

SUSPENSE



Issue # 2
December 2013

& DECISION



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ISSUE # 2
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SUSPENSE & DECISION



Issue # 2

Welcome to issue #2 of Suspense & Decision magazine - just in time for the Christmas holiday season!

We hope that all of our readers will enjoy what we've packed into this issue. So, as you turn the page, prepare yourself for this PBM present that we've spent the month of December wrapping for you.

Whether you've been naughty or nice, it's Christmas, once more, in the realm of play-by-mail and turn-based gaming.

*Unto one and all, we wish you a very **Merry Christmas** and a **Happy New Year!** May God bless each and every last one of you, and may this holiday season be a bright and blessed one for all mankind!*

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Remembering the Keys of Bled

By Jim "The Scribe of the Ages" Kemeny

Spellbinder Games Keys of Bled was a complex and very deep game that ended sometime in the late 1990s. It was ideal for sub-creating. Here I want to describe one of my end-point positions in one of the oldest and most addictive PBM games I have been in.

I kept the last turn of each of my three positions, but never imagined they would be worth keeping - until now. I am sorry I did not keep a copy of the rules, too.

My oldest clan in the game was Balgownies Bairns last turn being No.104, and with the objective role of Insurgent. This was a conventional military position, enabling me to explore the game. I liked it, so began to diversify. The youngest clan was called Israel headed up by Rebecca with a Matriarch objective role, on turn 62. My idea was to develop the 12 tribes of Israel, but only got as far as Benjamin, Isaac, Kohn and Levi. They were based in Firstholm.

The Gnos

My second oldest clan was called The Gnos, and as a member of the 1960s generation I made the classic choice to sub-create in the spirit of the Age of Aquarius. Its leader was called Sib, short for sibling. Naturally, my position was given "the objective role" of Priest, which I guess was fine. This clan was in Farholm and was on turn 81.

I made my clan sea-based, with a fleet of 5 warships: Flagship *Maharishi*, the other four *Krishnamurti*, *Rudolph Steiner*, *Esterhazy I* and *Esterhazy II* and a base for the ships. The two Esterhazy ships were allied, Esterhazy (a [Dual Monarchy](#) Hungarian magnate whose name, Esterházy means *House of Esther*).

Esterhazy was Chris Dempsey's response to my seeking a naval ally, so the NPC needed to be treated well. Of course, there was no way of knowing that the two allied ships might turn against me at the worst and most vulnerable

moment. But I hoped to be able to prove my reliability, so this was a calculated risk. Here I quote from my turn results:

"Barse has knowledge of Hurst's business with Esterhazy. Muktar El Kabar is an ally of Esterhazy and it is thought that Hurst is being well paid for his service. Hurst has instructions to land his cargo outside the town. Also the disquiet that you feel about this business is lost on him. There are no reports of sightings by the fire rock guards and the first delivery will arrive at the beginning of spring. He cannot recommend anyone from the 'higher' families for the position of mercenary captain, neither can he spare any of his own men. He also wishes to express (sic) your recruitment in his town. Whilst he will not stop you from doing this he will not co-operate either."

Each warship had 25 FM and 25 sailors. The FM were equipped with leather armour, stabbing

sword, and longbow. There were also 3 Escort Ships: *Cosmic Consciousness*, *Transcendence* and *Nirvana*, each with 20 FM (20 Leather Armour, 20 Stabbing Sword, 20 Sling).

I was gradually adding ships to create a fleet that would be hopefully too strong to be defeated by a player. Chris, of course, could throw anything at this to cause endless problems, as indeed he did. I also built a fortified settlement on the coast with a strong and deep harbour. It had security forces and spies. I had plans to build heavy catapults and had 100 potters making containers to be filled with oil, to be lit by the FM shooting fire-arrows: the nearest I could come to [Greek fire](#). But this was pre-empted by our purchase of a Bledian item called *fire rock*, which was to be delivered in the spring.

Sib also organised a group of Dancing Dervishes under a character called Darvish. See the Wikipedia item on [Whirling Dervishes](#), a kind of ecstatic sufi dancing. There was also a group of Mendicants,

led by Francis, conducting spiritual discourse and group meditations in the town for any interested to take part (this was not a subgroup). Sib attended these and during those times appointed another person to act as acting clan leader.

I also created a subgroup training as mountain commandos under Attila. It was to train up in mountain skills and find carrier eagles which were known to roost in the mountains. Atilla's subgroup was still training and the first unit of 25 was to be ready by the start of winter, when Keys of Bled ended.

Did anyone ever discover the secret of Bled? I don't believe I ever heard of anyone who did.

Why was the game called *The Keys of Bled*?

Central to the game were the powerful items that could be found, bought or investigated.

The keys I had in my inventory were part of a standard search. I imagine that just about everyone was looking for them and investigating them.

One part of this my last turn result was devoted to them, as follows: "In the town there have been bought 5 keysearcher potions for 250 gold. 500 SP have been sold for 5000 gold. The Mutant Key has been bought from the vindarer for 1200 gold...The vindarer stats that 1 fertility potion is enough for your whole herd of HA [Herd animals] for one season. Use another on your horses in the same way, perhaps? Smear the keysearcher [potion] over the key to learn it's use."

In the paragraph above are GM hints and how to use the keysearcher potion. What the Mutant Key is remained to be investigated.

Espionage Reports:

were a regular feature of turn results (at least for me). This is from the same turn results: "The spies who are following Paul have established that he has again met with the man in the tavern. He is doing little that is again out of the ordinary and again he at times disappears but these occasions are becoming less frequent

as your spies have discovered a pattern to his movements. He is certainly doing more than recruiting for you.

The house of his 'contact' is also being watched and this man is most definitely doing something sinister. He appears to be counting troops and making sketches of fortifications in the town.

The spies watching the troops of Esterhazy report little of interest other than that their targets are doing nothing out of the ordinary."

Non-Playing Characters (NPCs), towns and mapping: I kept a large piece of paper for each clan to map their

location. As subgroups moved and more mapping was generated the maps grew, forcing me to add pages and cellotaping them together.

The number of NPCs to interact with is considerable, with more being available depending on what you want in your orders. This is from my scouting report:

"Your scouts report that the troops of Esterhazy are quartered within the town of Byholm. The town of Harach and Hugo the Red and his bandits is at 83/97. The own of Battiya and many Esterhazy troops are at 83/07. Your message to Luigi C has been passed on at Battiya. Sven

reports that Anstey seems quiet. The rioting is over whilst the town appears calm, it is doubtful if another tax demand would be welcome. He moved rapidly to the town of Battiya and saw troops of Esterhazy riding out of the town to scout him. Battiya troops also greeted him and asked his identity. He is camped well away from the town."

Chris Dempsey was a formidable player and an outstanding GM. I met with him several times and expressed my admiration of the game. I was very sorry to see this game fold and replaced with Bledian Diary.



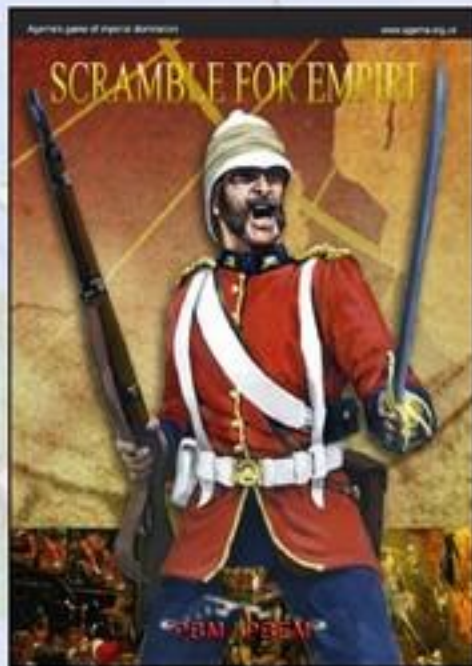
Scramble for Empire

Scramble for Empire is a new game of Victorian Imperialism in the colonies across the world.

Capturing the atmosphere of the time, and owing just as much to popular literature and films covering the same period, Scramble for Empire puts you in charge of an 'advanced' nation setting out to 'civilise' the world beyond the cosy armchairs and smoking rooms of the home country. Players can also run trading companies, running opium for example, or lead missionary societies to convert the heathen.

This game is designed to be fairly simple to play and a great deal of fun!

Game turns are three weeks apart, costing £7 each (the game can be played via the post or by e-mail)



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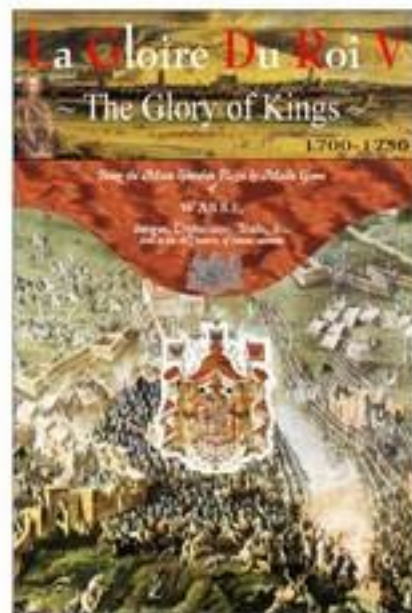
Scramble for Empire
THE COLONIAL AGE

The Glory of Kings

The Glory of Kings now enters its 20th year of being played, and is a multi-award winning play by mail (and by e-mail) game of the real world of the 18th century. Highly developed over the years, the game puts you in charge of a nation as diverse as the Kingdom of Sweden or Moghul India. It is even possible to run a pirate brotherhood! Deeply entrenched in the history of the time, The Glory of Kings has an enthusiastic existing set of dedicated players who are usually happy to help new players who get involved, and there are numerous game supplements available.

If you like history, you'll love this! You can play it by post or by e-mail, as you choose!

Game turns are three weeks apart, costing £8 each
(This game was previously called *La Gloire du Roi*).



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The Glory of Kings
THE COLONIAL AGE

REGIME

change!



