the nineteen sixties. Play by mail gaming joined this group in 1984 with the creation of the **Play By Mail Association**. By 1985, the association boasted multiple charter members and had begun holding elections for key positions within the group.

One interesting proposal from the association was to reimburse players who lost money when a PBM company failed. Now as we noted earlier, that seemed to be one of the chief complaints of play by mail gamers, many of whom had bought into the hype of a new play by mail company only to lose everything they put into the game when the company folded within a matter of months. Moving into the nineteen nineties, we see that a number of changes came to the play by mail world. In the early nineties, the complexity of the games began to increase even more than they had been in the early to mid eighties. The introduction of the Internet also brought a major change to the industry as it was now possible to send moves and results by email, decreasing the amount of time it took to play a game.

For the record, play by mail games played through email technically have their own term, play by email or PBEM for short. This period also saw the rise of the play by post game, but we're gonna cover that separately from play by mail games later in the show. Getting back into the PBEMs, Flagship magazine reported in 1992 that they knew of 40 PBM game masters hosting their game on **CompuServe**. Remember CompuServe? Those were the days.

By this point, the turnaround time for play by mail games was getting so short that many magazine editors were beginning to use the term turn based games since you were waiting hours or minutes instead of days and weeks for responses. Flagship magazine made a similar comment in 2005 when they noted that the term turn based games was used even more than it had been a decade earlier, thanks to a large majority of them being played via the Internet. Going back into the early nineteen nineties, the play by mail industry was still riding the momentum of new player involvement that they built in the eighties. For the record, in 1993, Flagship magazine estimated that there were a 185 active play by mail games. In an article published that same year, the **Journal of the PBM Gamer** wrote that, quote, for the past several years, PBM gaming has increased in popularity, end quote.

However, the signs of a turning tide were there if you were looking for them. And **David Webber**, who was the editor in chief of Paper Mayhem, he'd been looking for them. In a 1994 editorial, he expressed his concerns about the growth in the play by mail community. He referred to it as disappointing and pointed also to a reduction in play by already established players. He did note, however, that his data didn't indicate a loss of gamers.

Rather, those gamers were going from five to six games per player to two to three games, and he did concede that it was possible this drop was due to financial reasons. However, by 1997, he changed his thoughts on that, noting that he'd spoken with multiple play by mail companies that had reported to him a drop in players over the previous year. The glory days of play by mail games were starting to wane. Hell, Gaming Universal magazine didn't even make it out of the eighties, having ceased publication in 1988. However, two more important magazines ended their runs in the nineties.

Paper Mayhem ended when David Webber died unexpectedly in 1998, and Flagship shut down not too long after that. So what caused the reduction in play by mail games? The Internet. In his article, the history of play by mail and Flying Buffalo, which appeared in issue 79 of the **Flying Buffalo Quarterly** in May 1999, Rick Loomis offered, quote, with the growth of the Internet, PBM seems to have shrunk and a lot of companies dropped out of the business in the last four or five years, end quote. **Shannon Applecline**, whose 2014 book, **Designers & Dragons**, the seventies, a history of the role playing game industry, is a text we reference frequently in this podcast.

She stated in that book that, quote, the advent of the Internet knocked most PBM publishers out of business, end quote. One way this happened was that the Internet allowed for the globalization of games. While before the Internet, it was necessary to have a game company or provider in the country the game was being played in or at least on the same continent in the case of Europe, the Internet brought the entire world together in a matter of seconds. Therefore, a game publisher with a play by mail game in the United States could, in

theory, have players at all four corners of the globe, and they could all play the same game at virtually the exact same time. In the nineteen nineties, the largest PBM games being played had been licensed globally with each country they were licensed in having their own license.

By the February, this was no longer necessary. The major PBM firms realized they didn't have to license anything since the net gave them full control over their product and it could be accessed worldwide. So, as we report on the history of the play by mail industry today, we first need to note that there's only one play by mail magazine still publishing. It's called **Suspense & Decision** and it launched in November 2013. Suspense & Decision, which has an online games index listed as of June 2021, 72 active PBM, PBEM, and turn based games.

However, those games have been going strong for quite some time, which has led a number of writers on the subject to believe that this section of the gaming industry isn't dead yet and may yet see a resurgence of sorts in the future. At this point in the tour, we've checked out the history of play by mail games. But in my mind, there's a lingering question. What's the advantage of play by mail games? The writer, **Judith Proctor**, gave five reasons she believed gave play by mail games an advantage over traditional games.

One, plenty of time, possibly days, to plan your move before executing it. Two, never lacking players to face that have new tactics and ideas. Three, the ability to play an incredibly complex game against live opponents. Four, meaning diverse gamers from faraway locations. Five, relatively low costs.

That fifth point was driven home by **Rick McDowell**, the designer of Alamaze. In 2019, he noted that PBM games compare favorably with the prices of games at **Barnes & Noble**, noting that many games go for $70, while a game like Nemesis, which is a top rated game, runs about a $189. And I'd note for the record that if you bought all three of the core rule books for **D & D Fifth Edition**, unless you got some sort of a deal, you'd be well around a 120 to a $150. So that $189 isn't nearly as expensive when you compare it like that. Numerous writers would add a sixth point to that.

They've noted that PBM gives you the possibility of playing the same game for years. Now, of course, where there are advantages, there are disadvantages. Writer **Andrew Greenberg** pointed back to the cost of games as a disadvantage. He noted that most PBM games require a setup cost as well as a fee per turn. He added that you don't have the same atmosphere in PBM as you would have with a face to face game.

Finally, he noted that the levels of complexity of the PBM game, as well as turn processing delays, which still happen today, are negatives that some players just can't seem to move past. Let's look at one more area of play by mail games before we move on, and it's it's something we always try to cover, the mechanics. Regardless of the game being played, every play by mail game begins with the setup, which is when the players join the game, are assigned or pick what they're playing, and the rules and fees for playing are agreed upon. The length of turnaround for turns, by the way, is considered part of the rules, so it would be covered here. Once this all goes down, the game begins.

Players begin submitting their turn orders. And in the days that games were actually played by mail, this was done by filling out a paper order sheet and then mailing it back to the gaming company. You have multiple options for orders and things you check, yada yada. Anyway, nowadays there are order sheets provided either online or via email for players to use and email back or submitting directly from the website if that's an option. The author R.

Dennard broke the typical PBM turn down into four parts. First, the company informs all of the players what the results of the previous turn were. Next, players can conduct diplomatic activities. Granted, this isn't required and some games don't allow for it, but if a game does and the players want to, this is the point at which they take place. After that, players complete their next turn orders and send them back to the GM or to the company.

Finally, the turns are processed and we begin the process again. Or, like I say frequently, lather, rinse, repeat. Next up, let's check out our second topic for the day, play by post role playing games. Let's begin this part of the tour by defining what a play by post game is. Also known as a sim, a play by post game is an online text based role playing game.

Players interact both with each other and a predefined environment via text. One feature of the play by post game is that it can be based on pretty much anything. Existing role playing games, novels that don't already have games based on them, television and movies, original settings. Hell, if you could think it up, there's probably a play by post game dedicated to it. Play by post games got their start on the large computer networks and bulletin board systems that were utilized by major American universities during the nineteen eighties.

They got their inspiration from the traditions of fanzines, which are fan published magazines for the uninitiated, and traditional role playing games. When **IRC** was created and introduced to this process, users became able to engage in real time chat, which allowed for real time role playing by post. Of course, the explosion of hosting software and browser based services such as **AOL** and **Yahoo** chat in the nineties and beyond allowed the play by post game to move off the college networks and on to the **World Wide Web**, allowing for players worldwide to engage in the process. So how does a play by post game work? Since I go by the bad GM on my other podcast, I'll use myself as a part of the example here.

Let's say I wanted to host my Hunter the Reckoning role playing game in a play by post format. First, I'd find myself a forum to use and there are many to choose from, which we'll elaborate on in a moment. I'm a pretty simple guy when it comes to using the web, so I'd probably choose either play by email or a role playing blog. For the sake of detail here, let's go with a role playing blog. Now unlike most blogs, this blog would only be accessible by the players in the game.

So, unless we, as a group, decided to allow the net as a whole to see what we're doing, we're the only ones who can. And we're certainly the only ones who can post on it. So let's say I've got four players, Tim, Susan, Bobby, and Lisa. Each of them would create their own character for the game, and they can either choose to create one out of whole cloth or use a character from an existing source that would work for our game. An example of that second choice, by the way, would be if somebody wanted to play as one of the brothers from **Supernatural**.

I'd name them, but I've never actually watched the show. I know. Bad Wayne. Now, as the GM, I'm in charge of putting together the NPCs for the game much much like in a traditional tabletop game. I have the same options as the players.

So if they're pulling characters from existing product, so can I? Oh, and I have the option to either allow the players to allow their characters to evolve and grow, I e level up, or I can choose to put the rule in that no character can be altered without my approval, which is known in the hobby as god modding. And, yeah, I guess maybe I have a bit of a god complex. My entire game group just went, duh. Now we have two options for playing the game.

We can either use online dice rolling programs linked to the blog, or if we're feeling trusting we can allow the players to roll real dice and report the results, or we can go with a diceless format. Because when it comes to gaming I don't trust the die rolls I can't see, And since I'm not technologically advanced enough to link a program to a blog, we're going diceless for this game. So here's an example of how it goes. Let's say our players have been exposed to some sort of toxin or event that alters their minds, making them turn on one another. The inevitable part of this is that somebody's gonna attack somebody.

Here's how it would look. Oh, and I'm gonna give the name of the person saying it first so you know it. Wayne, you all believe that the other three people with you are out to kill you. Without a doubt, they'll take you out if you let them. What do you do?

All four players, since I didn't name one specifically, are gonna all type the responses at

the same time. Susan, I try to kick Bobby in the balls. Tim, I pull my gun and shoot at Susan. Lisa, I go full defense so I could figure out who's coming at me first. Bobby, I'm swinging on Susan.

As the GM, I would look at these and determine who hits, who misses, and what happens next. Now since Susan and Bobby are both attacking each other, I'm gonna have to decide whether or not one of their blows would hit first. I'm also taking into account that Tim is pulling his gun to shoot at Susan. Unless he's **Billy the Kid** or **Quick Draw McGraw**, it's gonna take him an extra second to pull his gun, so I'm gonna leave him out for just second. Obviously, with nobody attacking Lisa, she can assume a defensive posture and wait and see what happens.

Now Bobby is probably expecting somebody to swing on him, so a kick south of the border would take him by surprise. So Susan gets the hit on that one, and I'd rule that Bobby would definitely be winded for a minute and would drop to his knees, possibly going down face first since he was in the process of swinging when that foot made contact with his family jewels. Susan wouldn't get a chance to enjoy that though because Tim's shot would hit her seconds later. So with those results in, we'd start the next round. Now I admit that's a pretty extreme example.

Typically, I'd call out one player at a time, see what they want to do, and possibly allow for a reaction to that action before moving on. It's up to the GM to decide how that's gonna work, and the really good ones make sure their players are well aware of that fact before they even start playing the game, much like it should be in the tabletop world. One thing I didn't really make clear is that frequently, players need to speak in third person, so that everyone understands who is talking and doing what to whom. So let's keep that in mind as well. Now, I said something about there being a number of mediums you can utilize for play by post, so let's take a little time and take a look at some of them.