ACEMA

A Yuletide Carol in the Theme of Phoenix

By: Lady Silith Ungol of the Flagritz Empire

*Brutal Overlord Kang looked out
On the world of Venus
All the humans lay round about
Deep and crisp and even
Brightly shone the nukes that night
Though the heat was cruel
When a scavvy came in sight
Gath'ring AM fuel
"Hither, slave, and stand by me
If thou know'st it, telling
Wretched creature, who are thee?
Where and what your dwelling?"
"Lord?" uncertainly he did tense
Kang drew out his blaster
Clearly he had given offence
Sadly couldn't run faster
<BLAM>
"Bring his flesh and bring my wine
Bring his AM fuel hither
For on his corpse I will dine
You will cook my dinner."*

*Well fed Overlord forth he went
Servant on a tether
Through the nuclear wind's wild lament
And the bitter weather
"Sire, the night is darker now
And the wind blows stronger
My arms are glowing, I know not how,
I can go no longer."
"You may have serve`d me for an age
Still you should not speak so boldly,
Thou shalt find your master's rage
Freeze thy blood more coldly."
In his steps his master trod
Where the ash lay dinted
Kang would lash the lazy sod
In the night his flail glinted.
Therefore, humans all, be sure
Wealth or rank possessing
Bend the knee and let Kang cure
Your puny world with his blessing*

Introduction to AGE games

By: Darrell E. A. Lias

AGE games is a site that hosts and moderates multiplayer strategic war games, which are open to everyone to join and can be played at no cost. In our games, each player is the leader of an empire, taking on the roles of warlord, diplomat, and economist. As ruler, you will need to expand your dominion using whatever means are necessary, and make the decisions on how to deal with your neighbours: will you attempt to deal with them diplomatically, or overpower them with raw military force? Below you can see the titles we have available. For more info on a game or to sign up, visit <http://www.lords-of-conquest.com> or contact the GM at GM@agegames.co.uk for general queries.

Origins

Originally set up by three students in the US, in the early 2000's, the games developed through various guises until crystallising into the six scenarios that exist to-day, around 2003. The player community built up around AGE games via

the Yahoo groups and at its peak saw circa two thousand members.

The original ownership rested with Andrew Lloyd, as the programmers: Oleg Gorshunov and Dennis Mikhailitsky left the US, and the games moved from strength to strength until around 2006. At this point, the workload of being GM necessitated sub-contracting out games to



other volunteers, and although initially successful, the cracks began to appear in reliability of turns running and response to the player questions.

The collapse of the whole venture was then inevitable and the games ceased, with disappointed players and ill feeling in many quarters.

Like a Phoenix from the flames

In September 2011, after the ownership was offered

for sale, and negotiations had completed, the acquisition of the game system, web sites and intellectual property began in a phased manner, with full transfer completed on May 14th, 2012. Unfortunately the original web domains were not available and so the new ones were created: <http://www.agegames.co.uk> (initial access site, still in need of a revamp for background information and links etc) and the games main site <http://www.lords-of-conquest.com> – meanwhile the yahoo groups were used to announce the new ownership and a call for test game players to prove that the whole system worked.

There were still major hurdles to overcome, not least the venerable software versions used in the game system and GUI, and even in the websites themselves.

The first games with the Royalty features (adding additional perquisites to the basic game) available by a turn fee donation began

with a Napoleonic game in July 2012, and then encompassed the more popular (and tested) scenarios.

And now...

As of this article, the player base is worldwide with over 200 active currently, and new players are always welcome.

The original "agegames.com" web domain has just been acquired and will be incorporated into the web suite in 2014.

There is a plan in place to recode the game system into Java, to make it platform independent and easier to improve than the current legacy software, which is Windows based.

The next batch of game start-ups will begin in the New Year, across the six scenarios:

- Age of Conquest – ancient era of Rome, Carthage, et al
- Medieval Warlords – 14th Century European theatre
- Shogunate – 16th Century Sengoku period Japanese wars (adds Fog of War)

- Napoleonic Empires – Late 18th Century European theatre
- Dragonlords – Fantasy scenario in the land of Karne (most complex of all scenarios)
- Galactic Warlords – Trek style Starfleet level (the weakest of the offerings and currently only in playtest version)

The games are there, so if you are interested, please get in touch or sign up via the <http://www.lords-of-conquest.com> website.

A player created forum is available, which is in its infancy, but has lots of information, at <http://lordsofconquest.freeforums.org>

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WHO IS JESUS E. LEE??



INTERVIEW: Bill Heron of Nova Games

Interviewed By: Charles Mosteller

Bill, can you tell us a little bit about the origin of your PBM company, Nova Bill, can you tell us a little bit about the origin of your PBM company, Nova Games?

David Westwater and I were keen gamers and both of us had played PBM games in the past. As is often the case, we thought we could do a decent job of running our own games PBM game partnership. We had an idea of running a truly epic scale PBM called the Milenya Chronicles, where players could choose to play one of four games in the same world.

How long was Nova Games in operation?

Several years (I think it was 5). We brought out a few games. 2 Halves (a football simulation) which did well, Glory to the Lance (a hand-moderated game similar to the Pendragon RPG where the Players were knights), and Mandragora: Shadows Lengthen (a hand-moderated RPG using my own half-dragon creations, the Mandragora. We'd also planned the epic Milenya Chronicles, and I'd tried to

start a beta of another partially hand-moderated game featuring the

Mandragora, called Ties of Blood. We turned a modest profit but its safe to say we weren't going to get rich. Also with me already having a full time job, it became a real question of time to hand-moderate a game with 10 players.

What were some of the play-by-mail games that you tried your hand at, before you created Nova Games? Which ones were your favorite, and why?

Its hard to say really. I loved the freedom of the Chevian Chronicles, but Quest and DungeonWorld had a nice format, simple rules, and "weight" to the turn reports.

Did you play in any PBM games by other PBM companies or PBM moderators, while you ran Nova Games?

I played Alamaze, Quest, and the Chevian Chronicles. I also dabbled in DungeonWorld, and another of Madhouse UK's creations - which involved

marines taking on aliens if I recall correctly.

What about after Nova Games shut up operations as a PBM company? Did you continue playing PBM games for any length of time, thereafter?

Not really - a change in personal circumstances meant that I didn't have the time or money to continue. I'm much more focused on tabletop RPGS these days.

While Nova Games was in operation, what do you think distinguished your PBM company from your PBM competitors on the market?

Tricky question. If we'd ever developed it, the Milenya Chronicles would have been something of a unique experience - a dynamic game world where dragons flew the skies (Blood & Fire), armies clashed and princes plotted (Blood & Steel), while Magi schemed and fought for mana (stripping the earth of energy - Blood & Mana), while knights fought dragons and evil wizards and went on quests (Blood

& Honour). Probably too ambitious but we'd worked out a decent system of play - if we'd had the necessary skills at the time it would have been something else. Our football simulation "2 halves" did really well.

Do you ever still think about PBM games, these days, and if so, what is it that you are thinking on the topic of play-by-mail gaming?

There's more of a focus on turn-based-gaming in these days of instant gratification of email and SMS. While the pretty thump of a turn report landing on the doormat is something I used to love, the costs of postage will likely see the PBM part of the hobby dies, replaced by email or play by forum.

If you absolutely had to list a top three of the most influential figures in PBM gaming from years past, who would you name, and what made them so influential, from your perspective?

Carol Mulholland and her late husband, who ran/edited the Flagship magazine were very supportive of new companies or newbies like Dave and I. The Madhouse UK chap Steve Tierney pretty much keeps the hobby alive in the UK.

How do you see the future of play-by-mail gaming?

I can see more people playing via email or using online order submissions. Games now feature a certain amount of Artificial Intelligence and behavioural patterns unthought of in the hobby's heyday. There's far more potential.

What's the worst PBM game that you ever played, and what made it the worst?

I can't remember offhand but there was one sci-fi hand-moderated pbem game where the GM basically came up with increasingly complex - and often contradictory - rules. I lasted three turns

Are there any memorable moments, in particular, that stand out to you as defining the play by mail gaming experience, for someone that might be completely unfamiliar with what PBM games are?

It's when you become aware that you're looking forward to getting mail every week.

Single best PBM memory ever - What was that moment for you?

As a player - It's always going to be that loud thump

your turn reports make when they arrive. As a GM/Moderator, seeing those turn reports lined up to go out!

What do you consider to be PBM gaming's strong points and weak points, as a genre of gaming?

For PBM, definitely the postage cost and delay - most people don't want to wait for anything these days. Also there's so much online material, MUDs, MMORPGs, and games like World of Warcraft or Skyrim. I can see PBM becoming less popular as result.

Are there any fellow PBM players from your PBM days now past that stand out in your memory, even still, after all these years?

No, the social aspect of alliances or similar was interesting to start with in Quest, but back then email was a rarity. I never really wrote to other Players.

If you were going to start a PBM company, today, what would you do different, compared to when you created Nova Games way back then?

Definitely make sure that you have a game idea that's unique and you have infrastructure in place, the time to commit to a game,

and money to market it. Whether its developing the system and/or program. Make sure you learn the necessary business or technical skills before committing yourself to any outlay. if you're planning to make a commercial product, be professional. Get your code written tested and documented; your rules proof-read; and game tested. Only then market it.

What did you learn from your days playing and moderating PBM games that served you well since then?

How to create a cohesive plot and world, time management, and essentially how to run a business!

If you had to describe PBM gaming in just one word, how would you describe it?

Interactive.

How do you feel about being the first PBM moderator from the past interviewed for the first new PBM magazine to be created during the 21st Century?

Old, yet honoured! I'm also glad to hear that a PBM magazine is coming back after Flagship went on hiatus.

Can you think of any analogies from PBM gaming that are applicable to the real world?

There's always something bigger than you, just off the map.

Since closing down Nova Games, what has been the most fun game, from any genre or medium, that you have played since then?

Definitely tabletop RPGs - I have so many. I'm currently running Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay 1st Edition (The Enemy Within), which is fun once you inject a little humour into the whole GRIMDARK setting. I also run Advanced Dungeons and & Dragons (Temple of Elemental Evil). I'm also planning to run more horror RPGs - notably Wildfire's "The Void" and "CthulhuTech". I regularly blog about RPGs and games on my website:

<http://www.themandragora.com>

Why did you close Nova Games? Can you tell us a little bit about what happened, and what you were thinking during that time period of your life?

Ultimately, Nova Games closed down after we pretty much had to focus on real life, with real money. We

both had full-time jobs, and the hand moderation aspect quickly ate up any free time for very little reward. We quickly find out that you are unlikely to get rich running a hand-moderated game! If you're running a hand-moderated game and not enjoying it, you're wise to give it up. Deadlines meant that there was often a last-minute rush. More than once I was staying up until the small hours of the morning finishing the turn reports for Shadows Lengthen, as was Dave with Glory to the Lance. I'd planned to beta test my Ties of Blood game (which I then shelved from lack of interest and testers). Also, I'm not a programmer, my skills lie elsewhere. While the design concepts for the Milenya Chronicles were in place, there were literally too many variables - and we didn't have the technical know-how to build it. I occasionally entertain thoughts about converting Mandragora: Ties of Blood to a board game, but lack the time. I've no regrets really, aside from wishing that we'd got the Milenya Chronicles done.