Message boards are a popular forum for these types of games. Many of us know them as internet forums and this style of game has its own terms. Play by message board or PBMB for short, and they're also known as forum role playing or forum games. Most of these PBMB have dice rolling programs built into them, and they have the advantage of not being in real time.

That allows players to read over what's happened to the point and then include their own decisions before they make their next moves. **Twitter** and **Tumblr** have started being used for these types of games, though an online search will turn up a number of sites that host as well, such as toprsites.com. Play by post games are the basic style of game that I outlined a moment ago. They're hosted by message sites and many of them have a hierarchy of moderators to handle the traffic. Play by email, which we discussed a little bit earlier in the show, would definitely be something done between a small group since you'd be sharing an email thread.

And that's exactly how it works. The GM sends an email to the group describing and detailing the situation, then each member of the group does a reply all to what's out there detailing their responses to it. This form also allows a player to send an email to the GM only if they have a thought they don't want the other

gamers to know about. But most games also have a rule that if one player wants to talk to another, the GM must be cc'd in on the conversation. Play by chat is another option for gamers.

Most of us have probably heard of one of these since **Discord** is probably the most popular program to use for that type of game, and it has a ton of advantages. Each player's text color is different. So even if they don't speak in the third person, we know who did what. Plus, like so many of the other options, it's limited to those who've been invited to the party. It also allows for chat between players that cannot be seen by others, which some like and some don't like for this style of game.

The **Play By Internet** or **PBI** game takes place on a dedicated server. It also requires all of the players to be online and on the site at the same time. Each player can typically make moves independent of the other players because the software manages the outcomes. There's also a fixed time for each turn, so players have to think quickly. **Play By Wiki** is another version of that system.

Using the wiki software, it allows for editing of all posts, which can allow for alteration of previous comments in order to fix decisions that could cause plot holes in the game. It also means that the players don't have to necessarily be the best on the spot writers because they can go back later and make their stuff look better. The role playing blog was the forum I chose for my example. **Tumblr** and **LiveJournal** are two popular hosts for these. Now frequently, one of these games consists of multiple blogs, which I didn't use for my example.

There's the main blog, which is the blog I maintain and control as the sources of the game itself, and the player blogs, which the players use to post their moves. Each player has their own blog, and they role play by reblogging each other's posts and adding their own actions to them. Last up, we've got role playing via **Google Documents**. These are a lot like blogs and wikis in that we can set the users to just be those involved with the games. Plus, Google Docs is an easy program to get, since it's free and it's pretty easy to use.

I mean, I use it all the time. It should be noted that this is a very new way to play, so it's not nearly as popular or widespread as the others. So after looking at what a play by post game is and where we can find it, there's still a question left to ask. What exactly is a play by post game? The best example to me would be a fan fiction created by a group of people.

One story, multiple writers. And with that, we've come to the end of today's tour. Next week, we're gonna take a look at a couple of games I've touched on in recent episodes, **GURPS** and **RIFTS**. As we wrap up this week, I wanted to take a minute to announce something big that we've done for Bad GM Productions. Earlier this week, we launched our website, and I'd encourage all of you to check it out.

It's **badgmproductions.net**. We've got links to both the podcasts there as well as pictures of the players in my home game since they get mentioned in every episode just about a bad GM's campaign build along. So if you're curious about what we all look like, check it out. Also, we'll be posting website exclusive videos there as well as polls about upcoming shows and just other thoughts that come to our goofy little

minds. So make sure you bookmark it and make it a part of your regular routine.

Again, that's **badgmproductions.net**. And speaking of **Bad GM's** campaign build along, I would kindly request that you give that show a shot. We take one game, build out an entire campaign for it, and you can use it for your game free of charge. Right now, we're working up a game for **Deadlands Classic**, **Paranoia**, and **Hunter** in the future. You just never know.

That's Bad GM's campaign Build Along available wherever you get your podcasts or at our website **badgmproductions.net**. The music we use for this show comes from **pixabay.com**. Check them out for license free, royalty free music for your next project. Role playing history is a production of Bad GM Productions. Check us out on Facebook, and I've been doing this wrong.

I had to go back and check again. This is how you do it. **Facebook.com/gaming/badgmprod**. That's **badgmprod**, all one. Twitter, you can hit us up at **bad g m p**.

YouTube, **bad g m productions**. Email, **badgmproductions@gmail.com**. And I would note we have links to all of those online at bad g m productions dot net. Next week, it's alphabet soup. Alright.

Next week, we're touring GURPS and RIFTS, but that's next week. Until then, I'm **Wayne Davis** and your role playing history.
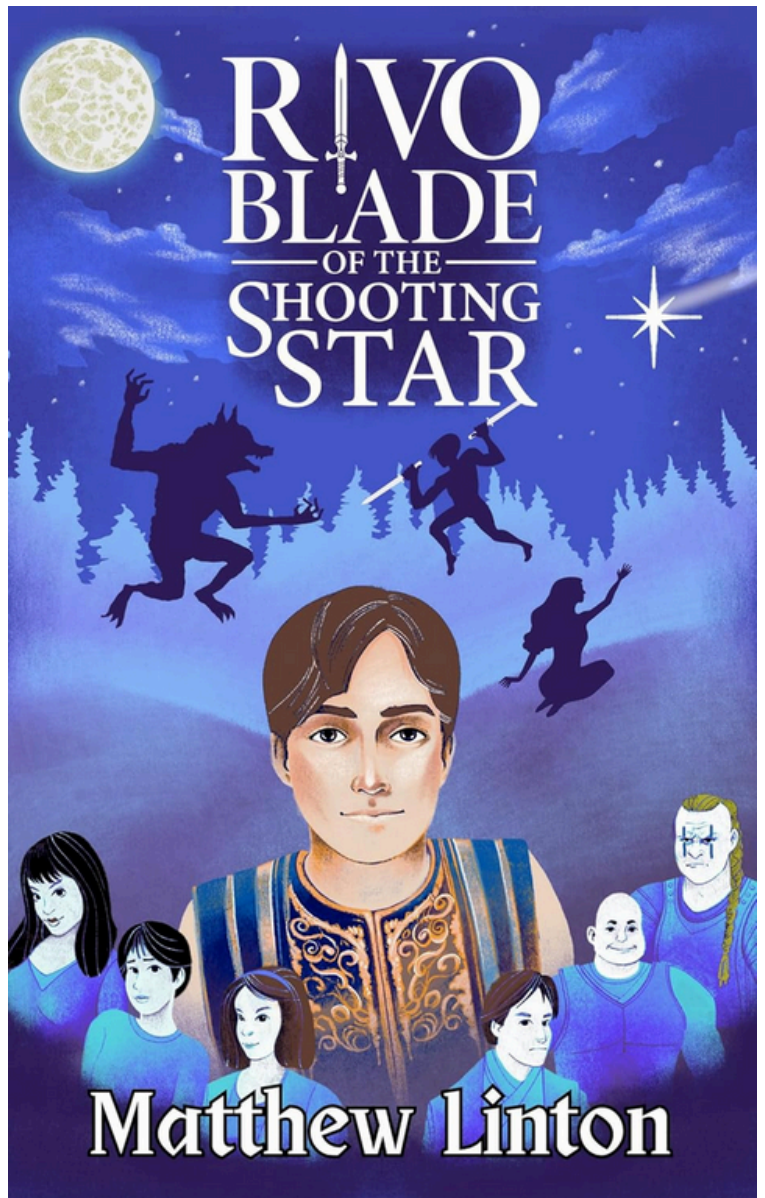
Which kingdom will you rule?

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An Imagination Game
Daryl P Holloman
(aka Hammer)

I have mentioned in a couple of issues of PBM Chaos that **Forgotten Realms: War of the Avatars** has become my favorite play-by-mail game!

What adds to the enjoyment of this game by **Reality Simulations** is that it stimulates my imagination when I am filling out strategies, but even more when I receive my RSI envelope in the mail and read the results of how my Realm has fared every 28 days!

I do realize that your imagination comes into play with most any PBM Game that you have played or may be currently playing, but the way Forgotten Realms stimulates my imagination makes this particular PBM Game increasingly enjoyable with every Turn that I have played thus far!

When a Player receives his or her First Turn Packet with an assigned Realm, there is also included a one-page Map showing the Hexagons surrounding their assigned Realm Communities with Terrains!

You can start using your imagination as you gaze at your map, imagining what hostile or friendly forces are lurking in the various Terrain Hexagons that are surrounding your Human Communities!

There are Orcs, Ogres, Dragons, Elves, Dwarves, Giants, Dire Wolves, Barbarians and Kobolds; plus, other races to be discovered defending hidden Communities or marching from Hexagon to Hexagon looking for either a fight or an opportunity to join an Army in your Realm!

Although I have had the good fortune of making pen pal friends with a couple of Prison Inmates who have sent me written information with details of Community locations etc, I really enjoy looking at my Hexagon Map and imagining where I should send an Exploring Human Light Cavalry or other Human Unit to find out what forces are lurking beyond the borders of my starting Communities!

Reading the results of those explorations further stimulates my imagination!

I will write an Article in a future issue of PBM Chaos regarding my reading such results!

However, for those of you who would rather have your imagination expanded by a Sci Fi Game, rather than the Fantasy-setting of Forgotten Realms, I heartily recommend checking out Galac-Tac!

To discover more about **Galac-Tac**, you may read about it online at **talisman-games.com** and allow your imagination to soar into the Stars until you decide to join the battle for Galaxy Supremacy!

Meanwhile, enjoy stimulating your imagination with the PBM Game(s) or Online Game(s) you are currently playing, or read PBM Chaos to expose your imagination to other PBM Possibilities!

Dungeonworld PBM
● 6 Online ● 23 Members
Est. Mar 2023

Go to Server

Godstar Games: THE LAND 0
● 4 Online ● 19 Members
Est. Jun 2024

This is the Discord for THE LAND, which is a fantasy RPG text-based game system. Currently in the beta stages, beta players

Go to Server

The Chronicles of Gravenheim 0
● 3 Online ● 16 Members
Est. Sep 2025

Gravenheim is a story-telling game. It works like a role-playing game in that you take on the role of a character in the city you start

Go to Server

Guild House
This square is the guild house of one of the in-game guilds. Walk onto it for a description. Issue an 'L 2'order on it for more info on the guild.

Shallow Water
Waist-deep or shallower water fills this square. Some combat modifiers and low damage are possible. The square can be moved over as if it were 'open'.

Bottomless Pit
A terrible black pit fills the square. This terrain is impassable and should be treated like a wall.

Portcullis
A stout iron portcullis is here. Normally, these are open and can be treated as an open square. Rarely, they are closed. Look around the area for more info.

Bed
There is a bed in this square. See the rooms 'look' description for the state of the bed. The square can be moved over as if it were 'open'.

Stairs Down
There is a flight of stairs leading down. See the rooms 'look' description for more info. The square can be moved over as if it were 'open'.

Stairs Up
There is a flight of stairs leading up. See the rooms 'look' description for more info. The square can be moved over as if it were 'open'.

Courtyard/Market
This square is part of a courtyard or market area. Buy and Sell orders can be issued here as shown in "Courtyards" in this guide.