Do you have any memories of PBM magazine personalities from across the span of years that those magazines were in publication?

I remember that Greg Lindahl was often vilified in

Stellar Conflict

exploration * colonization * conquest



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the rec.games.pbm newsgroup (yes, that long ago), but I never understood why. He seemed OK to me. Carol Mulholland was always helpful. I hope she gets better soon.

How heavily and how often did Nova Games advertise its PBM game offerings in play by mail magazines, and what kind of response did your PBM company get from those ads? Do you still have a copy of any old PBM ads that you can share with our readers at Suspense & Decision magazine?

We didn't - we couldn't afford it :) Larger magazines such as Dragon or Valkyrie would have cost a great deal. A lot of our customers came from newsgroups like rec.games.pbm, from mentions in Flagship, word of mouth, and a strong online presence (social networks were in their infancy).

Thinking back, what do you think was the best ad for a PBM game from any PBM company or PBM moderator, and what makes that particular ad memorable to you, all these many years later?

The artwork of the DungeonWorld ads always

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stands out with its clean lines.

If you were to create a new PBM game in the future, what subject matter would it deal with, and why would you pick that as the basis for a new PBM game?

It'd have to be the Milenya Chronicles. Online or emailed order input would be carried out

automatically, and a rich text email or PDF sent direct to the player. It'd be exactly the same as if it were posted. Events could be entered by game moderators, players could be contacted via their online ID etc. Monsters and NPCs would react to the players orders in a intuitive and calculated fashion with proper behavior and reactions.

**A PBM magazine for
the 21st Century!**

**SUSPENSE
&
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each issue!**



Diplomacy

By: **Chris Babcock**

cbabcock@asciiking.com

If you have never played Diplomacy, you are missing a real treat. Originally created by Alan B. Calhamer in 1954, Diplomacy has been played by mail since 1963. Best played with a full complement of 7 players, Diplomacy is a simultaneous action turn-based strategy game, meaning that all players turns adjudicate at the same time. This combination of simultaneous action and the requirement for 7 players to run a game is one of the reasons that this game is perfect for play by mail.

On the surface, the rules of Diplomacy are quite simple. The game is played on a map that bears some resemblance to World War I Europe. The two types of units are armies and fleets. Armies can travel to any land space. Fleets can travel through water and coastal provinces. Each turn, players submit orders for each of their units. In addition to move orders, which are always one province only, a piece may support action into an adjacent province, a fleet may convoy an army over water spaces or an army may travel via convoy. Movement by convoy is the

one exception to the rule that pieces may only move one space per turn. Unlike Risk and many other games, there are no dice to roll. If there is conflict over a province, the total power on that province for each move is counted up and the move with the most power wins the battle to occupy that space at the end of the turn. Some provinces are called "Supply Centers." A player is allowed one unit for each Supply Center he owns. There are 34 Supply Centers; owning 18 centers is the victory condition. All action is adjudicated simultaneously with no random events. That is where the simplicity ends.

The simplicity ends there because that is where the human part of the equation begins. In between turns, players are given a specific amount of time to negotiate. Ranging from 15 minutes per turn in a live game to 3 days for a play by email game and several weeks for a postal game, it is this human interaction more than the deceptively simple rules that make the game of Diplomacy ideal for play by mail and play by email. Diplomacy depends on negotiations to power the game. It is only by cooperating with some of your opponents that you

can gain an advantage over others. It is this dynamic that makes Diplomacy a powerful playing experience.

The full rules of Diplomacy can be downloaded from Hasbro subsidiary Wizards of the Coast:

www.wizards.com/avalonhill/rules/diplomacy.pdf

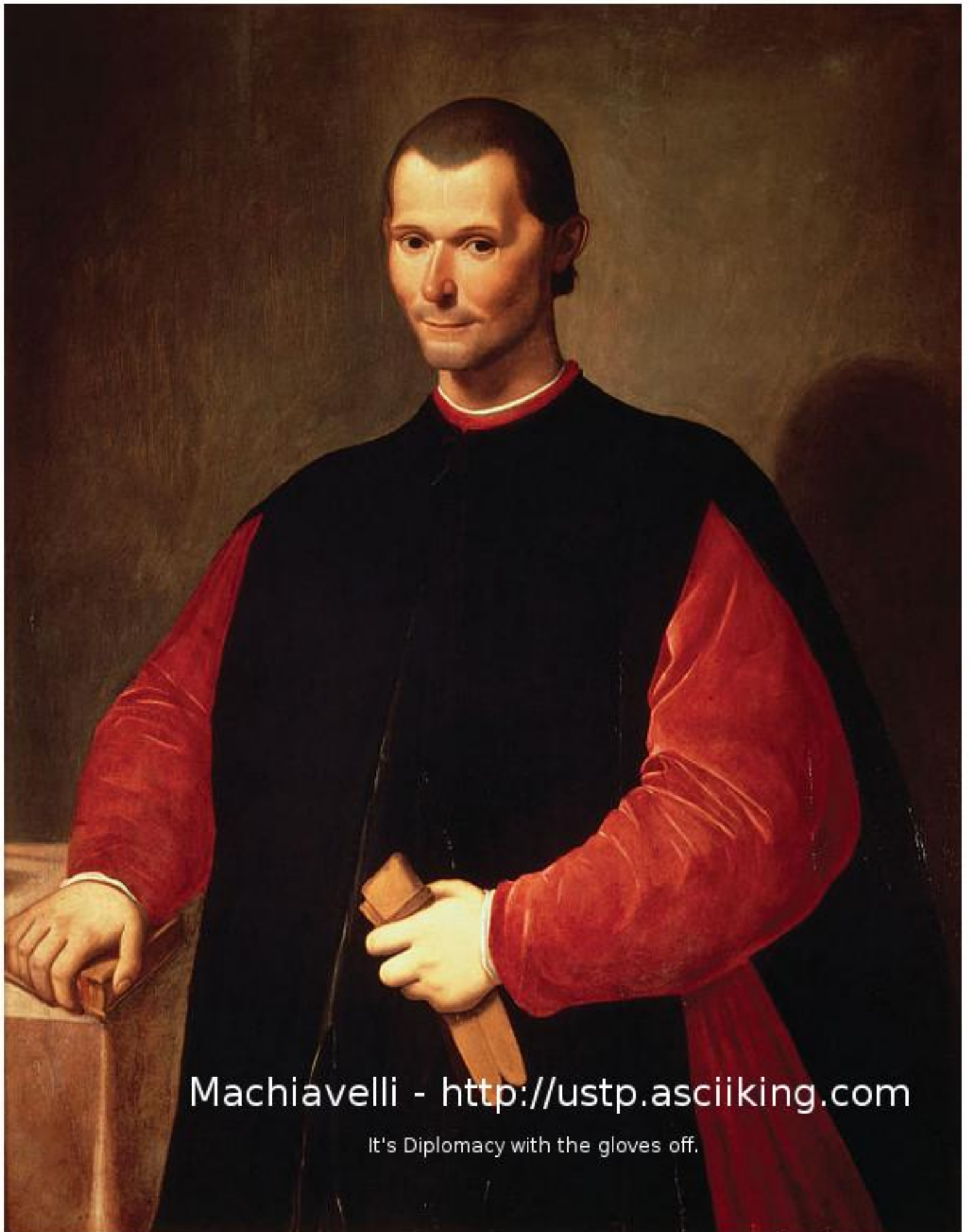
You can play Diplomacy by email free and ad-free on USAK –

<http://usak.asciiking.com>.

USAK features an automated adjudicator with a human GM for the best of both human and machine moderation. A typical game of Diplomacy with 3 day move deadlines takes approximately 6 months to play, so there is a vacation mechanism and many other powerful features to help you manage your playing time effectively.

For more information on Diplomacy and where to play – live, real time, on the web, on your Android phone or by old fashioned snail mail – contact the author at:

cbabcock@asciiking.com



Machiavelli - <http://ustp.asciiking.com>

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The New Battleground of Alamaze

By: Rick McDowell

rmcdowell@kingdomsofarcania.com

How does the ground affect the outcome of battle? Decisively. From Sun Tsu (The six principles related to ground"), to The Battle of Hastings, Napoleon, the outcome of Gettysburg, the method of blitzkrieg, and dozens of other examples speak to how terrain affects communication, logistics, strategy and tactics and of course, the outcome of battles and ultimately wars.

We just introduced (December, 2013) the first new map for Alamaze since its origin in 1986. The intention was to improve the aesthetics and provide subtle strategic changes to the various Alamaze scenarios currently in play, which collectively we call Alamaze Classic.

Alamaze has 676 areas that comprise ten regions (for example, Amberland), and

control of one is often critically important to establishing a leading position in the campaign. With fifteen kingdoms and only ten regions, early moves can be contentious as players maneuver to establish the upper hand in securing regional control.

Kingdoms in Alamaze have noble courts and a Princess or Duke can be a powerful asset in a King's pursuits, as in the right circumstances they are able to usurp control of towns and cities, and incite rebellion in those of the enemy. Well trained agents can kidnap or assassinate these nobles, and the magic of wizards can alter all kinds of outcomes. Then of course, there is the military, for which the terrain is most significant, affecting movement, tactics, natural advantages (Elves in the forest)

and providing concealment.