Locked Door
There is a locked door here. The square cannot be entered or passed until a rogue has unlocked the door.

Magical Trader
One of the enigmatic Magical Traders is here. Magical Traders very seldom move. All Buy and Sell orders can be issued while on a Magical Trader.

Wall / Sheer Rock
This square is completely blocked by a wall, or sheer rock and cannot be entered or passed through.

Unlocked Door
This square is filled with an unlocked doorway. It can be treated exactly like an open square for movement and combat purposes.

Crawlspace
This corridor is a rough low crawlspace. It can be treated like an open square, although hidden combat modifiers with long weapons do apply.

Treasure Chest
There is a treasure chest here. You can attempt to open it using a 'Z 60' order, although this can be very dangerous for the untrained. The square can be moved over as if it were 'open'.

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DUNGEONWORLD

The Largest PBM Adventure Game Ever Made!

DungeonWorld is a character-based multiplayer turn-based fantasy adventure game.

It is set in an epic world full of monsters, mayhem, swords and sorcery.

You can play DungeonWorld completely for **FREE** with a single character, or play commercially with as many characters as you like.

Whichever way you choose, all players are in the same continuous shared world. It's the biggest game of its kind on earth! *Enjoy!*

Private Land
This square marks the edge of some private land owned by a noble or lord. It costs 2 Move Points to cross. Issue an 'L 2' order for info on the owners name.

Road
This square is a road. Travel on it costs 1 Move Point. Roads are useful for faster travel between cities and places of interest.

City, Castle or Keep
This square is a city, castle or keep of some kind. It costs 1 Move Point to cross. Some of these can be entered. Issue an 'L 2' order to do so.

Dungeon Entrance
This square is a Dungeon Entrance. It costs 1 Move Point to cross. Issue an 'L 2' order to enter the Dungeon.

Magical Place
This square is a magical place of some kind. It costs 2 Move Points to cross. Issue an 'L 2'order on it for more info on the magical place.

Broken Land
This terrain is a harsh open area covered in cracks, pits and ravines. It costs 3 Move Points to Cross.

Town or Village
There is a town or village here. This square costs 1 Move Point to cross. Some of these squares act as limited traders. A few (but not many) can be entered using the 'L 2' order.

Light Forest
This terrain type is woods or light forest. Hunting/Foraging is usually good here. Vision is reduced slightly if you end your turn in Light Forest. It costs 2 Move Points to cross.

Steep Hills
This terrain is tough going. Steep Hills make for slow progress, but do increase your vision when you end your turn on them. They cost 4 Move Points to Cross.

Gentle Hills
Pleasant rolling hills which slow progress a bit but increase vision when you end your turn on them. Gentle Hills cost 3 Move Points to cross.

Heavy Forest
This sort of terrain is hard to travel and often teeming with danger. Heavy Forest decreases vision when you end your turn in it. It costs 3 Move Points to cross and can hide IDs of characters in it.

Mountains
This terrain type is impassable. To cross a mountain range you must first find a pass of some kind.

Open Land
Can be fields, farmland, wasteland or just about any other sort of open area you can imagine. Open Land costs 2 Move Points to cross.

Body of Water
Water comes in the form of streams, lakes, shallow and deep rivers. It costs 4 Move Points to cross, although some types are impassable without a bridge or boat.

Galac-Tac

Interpreting Combat Reports

Davin Church

Combat reports in **Galac-Tac** would seem to be trivial information, but they're not. Of course, each report contains the usual details about the ships involved in the combat, but there's much more information that can be inferred from them when reviewed carefully by an experienced player. Strategic interpretation of these reports can be an art form in itself and can help you play a much better game.

Basics

The report layout is reasonably simple with labeled columns, but there are a few small things you don't want to overlook.

First and foremost, did you destroy all of your opponent's ships? If you left any of them at all alive then that means that they got a combat report too, which provides them as much information about you as you can gain from them. It also means that the combat went all 10 rounds without a decisive victor, and that in turn means that your two fleets were relatively evenly matched. Consider those consequences before your next encounter. And don't forget that if you were on the near-losing end of that battle, you'd better take your remaining ships and leave before your opponent can finish the job next turn. Also either one or both of you might reinforce your fleets to try to do a better job next time, instead of breaking off, and don't forget that your opponent may do a better reinforcing job than you.

Another useful piece of information on the combat report is the tiny little column marked "TL". This column is often overlooked, especially since near the beginning of the game it always says the same thing. But this is each ship's Tech Level. Not only does tech level have a substantial affect on the outcome of the battle, it's telling you something important about your enemy's empire. Their empire's tech level must be at least as high as any of their ships. And you should expect that future combats may include many or all of their ships of that tech level. This is particularly useful to note about small ships such as scouts and freighters since those appear most often on a combat report (because they're easily defeated).

That also means that those trivial ships were probably constructed from scratch since that tech level was reached (rather than refit later), and that may well be some time ago in game terms (because new trivial ships are not frequently constructed later in the game and are not worth refitting), so that empire may well have an even higher tech level than those reported by the time you see one. Be cautious.

A fun thing to note here is what your enemy is naming their ships. If they have nothing but bland names such as "X", then your opponent is not being very imaginative and getting into the spirit of the game. Most players' trivial ships are quite commonly named a single, meaningful name such as "Scout" or "Freighter" or "Fighter" – it's difficult to come up with

interesting names for many hundreds of indistinguishable ships. But watch out for numbered ships (e.g. Scout 0042), as that can often tell you how many ships he's building of that type. But for the larger ships, a player that's having fun with the game and building their empire on a theme of some sort will be giving those ships theme-specific and often unique names. This will tell you something about how they enjoy playing Galac-Tac, and if you'll get "in character" too, are likely to make a good communications partner. Of course, be careful of your own ship names giving your opponents the same kind of information about yourself.

Missing Fleets

OK, the first thing that a combat report will tell you is if you don't get one! In that case, up in the main body of your report you will find a location where every ship there is listed as "Missing". Yes, this means they're all dead, but since nobody was left alive to report that explicit death they're officially considered to be Missing In Action (MIA).

In this situation, an enemy fleet has decisively beaten your fleet so that immediately tells you something obvious about your relative strengths. But why were you defeated? Was it because your ship or fleet design was inferior and could be improved? Or was it because his ship and fleet design was especially well-tuned to defeat you? Or was it simply the obvious reason that he had many more ships/SSD/ weapons than you did? Or was it some combination of these reasons.

Don't just ignore such a defeat – use it to improve yourself before the next encounter. If he was just killing one of your scout ships,

that's typically no big deal if you were just looking to see if someone was there. It's virtually impossible for a lone scout ship to survive any combat. But if you're anxious to get off a scout at that location, build special scout ships with maximum inertia drives and send in several at a time – you might just get back a partial scouting report.

Or if he has just killed one of your unarmed freighters you'd best be careful. He might be trying to take your colony away from you. Or he might be beginning an attack on your empire's economic system by disrupting the flow of PV. And you're likely to have another shuttle coming into the same place the next turn and it would likely meet the same fate. So either reroute your shuttles until something else can be done or counter-attack to see if you can defeat his fleet (assuming he leaves it there).

While you're doing that, see if you can do something else to prevent a similar occurrence elsewhere. Arming shuttles can help, but that's usually only effective against the tiniest attacking fleets and is usually too expensive for that minimal protection. Better would be to set up permanent defenses in those systems or a separate roving sentry to check in on them from time to time.

But the more difficult situation is when a larger ship or fleet loses the battle. For that it's critical to know what kind of fleet defeated yours so you know what you can and cannot do about it. If the attack occurred in your own colony or PC then you should get a scouting-type report from them about the enemy that remains in the system. Otherwise you should send in some of your own scouts to try to determine something about the size and composition of the enemy before you can

consider what to do about the loss of your fleet. In fact, if you're attacking an unknown fleet it's usually a good idea to try to send in a scout or two alongside your attack fleet (with separate orders, of course) so that if your fleet ends up being destroyed the scout (if it's not caught) might still get you a report of the size of the fleet that killed you.

Trivial Combats

In the case where you get a combat report against a trivial intruder, it's usually a scout ship out looking for general information. This usually does not provide very useful information, except in a few cases. If they have just scouted one of your production centers, or worse, your home world, now they know that they've found an intentionally-protected system. If they get a report back from an undetected scout that you have large platforms (too big to be mobile) then they also know that they have at least found a production center. Either way you should protect yourself against more scouts and possibly an invasion. Moving your home world might also be something to consider if you think it might have been located.

If they have sent in multiple scouts to the same location then they are trying to deduce your level of defense at that location and you should immediately provide for additional system protection and improve your anti-scout defenses.

If you've got a trivial scout here and there then it's nothing to worry about. But if you start catching many scouts at the same time scattered across your empire then your opponent is probably trying to quickly gather detailed information on your empire's maps,

developments and defenses, often in preparation for a large attack of some sort. Be careful of further incursions or large attacks in the near future.

Ship Compositions

The first level of combat strategy involves the design of individual ships, both yours and his. Look at the combat report to see what kind of ship designs he has in his fleets, and keep in mind what else you've found out about him in other combat reports. This information is critical to being able to plan for future military encounters with that empire. Then compare your own ship designs with his to see how they fared in this combat. If he had fewer ships but they still put up a respectable battle, perhaps you could learn something from his designs. If he did poorly under the circumstances, see what portions of your designs might have given you a relative benefit that you might use again for a future advantage.

The first thing to consider in combat ship design is the balance of shield generators to weapons in each ship. The more (and more effective) weapons, relatively speaking, the faster you can kill off the enemy ships. But the more defensive shield points you have then the longer your ship can survive, doing more damage to the enemy during that time. So a balance is called for in any particular size (SSD) of ship. See how his shield-to-weapon ratio performed compared to yours.

Another important consideration in the ship designs is how many inertia engines each ship has. For best combat benefits use the maximum inertia engines that you can on a combat ship, even though it's expensive. The inertia engines determine how often your

weapons damage the enemy and how often the enemy weapons can damage you. Obviously this has a big effect on combat results. Did any of your or their ship designs have fewer engines than the maximum? That's something to consider changing for your own ships, or exploiting the enemy's lack thereof.

Tech level differences are terribly important in combat as well. Keep your tech level as high as you can reasonably afford and keep your warships refit to that level. If the enemy has a tech level advantage, avoid conflict unless you greatly outnumber him (say a 4:1 or better advantage). If your tech level is higher, you can assume generally better destructive capabilities without as great a numerical superiority, and thus may be able to attack him more effectively in more places with somewhat fewer resources. Even with similarly-sized fleets a tech advantage can allow you to win combats with minimal to zero damage to your own ships.

Fleet Compositions

The more difficult level of combat strategy occurs when dealing with the way fleets are constructed out of various different kinds of ships. Look at the fleet compositions in the combat report and compare them. The larger the combat fleets are the more important is the overall composition of that fleet.

For instance, in small fleets hangered fighters are the most versatile and cost-effective combat ships to use. But as the size of the fleet increases little by little, larger and larger ships become more important to include. Large fleets work best when there are a wide variety of ship types and sizes included in the fleet.