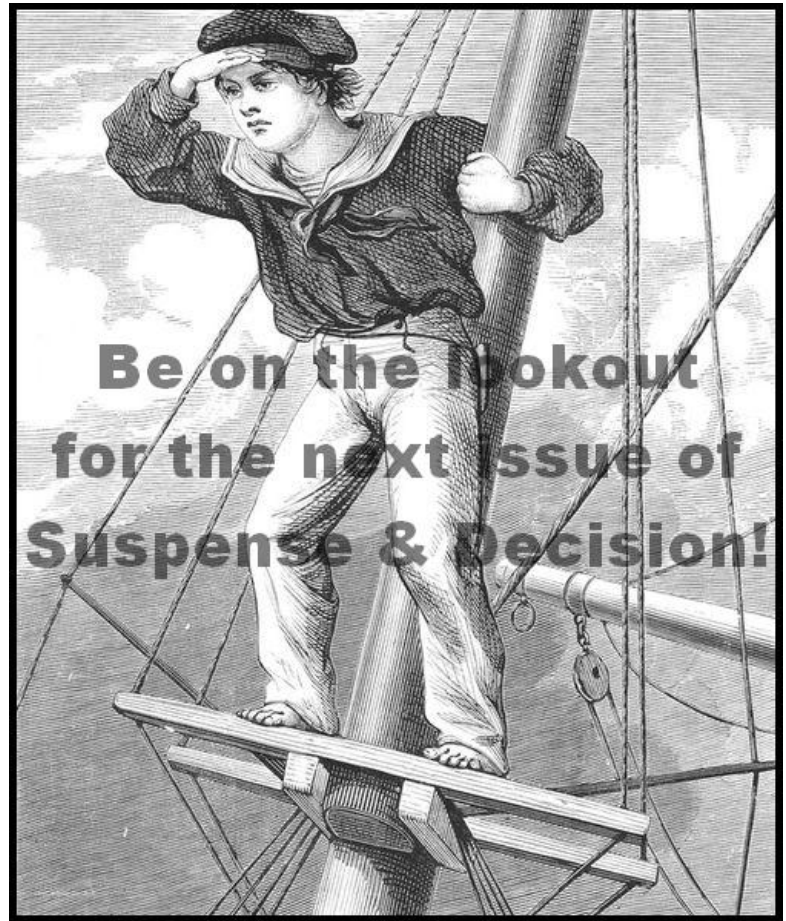
We call the new map Alamaze Resurgent. In it, regional borders have changed, though the specifics of such alterations are yet to be discovered by the players. City locations have changed. While the major cities are shown on the map, their new locations have sweeping implications for initial and later game strategy. Which regions now have two major cities? How does Viperhead, now north of the Sea of Terror alter strategy for the Witchlord, Giant, Red Dragon, and the Dwarves? Kingdoms who previously enjoyed a good deal of natural seclusion are now thrust a bit more into open areas. In conjunction with the debut of the new map itself, we have introduced all new names of population

centers as well as new names for all emissaries of every kingdom.

We're pleased to have the new Alamaze Resurgent map in place, and players may choose to explore the new challenges it presents, as well as continue games on the original, Classic map. We can't wait to find out how it creates new strategies for all kingdoms in Alamaze!

To learn more about Alamaze, please visit our website at www.Alamaze.co (not .com), and our Player's Forum at:

<http://kingdomsofarcania.net/forum/>



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TAKAMO Yesterday and Today

By: Randy Ritnour

I view PBMs with nostalgia. I remember waiting for the snail mail packets to arrive, watching for the mailman like a little kid hoping that his cereal box top decoder ring would be in the post. Turn results were really just reports of things that had happened days earlier in ancient lands or far off star systems. I would pore over the printouts and see in my mind's eye the events as they unfolded.

I preferred strategic level games where I could imagine my role as the leader of a vast empire building and conquering all before me. So that is the kind of game I built way back in 1982. TAKAMO was the result. An empire building science fiction game of seemingly epic proportions and endless play. There would be multiple galaxies and thousands of player empires. I collected three partners and started out on a single PC with a monster sized ten meg hard drive and a tractor feed dot

matrix printer that was twice the size of the computer box. Turns received were batch loaded and processed overnight (it took upwards of 8 hours for all turn orders to process). Each morning we would listen to the noisy zip zip of the dot matrix printer, separate and review the turns for obvious errors, stuff hundreds of envelopes and trundle off to the post office to mail the results and pick up the next batch of turns. We were masters of a whole universe of game play and we learned tons about how to design, develop, patch, enhance and run a massive multi-player game way before it could be done online. Thirty years later I wonder how in the world we managed to run the game on such a puny system. It ran in that ten meg configuration for over twenty years in PBM and PBEM format.

TAKAMO was always a work in progress. The game system worked well but we

always had to be on the watch for loopholes in programming that might unbalance the game or allow someone to reap a windfall in Resource Units by loading and offloading cargo in some unique configuration or by transferring items in a way that we had not anticipated. There were some creative souls out there searching for ways to game the system rather than play the game. They kept us on our toes and hoodwinked us a few times. We didn't mind, because they helped us nail down problems and armor plate the system.

TAKAMO was big. It was so big that players would tend to be overwhelmed by the weight of information coming their way and the need to track everything. Players often had multiple three ring binders filled with printouts, player messages and their own hand drawn illustrations and mapping systems for their particular galaxy.

As time went along, we found that players would reach a point where the record keeping involved was so great that they began to lose interest. Its no fun to spend more time on your record keeping system than you do on the game. We eventually developed an automated record keeping system that would print out all owned assets as well as some special listings available as action codes in the game. This allowed tracking of all fleets and showed the status of all owned worlds at the end of the turn. That helped but there was still the problem of maintaining a current record of all explored areas as well as alien fleet movements that had been detected. Much of that was being addressed in the PBEM version of the game when a catastrophic fire took my home, the game cpu and the backups. I know, I should have had the backups somewhere else...

At the time of the fire and in the subsequent years my position as a county attorney in south-eastern Nebraska kept me too busy to revive the game. Copies of test bed databases and code languished in a few old computer boxes at my

office and at the home of my friend and fellow developer, Thom Walla. After my last term as a public official I decided to look into the possibility of creating an online version of the game. That effort is now in full swing and is titled TAKAMO UNIVERSE. Two of the original developers, Al Edeker and Bill Hayes, have joined the team and we have fifteen other programmers and artists who are working to create the game system. As we began to promote the development effort on Kickstarter and elsewhere, we discovered that most modern gamers don't seem to grasp what TAKAMO was like. We've tried in various ways to convey what playing TAKAMO was about with little success, so we finally threw up our hands and decided to deploy and run a TAKAMO database from our website to give players an understanding of the game system.

That's right. TAKAMO, the original game, will soon be up and running at www.takamouniverse.com and you will be able to play it for free. We are even working out a way to port the resulting player positions into the TAKAMO UNIVERSE Beta next year.

The idea is to give you a feel for the TAKAMO game system and hopefully whet your appetite for the new game currently under development. So, if you are a TAKAMO veteran, get on over to the web site and check us out. If you are new to the TAKAMO experience, this is your opportunity to play the game for free.

See you out there!

Long ages have passed since the Naplians were defeated. The cybers that ranged across the stars have passed into the void to hunt biological life in distant star clusters, yet the dread of those dim times hangs over the humans like dust in the darkness between stars.

[\[History of the Five Galaxies\]](#)

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A CALL FOR CREATIVE CONTENT!

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Exploration, Expansion, Exploitation, and Extermination for Extremists: A Review of Cluster Wars

By: Bernd Jaehnigen

Cluster Wars is a revival of one of the most complex and engrossing space empire PBM games of all time -- Empryeon Challenge. More on that in a moment. The main thing I want to stress here is that the complexity is subtle and expansive. On the face of it, every mechanic in this game is simple to understand and contributes to a patent attempt to make a logical simulation of this cherished genre. The vision becomes immediately apparent upon reading the rules. While they are extensive, they are also plainly logical and harbor no hidden game mechanics or obscure references.

The genius of this game is that this simple and orderly manner of modelling builds to a game of emergent complexity and deep strategy. It is a game that will satisfy equally the

Builder and the Admiral. It will not do much for the Role Player. Not only are there no "characters" in the game, but every "race" in the game is identical. There are no Master-of-Orion style racial archetypes like Psionic Warriors or Intelligent Silicon Formations. There aren't even differentiations between each player's biological preferences -- if a planet is habitable to you, it is habitable to everyone in the game.

This is essentially a feature of the game, done by design. The minimalist narrative outlining the context runs like this: there was an old empire that dissolved into civil war long ago, leading to widespread collapse back into pre-hyperspace culture. So there are scattered planets within a bounded star cluster, all of which are advancing back into

hyperspace technology at more or less the same moment. This is generally a far more plausible narrative than many space empire games, in which various animaloid races meet each other randomly at pretty much the same point in their development. Whacky antics ensue, etc. As such, this "recovery from civil war, leading to the next cluster war" follows along the same vision of hewing as close to a logical and orderly simulation as possible.

Empryeon Challenge, the esteemed grand-daddy of space empire PBM of the 80s, was a team game. 150 or so players were divided into 10 or so races, so each racial homeworld hosted a team of starting players. These people had to organize themselves and cooperate by dividing the difficult work of interstellar expansion. Some focused

on research, some build mining networks, some focused on military readiness. Sometimes these teams failed to gel and individual players would grab choice real estate or hoard resources. Civil wars were known to break out. And, as with any team game, player-dropouts were a constant problem.

Still, the games progressed. I think there were 7 of them all-told. Epic sagas started emerging. But again they appealed to Builders and Admirals. The hefty printouts sent out each turn contained no deep narrative content or tantalizing discoveries. When your scouts found a new system, you could expect to survey the orderly array of planets in that system and that's about it. No hidden artifacts or friendly locals -- except perhaps the other players you might find. This game appeals first to engineers and strategists. The romanticism "emerges" later.

Since progress in these giant team games was ponderously slow, and the dropout rates occasionally high, there was clear demand for an individual variant, hence Maxi-

Challenge was born. Instead of 150 players starting in 10 teams, there were 15 players each in full command of an entire homeworld. No more civil wars, no more team dynamics, no more vulnerability to dropouts. With the resources of an entire planet at ones disposal, progress could be finely tuned and measured -- the game became a titanic battle between emerging empires.

Perhaps this variant became the more vibrant brand of Emphyrean Challenge for that reason. The end result turned into the type of space opera that the moderator had always envisioned. (I will defer, of course, to the moderator himself, who has been interviewed on playbymail.net.) Perhaps it was the lower dropout rate. Perhaps it was the fact that it was getting harder and harder to find 150 players for ANY game. (I daresay it would be impossible today.)

So, when a hungry fan bought the old rights to the game, he brought the original creator back on board to rebuild it from scratch. Cluster Wars is now in its second beta game, and it is an advance

of the Maxi-Challenge concept. I am wistful for the old team games, I admit. Every turn there were multiple phone calls and letters sent in high urgency prior to publishing our team newsletters (a courtesy copy of which went to the moderator each turn.) We had land-grabbers. We had market-hoarders. We had vigorous differences in strategy that had to be resolved if we were to cooperate. And we had a glorious civil war.

But that was then, and this is now. Cluster Wars is live, and coming to an inbox near you. So how about that game?

There is one other aspect to the premise -- your world is fully populated, and you will soon be running short on everything. Your mines have a limited deposit quantity to feed your factories. Your fuel will only hold out so long. Most urgently, your birth rate will start to drop if you don't start moving people off world soon. Like any good simulation, you have a host of decisions to make in moving forward. But the emerging narrative is the threat to survival.