Having many ships of different sizes greatly affects the targeting over the entire combat, as each size of ship tends to fire first on enemy ships of its own size, as mentioned in the rule book. Thus, a fleet (of empire A) of entirely fighter-sized ships tends to fare poorly against a fleet (empire B) that contains a mix of 5-SSD, 10-SSD, and 20-SSD ships, even when the total fleet sizes are about the same. Empire A will fire solely at enemy fighters until they are all disabled, during which time the entirety of empire B's fleet will be shooting at the fighters with more powerful weapons against empire A's more limited shielding. And that's just the beginning of a much more comprehensive combat-details issue that isn't covered here.

So compare your fleet's ship size composition with his to see what advantages one side or the other might have had in this battle and decide what you might be able to do in future battles to improve or take advantage of your situation.

Also consider that large fleets should have a mix of weapon types. P-Types are the best all-around weapons, but other weapon types are also quite important in large battles. For instance, T-Types are very helpful when fighting battleships and large platforms because they do a lot of damage to large ships early in the battle, knocking down many enemy shields and making them more susceptible to later ship attacks. Drones are especially valuable if the enemy has his own drones or T-Types and they can reduce the effectiveness of these enemy attack methods. See more details in the rules about how the different weapon systems work and figure out how they might be best employed together.

So what can you learn from your opponent's fleet construction on any combat reports you

get? As you can see, prior information about enemy fleets is terribly important to planning your own fleet composition for best effect. Learning as much as you can from your previous combat reports (and scouting reports) is really important to configuring your own fleets against them for future battles.

Damage Results

There's also a lot you can learn from the amount of damage that individual ships have taken during the combat. For instance, if most of a group of a certain size of enemy ship (fighters, for instance) were reduced to or near a "//" rating, that tells you that they were far overmatched (by size category) in the combat – they took much more damage in a single round than it took to destroy them, so there were a lot more ships firing at them at the same time than were needed. A better use of that firepower would have been to spread it around to different sizes of ships by including a larger variety of ship sizes in your own fleet.

If you won your battle but still took lots of minor damage on many of your ships, then that often means that you don't have enough shielding on those ships (or he had quite a few more ships of that size firing at you).

If any of your ships were destroyed while most of their rating code was reasonably intact, then most likely you have some portion of your beginning rating code (such as inertia engines or a weapon type) with only a 1 or 2 in that spot in the code and the combat ended with a 0 (blank) in that space. That represents a location in your ship that an enemy weapon has destroyed and another weapon was able to punch through the hole that it left in your ship and destroyed it from the inside (excess

damage, from the game rules). If so, try not to build ships with very few items of a particular type that may be sensitive to leaving a gap in your ship structure. For example, a 1D+1P+1T1/1;1;1/1-1 is the worst possible rating you could build when just considering this reason alone.

If either set of ships included T-Type weapons, this can tell you something about how long the combat lasted (i.e. how fast you killed him). Look at the number of missiles expended by a ship during the combat and compare it to the number of T-Type launchers it had. For example, if a ship started with 1T10 and had 1T10(4) left at the end of the combat, then they expended 6 missiles over the course of a 6-round combat. That tells you how quickly and easily you defeated him, which tells you something about your effectiveness in combat (at least in this particular case).

If you cannot see any obvious reason why one side had the advantage over another, particularly in smaller encounters, review the rules on how the commands given to ships affects how combat begins. It may be that one side got in one (or even two) free shots on the other before his opponent could begin shooting back. This can turn the tide in smaller battles and gives one side an edge in larger ones. So if the combat report seems otherwise fairly even and the results do not, look into that possibility.

Another issue that does not directly appear on the combat reports that you might be able to infer, is the use of the Combat or Standing orders. For instance, let's say you have a mix of different sizes of platforms (small to large) defending your home world along with a number of other ships, and yet your platforms took an excessive beating, relative to the rest of

your fleet, even from a slightly weaker attack fleet. From that you might infer that he gave his fleet Combat orders to concentrate on platforms. Other such inferences are possible, too.

In general, if one side or the other took more damage than the above considerations alone would imply, you could then do some additional detailed calculations to tell you more about how the combat might well have played out. For each side, and for each ship classification, tally up the number of weapons of each type that were being fired. Then figure the damage each of those weapons is capable of. Then, assuming what group of enemy ships each ship and weapon type might be firing at, use the rule book to determine the percentage chance of that weapon getting a hit. Multiply all those items together and sum the results to see how much actual damage your ships are probably sending downrange in each round (as long as it lasts). Then also compare how many shield points each opposing ship has protecting it. Compare the damage being done by each side to the shielding of the other side's ships. Just looking at these totals on both sides will tell you something about how fast you can expect one side to defeat the other – the most important part of which is about how many combat rounds the defensive shielding will last before the ships start taking actual damage. And if you know (or can estimate) something about an enemy fleet before you attack, you can also do this same thing in advance of combat to predict how you might fare.

Scouting Reports

As you might have noticed, knowing what your opponent's ships are in a combat is necessary to knowing how that combat played out. A combat report (or several of them) can help you learn how an enemy constructs his ships and fleets in general and where weaknesses might be found. But that's not the only way to gain information of this sort.

While it's not nearly as detailed as a combat report, a scouting report can still give you vital information about what you are confronting. Scouting is cheap and easy, especially in comparison to constructing a winning war fleet to get a combat report. If a scout dies, then you know they have protective (Patrol or Sentry) measures in place at that location and thus they consider it important enough to be thus protected. But any scouts that can return information can be invaluable in planning future offensive and defensive operations.

It would seem that a scouting report does not give you very much information, but that would be a mistake to assume. It enables you to make some reasonable guesses as to the composition of a fleet. First of all, it tells you the number of ships present, which is very important. If your opponent has 100 ships and you've got 5, don't attack! Even if your ships are large and his are small you can still be overwhelmed by numbers.

The last number given is the total SSD of his fleet. If his SSD is twice yours, don't attack! If you have twice his SSD then you stand a reasonable chance of winning, although not necessarily undamaged. But if you take his total SSD and divide it by the number of his ships that will give you an average ship size. An average size tells you a lot more about what you would encounter, even without a full combat report. An average size of something near 5 SSD means he has a fighter-based fleet. If it averages 10 or even 20 SSD then he's got a lot of larger ships.

The middle number shown, if any, is the size of the largest ship. If this is only 10, for example, then he doesn't have any big ships and an average near that maximum means the fleet will have to be composed of a large number of this size (e.g. 10 SSD) of ships. If the largest ship is in the 20-30 range then he's got battleship-sized ships and you should be prepared for a serious fight. But if his average is also high like that, then he has few small ships in his fleet and that may signal a weakness that you can exploit. If the largest ship is 40+ SSD then you've found a production system, perhaps it's even a home world! But it also means that it will be a tough nut to crack, so carefully observe the average ship size and try to estimate what his fleet would look like before engaging him.

So use scouting reports as if they were limited-information versions of combat reports and get as many of them as you can, throughout the game. Intelligence information is always useful!
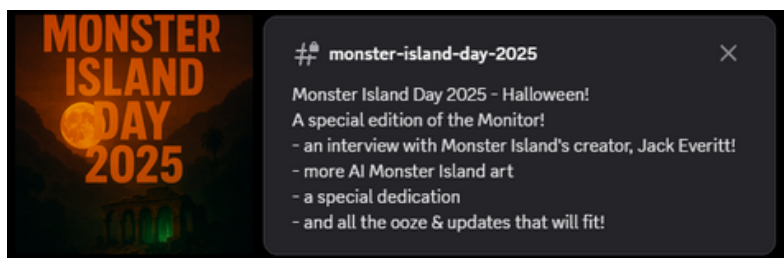
Suggestions for Galac-Tac

Charles Mosteller

[1] Instead of the Galac–Tac rulebook talking about both **impulse engines** and **inertia engines**, which can be a source of unnecessary confusion, only one or the other of the two terms need to be retained, with the other one eliminated from the rulebook.

Even the **Ship Designer** tool in GTac, the Player Assistant Program for Galac–Tac, features the use of the term **Impulse** when players use it to create new starship designs. **Consistency in the use of of terminology** would be beneficial to newcomers.

Appearances of Terms in the Galac-Tac Rulebook

impulse engine – Pages 26
impulse engines – Pages 26, 27

inertia – Pages 17
inertial speed – Pages 23
inertial speeds – Pages 22
inertia drive – Pages 16, 17, 24, 27, 33
inertia drives – Pages 10, 13, 17, 18, 24, 25, 27, 35, 39
inertia engines – Pages 23

[2] For the windows/boxes in GTac that feature a scroll bar, implement a programming change to enable the computer mouse's scroll wheel to allow for the scrolling up and down of these scroll bars inside of the GTac player assistant program

This would improve both **user friendliness** and **intuitiveness** of GTac's interface.

Galac-Tac Galaxy #228 is now forming!

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THE MONSTERS OF DUTCHMAN REVEALED:

CURSES AND NIGHTMARES

Bryan Ciesielski

Up the trail a ways stands a pallid figure carrying a flickering lantern. The man looks old--much too old to be out here alone, especially at dusk. The mournful wail of a distant coyote drives the point home.

The old timer raises his lantern in greeting, sending severe shadows slashing across his face and shivers across your skin. *"Reckon you could help a fella find his way?"*

His hollow eye sockets and decaying flesh suggest he never will.

Superstition Mountain is a place of mystery, danger, and legend. In the upcoming play-by-mail game _Dutchman_, this mountain is not just a backdrop—-it's alive with curses, dark energies, and the restless spirits of those who have fallen victim to its unforgiving terrain. The game has four distinct monster types that reflect the dark history and horrors that await those who venture too far...

Animalistic Monsters

These creatures are men who have embraced (or perhaps, been consumed by?) the primal, predatory nature of the desert's wildlife. From the Rattle Man, who embodies the cunning and danger of the snake, to the Cactus Monster, a grotesque fusion of man and desert flora, they are a reminder that this is not only a place of beauty but also of deadly survival.

The Undead

Restless spirits and cursed remains also wander the back trails. These monsters are bound to the land by unfinished business, tragic deaths, and dark curses. Watch out for the Headless Miner, a prospector who delved too greedily and too deeply into the cursed veins of the mountain and now shambles along with unnatural purpose--and no head. Or the Dusty Zombie, a man who perished in the unforgiving wilderness only to have his body overtaken by the desert itself. His cracked and leathery skin now oozes a fine, powdery dust.

Psychotics

Then there are those who have been driven mad by their time in the desert, their minds twisted into something monstrous. Whether it's

Pyro Pete, whose obsession with fire has turned him into a walking inferno, or Gilded Jack, whose greed for gold transformed him into a bizarre, golden figure, these monsters are a reflection of human flaws taken to horrifying extremes.

Demons

The demonic monsters are the most feared of all--otherworldly beings of raw supernatural power long whispered about by local tribesmen. These creatures, like the so-called "Hunger That Walks" (a hulking beast with a gaping maw and insatiable hunger for flesh) or "Sky Breaker" (an elemental storm demon), are not bound by human morality or reason.

What else lurks just over the next bluff, or in the shadows of the next ravine? Are you brave, or fool, enough to find out for the sake of treasure?

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Milchamah

53-96 Milchamah
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(Double-click star for more information)

Have you played Galac-Tac?