As stated, the game

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mechanics taken one by one are all very straightforward. For example, your factories can build any of the 26 types of "things" your empire needs -- weapons, life support, farms, and yes, more factories. Each factory requires one "professional" and three "unskilled" population units to operate. It burns a set rate of fuel and produces a set amount of output, consuming a set amount of resources in the process. All quite simple.

Complication number one: a factory takes 4 turns to produce anything. This means planning ahead, forecasting future needs, plotting out resource requirements, etc. The narrative now expands -- your empire needs to prepare for the future.

Complication number two: you can replace "unskilled" population with automation, if you build it. Thus, you can run your factories with fewer and fewer people, or to put it another way, your people can run more factories. The narrative expands again -- automation brings great rewards, but carries deep strategic implications.

Complication number three:

you can't replace the "professional" crew. Thus, while you might expand and automate until kingdom come, you will always be limited by the number of highly educated people you can muster. The narrative now includes -- people are your ultimate resource and are thus to be protected and nurtured.

Complication number four: technological advances will multiply your productivity. A tech level 3 factory can produce 3 times the output of a tech level 1 factory, for the same amount of human labor. Hurray! But there's that old narrative again -- high productivity puts a high burden on natural resources. Your mines will need to advance to follow suit, and your home world can only support a limited amount of mining. Space colonies become not only a military hedge, but an economic necessity.

Complication number five: laboratories, which produce the research you'll need to keep improving, require THREE professionals, and only one unskilled laborer (or his equivalent in automatons.) Thus, while you need to keep staffing your factories with competent managers, you

need to devote every last bit of educated labor to staffing laboratories. Thus the eternal trade-off between production and advancement emerges.

Complication number six: other people are coming for you. The other players all inhabit the same cluster, and are looking to grab the same limited set of habitable worlds before you do. Space is big, but not that big. As players bump into each other, military preparedness becomes essential. Thus perhaps the most compelling element of the narrative emerges -- war for survival.

So the simple game mechanic of running factories has led to a rather complex endeavor, spinning all sorts of trade-offs, gambits, and other narrative elements in its wake!

Each of these "complications" carries its own complications. For instance, your people need to eat. So you have to run farms, which again require a single professional and three unskilled/automatons to operate, along with some fuel. But your home planet can only support a limited amount of farms. You can

What did they say about issue #1?

"Excellent first issue - looking forward to #2"

"I printed out this Issue #1
and I tell you it's an instant classic."

"A very good first salvo. Much appreciated. "

"Great stuff! "

"Well done, I hope that your efforts spawn
a new generation of gamers"



"!!! Oh, wow! Great job."

get past that by developing high tech hydroponic farms, but that requires research and more fuel. You can run these high tech farms in orbit, where solar energy saves the fuel, but that requires people and expensive life support. You can set that all up, but your orbiting colonies become vulnerable to enemy fleets -- far more so than ground colonies. The head spins.

The minerals you dig up ("metals", "non-metals", and "fuel") require the use of mines, but each planet can only host a limited set of mines, and the yield of each mine can vary. And some of your most productive mines might not be your habitable planets, thus you'd either need to ship those minerals back home, or build enclosed colonies or orbiters to host new local factories. And people. And hydroponic farms. Did I mention that your people need "consumer goods" in addition to food?

And what about combat? Again, it starts quite simply. A generic "energy weapon", for instance, will burn a set amount of fuel to shoot a beam at an enemy target. This is complicated by many

factors -- distance to target, the maneuvering speed of you and your target, your sensor technology, your weapons technology, whether you have enough fuel, etc. The defender can burn a higher amount of fuel to light up his energy shields, so fuel becomes a militarily vital resource. Or he can design his ships to be fast and cut down your hit percentage. Or he can "ballast" his ship with unneeded bulk to ward his vital weapon systems. And I only recently discovered another "simple" aspect of combat -- the damage your weapons will inflict will vary based on the type of target. A ship will take full damage, while a dispersed "open colony" will take only one tenth as much. Thus, bombardment from space becomes a much more difficult endeavour. Missile weapons (and their complement -- anti-missiles) carry their own set of simple complications.

The game has many refinements over the old Maxi-Challenge rules that I remember. There are "beamers" which are huge capital-intensive machines to transmit matter from an orbiter (only) to any other colony in a given system,

but not people. This means you can stop shipping raw materials every turn and just beam them, at the cost of significant fuel and resources. There are "robot probes" which can be used to let a single scout survey all the planets of a large system in one turn, AND which can be surreptitiously attached to the ships of other players to spy on their movements. There are "power plants" (think hydroelectrics) which can replace the need for fuel on certain planets.

Ultimately, game strategy (and the emerging narrative) drives players up against each other. Players can cooperate, fight, or ignore each other as they see fit, each with their own strategic implications. In conflict, the various military complexities can easily lead to situations in which a larger force is defeated by a smaller but better informed force, acting on better intelligence. For instance, a robot probe or high-tech sensor scan might inform you that an approaching enemy destroyer is heavy on energy weapons and weak on missile tech, so you might fly into their orbit "high" (i.e.: farther away) where missile weapons

have an advantage over beams. Or you might detect that enemy fleet has moved elsewhere, thus leaving a valuable mining colony exposed to attack. Or you might SELL that information to your neighbor's enemy. Complications ensue.

One of the biggest fronts of emerging complexity in this game is through the design of ships and colonies. There are no stock models to choose from -- each one must be designed from scratch. You will need a certain number of hyper engines to move a given amount of mass, so plan accordingly. You will need enough space drives to move your ships through 10 tactical space units (or else require multiple turns to dock!) so plan accordingly. You will need enough life support, food, consumer goods, fuel, etc. to keep everything running for however many turns you want between resupplies -- plan ahead. As combat damage comes in, it can affect any of these component parts in proportion, and alter your functionality accordingly.

The biggest upgrade of Cluster Wars over Maxi-Challenge is the new Central Command client

The Diplomatic Pouch

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

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software required to play. It is based on Microsoft Access, and includes features for automatically sending and receiving your turns via FTP. Through its many dashboards, you can view any of your ships or colonies, monitor your technology progress, study the stars and planets you've discovered, and keep tabs on in-game communications. There is a ship-colony designer tool that adds many of the

comforts of a spreadsheet to that process. And there is an order-writer tool that captures most of the mistakes a player might otherwise make in crafting his orders.

In the old days, you could expect a number of errors on almost every turn. Most would be your fault, some would be a bug in the code. Recovering from them was a constant exercise. With the order writer, most of

the gotchas are covered, but not all. You can still set up more factories in an orbiting colony than you have people to run them, for instance. I can see that you might WANT to do so -- maybe another ship in that orbit is contributing the other people. But it would be nice to see a warning go up when you are issuing a potentially erroneous order. The tool makes things easier by far, but it still harkens back to the old "command line" format. It would be nice to see some visual interfaces, such as click-and-dragging a ship to another star system, for example. It would be nice to get some big fat alerts when there is incoming communication (something I have missed in the past!) And more generally, it would be better to put all of this on a web site and not require the users to install and upgrade a client app.

But these are minor gripes in the face of a compelling game. As a revival of Empyrean Challenge, it is a superior evolution and refinement of an already great game design. It is NOT a game for PBM newbies (unless they have another player in the game they can lean on for advice), but with the power

of the Central Command client app, it should be within reach of anyone experienced in any sort of technical PBM gaming.

There is an active player base that is contributing to the rules and suggesting refinements. I have suggested, for example, that hydroponic farms consume life support capacity, since they require clean air and water to function. It may not be incorporated into future games, but the moderator has set up a welcoming environment for such discourse. Some players have also published improved reporting analytics and helpful spreadsheet tools to support deeper involvement, and again the moderator has actively encouraged these contributions. In a way, Cluster Wars is undergoing something of an open source design process that should serve as a model for other PBM developers.

The game ends when a player captures and holds a winning level of habitable planetary real estate against all takers. Turnaround is about 2 weeks. It can take as little as half an hour to do a

basic turn, or several hours of involved obsession over espionage, tactical choices, strategic goals, and supply chain planning. I have not yet had extensive interactions with other players in the current beta test, but if it is anything like the old Empyrean Challenge days, other players will present perhaps the greatest opportunity for "emerging complexity."



What's YOUR preference??

Issue # 1's 2-column layout was compiled by Associate Editor Mark Wardell.

Issue #2's 3-column layout was compiled by Managing Editor Charles Mosteller.

Merry Christmas



from your friends and fellow gamers at
PlayByMail.Net

An advertisement for the wargame 'Empires at War 1805'. The background is a detailed illustration of a Napoleonic battle scene with soldiers in formation and cannons. In the foreground, two soldiers are shown in profile, facing each other. The soldier on the left is in a blue and white uniform, aiming a rifle. The soldier on the right is in a red and grey uniform, also aiming a rifle. The title 'Empires at War 1805' is written in a stylized, golden font at the top. Below the title, the website 'www.eaw1805.com' is displayed. At the bottom, a list of features is provided.

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- 1 Napoleonic Wargame

Call For Content

By Randy Ritnour, Takamo Universe Lead Game Designer

This may be the craziest, dumbest, most brilliant thing I have ever done. Here goes...

So... for the last way too many years, ever since the original Takamo play-by-mail game began in fact, I have toiled over, written and rewritten stories, rules, outlines, summaries, flowcharts and really bad sketches of what the Takamo Universe should be. I have buckets of notes and boxes of papers full of creative work. To my very great surprise and joy, it is

all now coming to life in ancient histories, databases, 3D models of star ships, and complex story lines that are all part of the Takamo Universe MMO now under development.

All of these ideas and designs--this mountain of stuff--is filling up the Takamo Universe. But wait! All of that creative work--that mountain of thought that took years to produce--isn't enough! My development team is building a universe bigger

than I'd ever imagined! The technology that finally caught up with my vision of a persistent, ever-expanding three-dimensional universe that continues to propagate itself as more and more player-controlled empires move out into space, is surging forward like a massive force that will wash over my mountain of content like a wave over a sand castle.

I can't create content fast enough to fill the universe that is blossoming before

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my astonished eyes. If I go out and hire a hundred artists and writers I still won't be able to keep up. Never mind that I don't have that kind of scratch. So, what is a megalomaniac like me to do? Well, that's where the cloud comes in...

Out there, in the cloud, I imagine are thousands--no... tens of thousands--of talented writers, composers, musicians, voice actors, and artists who love science fiction and internet games. Many are frustrated game designers who would love nothing better than to see a creation of theirs in an online game, either to show off their work and fill their portfolios or for the joy of seeing something of theirs spring to life.

Here's where the crazy/brilliant part comes in. I need content. You need a creative outlet. So let's get together! If you are a writer, composer, musician, 3D modeller, voice actor, wanna-be voice actor, concept artist, illustrator, graphic novel artist, programmer, animator, film maker, or any other talented soul who has the interest and ability to provide content for a massive, multi-player, online, science fiction, real

time simulation game, then come on over!!!

This is a call for content. Takamo Universe has hundreds of computer run empires that need writers to flesh out their civilization and histories. Heck, a short story or novel based on some part of Takamo Universe would be great! We need composers and musicians to write ambient music for the game and theme music for empires and locations within the universe. We need 3D modellers to build the star ships, star bases, fighters, ground vehicles and figures in the hundreds. We need concept artists to draft designs for the 3D modellers. We need voice actors to build libraries of sound to be used in the game. We need artists for digital graphic novels, landscapes and illustrations. We need folks with talents that we don't know we need yet!

So how much are we gonna pay? Nothing. That's right. Nada. Zip. So why would you do it? Because the content that is approved and accepted by us goes into the game and you get a by-line in the game and on our web site to show that your creative work has been published in a

commercial game. That's good for your resume. It is also a great opportunity to network with other talented artists in your field. It is also creative... and interesting... and fun. You get to see YOUR creation come to life!

And it doesn't happen in a vacuum. Our Call For Content pages on the Takamo Universe website will have lists of requests for specific content in various categories, as well as opportunities for you to research your own proposals, and submit them for approval and acceptance. There are forums for you to network with other artisans to collaborate and assist one another. We will offer guides, specifications and feedback to point you toward success. We need the content, so we are motivated to help you bring diverse and exciting art and music to the universe.

If this interests you, visit our site at www.takamouniverse.com and tell your friends. Heck, tell everybody! We want this to be the universe the cloud built.

StarCluster PBM



Letter from Rick Loomis to the Play By Mail/Email/Web/Turn Based Games Community

By: Rick Loomis

It's great to see there is still a lot of life left in the hobby. For the longest time, it was just me and my customers (in the early 70's) and then as it caught on and more people started moderating/refereeing games we had enough interest to support not just one but two regularly issued magazines (Flagship and Paper Mayhem). But as the World Wide Web grew up it gradually sucked away many of our customers and game companies. I was beginning to think I was the only one left, so I am pleased to see this magazine starting up, and I really hope it is successful.

The Web has provided many of our former customers with ways to spend a lot of time on (supposedly) free games, but it also provides us with ways to serve our customers faster, and ways to find the limited number of folks who appreciate the

kind of games we play and run. If you enjoy these games, you need to do more than just play the games and send turn fees to the moderators and read this magazine. You need to spread the word. There are a lot of people out there who would love to play multi-player, hidden movement, turn based games. They just don't know we exist.

It's tough for us game companies to advertise for new customers. There really aren't any good ways to reach this niche market without spending a lot of time and money that we just can't afford. What we need is for PBM to go "viral." Talk about the games on Facebook and twitter and whatever other social media you participate in. "Like" your favorite games on their Facebook pages (they do have a Facebook page, don't they?) If not, start your

own "fan" page. The more customers the companies have, the more games they can start, and the more likely they are to stay in business. It's really in your own self-interest to help!

Meanwhile, in case you'd like to know what Flying Buffalo is up to, we are still here after 43 years. Still regularly starting games of Starweb and Battle Plan/World Wide Battle Plan, occasionally starting games of Feudal Lords, Galactic Conflict, Nuclear Destruction, and Mobius I. And steadily churning out bi-weekly and monthly turns of Heroic Fantasy and Riftlords. All the rules can be downloaded free from our website, and you can submit your orders easily by email. You can get the results back by email, or if you like you can still get them in the postal mail. Real letters in your mailbox -- how much is that worth to you? I know I always enjoy getting a letter.



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Rick Loomis

of

Flying Buffalo, Inc.



Don't Forget Flagship!

Check out PDF copies of Flagship magazine - Download for free!

The image displays a collection of 12 covers of the Flagship magazine, arranged in a 3x4 grid. Each cover features different gaming topics and artwork. The covers include titles like 'Middle Earth', 'Destiny', 'Phoenix', 'Supernova III', 'Total Conquest', 'D&D at 30!', and 'Athletic Online'. The covers are colorful and feature various gaming-related images and text.

www.flagshipmagazine.co.uk

Game Mastering

By: Mica Goldstone

Game Mastering in General

As a Game Master it is not for you to act as a god to mere mortal players. It is not to gleefully destroy their plans and congratulate yourself on your cleverness. It is not for you to dictate all options in the game and control all actions. It is not even your role to intervene with hero-man, your beloved alter-ego. No - your role is purely to facilitate the smooth running of the game and provide scenarios the interpretation of which is down to the players.

Providing you enter with the view that it is a thankless job, any praise that you receive is appreciated as a reward, not your due. To see it as anything else is a slow descent into narcissism and egotism.

Secondly, when designing scenarios, account for the fact that players must have input into direction it takes. Where possible, attempt to give them both options and hints. The latter allows for

creative interpretation by the player. If you have to close down a direction the scenario is headed, try to give alternate avenues or at least explain in such a way as to avoid sounding negative if at all possible

Game Mastering in Phoenix

Becoming a competent Game Master requires long years of practice and learning how to interpret a set of stats and quickly convert it into something that feels tangible. Whether this is describing how the rainfall in a particular region has eroded the upper hills leaving them bare while bayou like swamps have evolved in the valleys, all the way down explaining unique breeding cycles of various arachnid analogues.

Looking at the game from a player perspective:

You are in Corewards, a new Periphery, never previously explored, in a backwater system orbiting what appears to be from the map and stats a sub-tropical world. You land in a

forest sector then decide you are flush enough to spend 1.8GBP to have your crew leave the ship and explore the surrounding area.

Your resulting turn comes neatly formatted, describing various floras, fauna and possibly something about the weather, general trends in biodiversity and maybe even throws in some hints towards sentient low-tech natives.

Here's a challenge - choose 5 random sectors from different planets/moons then time how long it takes to write a similar length description while taking into account the unique details of the world. I doubt many could complete this task in under an hour.

Part of the vocation, for this is to a greater extent what it is, is both a fascination for discovering new things and a desire to share this information. How this translates to Phoenix is simply down to reasonable application of the fundamentals of science to

an alien landscape. A quick skim of the latest Geology Now blog might inform me about how differences in atmospheric carbon dioxide resulted in changes to the sedimentary deposition during a period of pre-history. Armed with this knowledge I can now articulate abundantly on some rock formations investigated during a survey of a world with a dense carbon dioxide atmosphere. Perusing an article on how a small tribe living along a valley viewed time as up and down gives me ideas about a cold-blooded sentient species seeing temperature as fast(hot) and slow(cold) due to the effect it has on their ability to think and act.

But this is simply creative writing. Prolific writers such as Peter Hamilton can probably hammer out 50+ pages in a day (and probably with far fewer spelling and grammatical mistakes than me). So what other skills set a professional Game Master aside from say a creative writer with a penchant for sound-bites?

This is something that was touched on in a recent article - when sci-fi meets sci-fact. The primary aspect

of our writing is that it is fundamentally interactive. Whereas a typical sci-fi writer can get away with a few hundred pages of techno-babble and maybe get a raised eyebrow from an editor, we have to ensure that we can answer all follow-up questions. This is where a solid grounding in sciences is essential (though Pete is pretty damn good in this department too). Providing we can use the building blocks of physics, chemistry and biology to justify and expand on our descriptions we are halfway there. We do our utmost to make Phoenix credible with only modest use of handwavium.

This does bring me onto the subject to legacy. I came to the game a few years after launch. While my predecessors had fiery imaginations their views were somewhat pulp. The fundamental difference in our styles is not too dissimilar to Star Trek and Next Gen. Flumps that sat in craters on airless moons, floating islands (complete with perpetual waterfalls) and black holes you could traverse all had to be explained away as people revisited previously explored locations.

So, all there is to game mastering is fast and credible creative writing?

Well, not quite, there are three other areas - professionalism and diplomacy and vision.

Professionalism

Professionalism is being seen to fair and as transparent as possible in all your dealings. It is about attempting to keep the game running smoothly, starting a download at approximately the same time every day (the vagaries of broadband maintenance notwithstanding) and finishing at a reasonable time. It's about dealing with enquiries as promptly as possible and not being intentionally flippant (though some of my terse replies when busy in hindsight make me wince). Often it is a case of making sure all parties are aware of a situation and how to resolve the situation to the benefit of the players providing that it does not significantly negatively impact on the game. Do we always get it right - nosireebob. Do we try our best - absolutely - it is one of the reasons why some customers have been

playing Phoenix for 20 years!

“Providing that it does not significantly negatively impact on the game” is an interesting caveat and seems to fly in the face of customer service. The point here is that sometimes you cannot be fair to a player under extreme circumstances. For example, if a player caused a conflict through an honest mistake but the battle resulted in him getting a lot of tactical information, it would not be fair to restore his positions.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy is a tricky one in Phoenix often because what appears to be an unfair situation is only so because much of the information is secret. What starts as a straightforward scenario can be viewed as favouring one faction over another. This is where communication with the players is paramount. The quicker you can understand their position the quicker you can deal with it. Better still is to see the potential impact on the game before it even develops - this is the real art of diplomacy - to have a resolution to a situation before the situation has ever arisen.

Then as Game Master you can drop hints/rumours that allow them to look to their own history, thereby causing a perceptual paradigm shift.

For example, the results of your credible creative writing have over course of years littered many worlds across the game with clues. These clues point to a single world on which some aliens did something a little dodgy a very long time ago. Should anyone follow up the clues they will discover this and get the tech the aliens left behind.

After dozens of extended explorations and investigations, one faction strikes gold, despite many other factions having encountered the clues but never having followed them up. They announce only that they now have this tech with no indications as to either the difficulty in finding it or even that others could have got there first. The potential therefore is for others to view the tech as something ‘gifted’ to the specific group.

As a Game Master it is not unreasonable to tell people to look to their history or ask certain affiliations about ‘unusually sized

fauna’ in such a Periphery. This allows them to pull the data together, groan that they missed something that was in hindsight staring them in the face and ‘live with it’ rather than spitting the dummy out of the pram.

This takes me neatly to ‘Big Red Buttons’. This is the term used in Phoenix for a potential cascade situation that can be instigated by one or more players.

The most recent one was a fundamental change to the layout of the Peripheries. This started no less than seven years earlier when a hollowed out asteroid led to the discovery of a short-lived group of rampaging aliens. Investigations seemingly linked this world with a second asteroid in another region of space. While quite a few factions were involved in the early stages only one followed up right to the end - in this case the ability to educate a Boltzmann Brain about the greater reality of the universe.

Other buttons over the years have involved the discovery of the body of Emperor Paul and the shooting of the Pope, though more often people get very shy around them

once they realise their nature. One button has been pressed though appears to have done nothing is that of Baron LiQuan stepping on board the sentient ship studying the Plague Stargate...

Vision

Vision is belief in the game, that it has a long and bright future and that everything we do now we will have to live with so we best do it right. While people are dropping out of online games after a few months having visited the zoo again and again and discovered there are only so many times you can see the same tiger cage, they will still be playing Phoenix. We do not offer cheap thrills, we do not offer pretty graphics and we do not offer instant gratification. We offer the chance to create a legacy, we offer the ability to do things in the game others have not and never will, we offer the chance to fundamentally alter the game universe and we offer a persistent and ever evolving storyline. We offer a game for life.

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The Changing Face of Play-by-Mail

KJC's MICA GOLDSTONE asks: How do you make a large pile of cash in the PBM industry?

By: Mica Goldstone

(This article first appeared in 2005 in Flagship magazine issue # 116.)

I was asked to write an article on the changing face of Play-by-Mail. This was a tough one, as I could only write from my perspective, which I know full well to be only a part of the big picture, and not necessarily an accurate one, at that. So, my gut reaction was to decline. A few beers later and some mulling, and I came to the conclusion - yeah, what the Hell, and who cares whether I offer up a well documented and carefully ordered dissertation on the changing face of PBM: wouldn't they rather read the ranting of a madman?

So, why did the industry collapse, and trust me on this, the industry is not what it was. For my money, I would put this down to three primary factors.

First of all and most importantly, it was

competition from computers, console, and more recently on-line games and the underlying nature of PBM. These offer much better (faster, less frustrating) learning curves, resulting in a quicker fix. Essentially, they pander to the majority, who are less intellectually gifted and more slothful and idle. Hell, when I'm at a loose end, full of beer and can't be bothered thinking, I grab the Xbox to nuke some aliens, and generally press buttons with all the forethought of a child making itself sick with chocolate.

Second is the 'local pub' mentality of most players. Players tend to find a game or a few games, and stick with it/them to the exclusion of all others. It is a bit like your local pub. You always go there. Sure,

you may visit another one, from time to time, and there will always be those few that flit round all the pubs - generally getting on people's tits, before bugging off to a new, shinier pub, but most people like their local pub. They know most people, have developed a rapport with the regulars, and have some kudos, or at least, a reputation of sorts. While people talk about PBM as a hobby, in general, in truth, it is closer to many individual hobbies, each being a game. Nobody (of consequence) says that their hobby is sports; that would be stupid. Instead, they say that their hobby is fencing, running, rugby, football. Same thing here; even when there was a convention for all the games, you found that the players visiting tended to hang around the stalls of

the games they played, though they may have had a little nose at some others, with the same vague interest that a fencer looks at Kendo. Within a short period of time, though, the players from the same game ended up together in the beer tent swapping in-game stories and getting hammered. This level of introversion has meant that once players are committed to the game, they get a little cagey about talking about it. You don't sing your local's praises: it is something that is special to you. You will be happy to talk to a new customer, if they happen to be standing next to you at the bar, but they are not a regular and there is definitely no immediate invitation to share your table - unless they tip you on the pub quiz and you happen to be hammered at the time and she has huge jugs...but, that's another story, and the analogy breaks down there. To cut a long story short, the players involved in a game tend to not rant about the game to outsiders, irrespective of how much they are enjoying it. This means that the player base tends to not grow through word of mouth.

The extended learning curve means that advertising is problematic. It is difficult to capture somebody's interest with an accurate advert, and a longer advert is not normally viable. This means that, generally, only those who know about the hobby read the adverts, and these people are often already playing in another game.

Finally, internal sabotage has played a part in pulling it down. This is not the sweeping axe of inter-company all-out war, but rather, the death by a thousand cuts, or the one too many fleas that killed the dog. Many players have looked at the results they have got from the game they are playing, and thought that it must be easy money to run a game.

A couple of quid for a couple of sheets of paper, or more recently, nothing more than an email - piece of cake. So, they hammered together a half-assed game that runs only through constant supervision, and pan-handled this to other players in the games they are playing in. Players have not left in droves, but some have, due to promises of more personal service, better returns for their

money, etc.. The bloke in his bedroom - not paying tax, overheads, advertising, or other running costs discovers that the time and effort is actually quite a bloody lot, and after a few months of hard work, frustrations, and run-ins with disgruntled customers, decides to sack it off. Unfortunately, this has been sufficient to alienate the players, and cause them to venture into other forms of entertainment, as they cannot hope for the same level of commitment from a larger company they got from bloke-in-bedroom, even though bloke-in-bedroom burnt out, as a result. Sure, some will come back, but not all. The damage to the industry has been done over the years. As I said, it has been the death of a thousand cuts, and fleas sucking the dogs dry.

So, what are we left with?

A division in the industry, split between dedicated-blokes-in-bedrooms delivering personal services to a small audience, and the larger companies that have built up the sophistication of their code over many years and can beat off the fleas with big sticks. While there is

considerable mutual respect between the big three (Harlequin, Madhouse, and us, KJC), we do not really talk. There is nothing much to say, really. We are still here, while many rivals are now stacking shelves at Tesco or teaching. We are in competition with each other, but we are more in competition with the changing mentality of the modern gamer.

The modern gamer

Once upon a time, the gamer accepted his fate. He learnt the rules to try and avoid his fate, but at the end of the day, he knew that when it was over, it was over - and would be prepared to start, again. Then came the reload option, and next the save button, and finally, auto-re-spawn. It doesn't matter if you act a prick, nothing is permanent and it can all be re-set. The disposable society finally hit gaming in a big, bad way. We find that most PBM gamers are those who were born before this mentality of 'here I am, give me what I want' set in. Our average gamer is more understanding of the principles of 'implications, ramifications, and cause and effect.' They understand that it can take

years to build up, and mistakes can well be permanent - 'yeah, fuck-it' will not be issued from our gamers' lips, prior to breaking a treaty and committing to a war that could end in their own annihilation.

Industry failings

What we don't offer is a well-established general forum or notice board, where potential players intrigued by this style of gaming can see what they can get from reliable, established companies.

Instead, we have sites scattered across the web with pages of listings, some with nice wrappings, but unfortunately, wrappings around rubbish. They're often littered with dead links, a 2p bloke-in-bedroom affair, or just a downright load of crap. I note Flagship's new forum, and hope this will gain popularity and create some common ground. We (the industry) don't offer a quick fix,. One of the major aspects of a PBM game is the community. How can a couple of turns reveal this? A reviewer of a game cannot possibly hope to give a fair accounting of a game. It would be as fair to review a restaurant by

looking at the menu, or a holiday from the brochure.

This, however, was exactly how the industry issued the awards for PBM in the past. We have loads of awards dating to the times when KJC were buddies with the various people responsible for handing out the awards. have we been approached by award givers in the last ten years? Like buggery we have, so how can anybody take seriously an award that does not even take into consideration some of the most popular games on the market? We generally find the whole thing a bit of a joke. We are still here and paying the bills, this we think is what makes a good PBM game and company - the very fact that we are still around, and players still play our games.

What is needed is an independent site where games can be listed. This site should be updated regularly, and details about the game should be present. These should include how many years the game has run for, and probably some reviews by the players, themselves, along with costs, etc.. Reviewers should state exactly how long they have played the game, and state

how much they got involved in the game.

Personally speaking, I am glad that most of the pissant companies have gone the way of the dodo. Those that remain actually do give a damn about their customers. They do offer reliability, and are committed to putting back into the company the money they earn. The only real shame is that the professional companies are still outnumbered by pan-handlers by hundreds-to-one.

So, where do I see the industry going?

We are down, but we are not out. That is my prediction. We will never be the glory boys, but we offer something that others cannot compete with, this being long-term satisfaction. We will find that the average age of our players will increase, until the majority are in their mid-twenties to late thirties, and as a result of other commitments, always a minority, but the industry will remain. We offer games that can be played during work hours, we offer communities, and we offer the smug satisfaction that intellect will win out over

hammering buttons really fast.

I am also noticing that we are recruiting players who have become disillusioned with the alternative gaming experiences. The other games do not have the longevity of our games, and tend to be more about jumping through hoops, than real strategy and tactics. They have no real meat to them. This is clear by the vast amount of players who jump ship, as soon as the next big thing hits the shops/Net. I believe that we were there at the beginning, twenty-something years ago, and popular, simply because there were few alternatives. As the gaming community matures, I anticipate that we will find that some players will gravitate to our generally more mature style of games, providing that they have even heard of this type of gaming!

I also suspect that the hybrid game will become the standard. As PBM has moved towards PBeM, the general progression will be towards PBeM/Web games. There will be different levels of hybridisation.

Many games already allow turn input via the web, and some of the more

sophisticated ones even upload data to the web. I suspect that Forum/PBeM will become popular - at least, that's where I am pushing development in my company.

I note Flagship's improved website, especially the forum, and applaud it as a progressive move - and will applaud even louder, if it increases interest in the hobby, in general, and our games, in particular. I also believe that their move towards main-stream gaming is in the right direction. This appeal to a more general gamer will hopefully mean that PBM will be introduced to gamers who have simply not experienced this type of gaming - poor ignorant bastards - may they see the light.

Progress?

Next time, I may give some ideas about what we have done to survive, beyond the obvious answer of work, sweat, and work. In particular, the work we have done to create Phoenix, and how it opened our eyes to what can be achieved. This article may well interest game designers, and hopefully encourage the potential bloke-in-bedroom to work

TURN-BASED GAMING

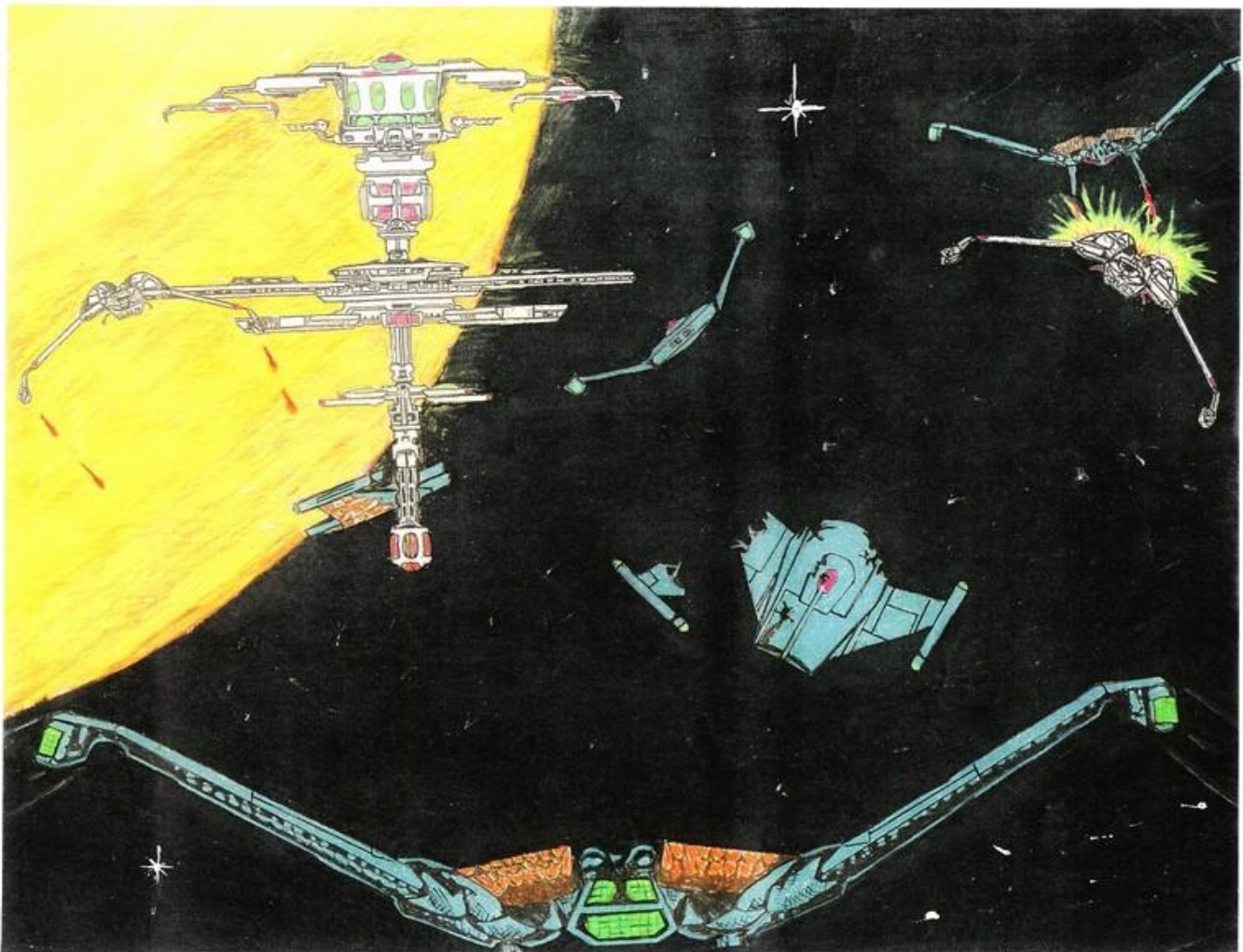


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with an established company, in preference to being another straw on the camel's back.

Finally, to come back to the title: How do you make a large pile of cash in the PBM industry? My answer would be to start with a huge pile of cash!

What was the last Play By Mail game that you played??



Art by Scott Estrin for Starforce Battles.

Reflecting on the Musings of PBM Personalities

The Changing Face of PBM meets the Mirror of Modern Day Reality

By: Charles Mosteller

Back in 2005, Mica Goldstone of KJC games authored an article titled, "The Changing Face of Play-by-Mail." In it, he argued that the PBM industry had, in his words, "Collapsed." He chalked this collapse up to three primary factors.

1. Competition from computers, consoles, and online games, and what he termed "the underlying nature of PBM."
2. The "local pub" mentality of most PBM players.
3. Internal sabotage which took the form of a death by a thousand cuts.

Mica goes on in the article to characterize his PBM company, KJC Games, as one of what he terms to be "the big three" - namely, Harlequin Games, Madhouse, and KJC Games. So, here we have an instance of one of the top commercial PBM companies acknowledging and conceding that the PBM

industry had, in fact, collapsed.

Additionally, in that very same article, Mica Goldstone goes so far as to state that these very same "big three" PBM companies do not really talk, even while asserting that there is "considerable respect" between these big three PBM companies. Mica stated, "There is nothing much to say, really."

So, let's get this straight. The PBM industry had collapsed, but there was nothing much for the biggest commercial PBM companies (at least, on the European side of the Atlantic Ocean) to say?

Did these very same top tier PBM companies believe that not talking was the right path, when faced with the collapse of their very own industry? Or, could it have simply been that there was nothing left to say, that had not already been said? What would be the point of talking, just to talk? Yet, how effective is

communication between the various individual PBM companies, if they aren't talking? And if the collapse of the PBM industry doesn't constitute sufficient reason to be talking, or to begin talking anew, then pray tell me, what does?

Mica Goldstone went on in that article from eight years ago to say, regarding what he termed "the modern gamer," "Once upon a time, the gamer accepted his fate." Could it be that the commercial PBM companies and their moderators had "accepted their fate," also?

Perhaps the time has come to revisit Mica Goldstone's words contained in that article. Certainly, there's much food for thought to be found in what he said. But, whatever else that one may conclude from reading that article under the light of a fresh day, I do not believe that gamers hold a monopoly upon the ability or the willingness to "accept one's fate."

Mica Goldstone's laments regarding the reload option, the save game button, and auto re-spawn could - and probably should - be considered beyond just the very limited context of them being convenient scapegoats for the PBM industry's collapse. After all, it is not as though no commercial PBM company had never re-run a turn, before. Furthermore, with the advent of computer and console games, it quickly became apparent to many gamers that having to restart a game, or even just a particular level, each time that one wanted to play a given game was not just a never-ending exercise in frustration, but a very inefficient use of their personal time.

Do commercial PBM companies hold an inherent monopoly upon trying to improve games? Would it have been a wise business model for manufacturers of computer and console games to simply ignore things that frustrate their games' players, or which waste those players' time?

The article in question went on to elaborate on what Mica Goldstone perceived to be "industry failings" of the PBM industry. And what,

specifically, were these "industry failings?"

1. The PBM industry did not offer a well established general forum or notice board.
2. Sites scattered across the web with pages of listings, some with nice wrappings, but unfortunately wrappings around rubbish.
3. The seeming impossibility for fair accounts of PBM games by reviewers, after only a couple of turns playing a game.
4. An industry awards system that is a joke.
5. The need for an independent site where PBM games could be listed, one which is updated regularly and details about the game should be present, and one where reviewers should state exactly how long that they have played the game, and how much that they got involved in the game.

Mica's article from almost a decade ago is well worth reading, if for no other reason than because it makes one think. From my perspective, I think that the article only skimmed over the PBM industry's failings,

while simultaneously placing blame where, in at least some instances, it wasn't properly due.

Some of the developments pertaining to computer and console games were very natural progressions for games and gaming for these newer mediums that the public masses embraced.

Cost and lack of innovation weren't mentioned by Mica Goldstone in his article as PBM industry failings. Yet, these very same issues persist, even today, in the PBM industry that remains.

With what Mica Goldstone characterized as "pissant little companies" that have "gone the way of the dodo" now out of the picture, what is the PBM industry's excuse, now? Their convenient whipping boys may make for nice propaganda and colorful lamentation, but how many new PBM games have the big PBM companies churned out, in recent years? How frequently do they put forth new PBM offerings that are actually new, rather than variations of the same old games that they are already running?

In olden days, new PBM games were created with

frequent regularity. Many little "pissant" PBM companies were actually pretty good at giving the at-large PBM player community something new to try.

For all of the laments about computer, video, and online games, it does not escape my attention that the advance of technology and the progress of change acted as accelerants to competition for the PBM industry. It's bread and butter was something more fundamental than just playing games. It was entertainment, itself. Where, previously, PBM companies competed with one another, that bubble was burst, when computer bulletin board systems (BBSs), and later the Internet, arrived.

Having resigned themselves to their fate, and having failed to recognize the true nature of the competitive forces that were advancing toward them, PBM companies exacerbated their new-found dilemma by failing to fully appreciate how the pieces of their own genre of gaming fit together.

How is it that the big commercial PBM companies could not provide the PBM

gaming community at large something as simple as a general forum or notice board? If they provided it, then why was Mica Goldstone articulating their failure to do so as an industry failing?

In his article, Mica said, "I note Flagship's improved website, especially the forum and applaud it as a progressive move and will applaud even louder if it increases interest in the hobby in general and our games in particular. I also believe that their move towards main-stream gaming is in the right direction. This appeal to a more general gamer will hopefully mean that PBM will be introduced to gamers who have simply not experienced this type of gaming - poor ignorant bastards - may they see the light."

I will state for the record that I did not dislike the fact that Flagship established a new forum. I, myself, in fact, helped Carol Mulholland with the Flagship forum, and on more than one occasion. There were several different incarnations of the Flagship forum, over time, and unfortunately, Carol encountered medical issues before she could bring the

last iteration of the Flagship site to fruition.

That said, I think that Carol steered Flagship to cover "main stream" gaming primarily due to the fact that the PBM industry had allowed itself to deteriorate to such a point that it was beginning to manifest itself as institutionally irrelevant. The PBM industry, having long-since resigned itself to its fate - to its supposed eventual and pending demise - acquiesced, and even encouraged, moving coverage (and by extension, attention) further away from the PBM industry, itself.

But, one certainly can't blame Carol Mulholland. After all, perhaps the PBM industry, itself, having long-since resigned itself to "its fate," had finally reached the point where it was no longer worth covering in depth.

As far as "the potential bloke-in-bedroom" being another straw on the camel's back, in no instance can it be properly surmised that any bloke-in-bedroom or any number of blokes-in-bedrooms are - or ever were - responsible for the breaking of the PBM industry's back. Upon closer inspection, the "camel"



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really isn't a camel, after all. That's just another excuse, another pointing of the finger of blame.

Even if the PBM industry as a whole wasn't aware of what the industry's own shortcomings were, prior to Mica Goldstone writing that article back in 2005, what was the PBM industry's excuse AFTER Mica wrote it?

In the old days, back during the golden era of PBM gaming, when play-by-mail gaming was at the apex of its existence, the entire genre was alive. Not only was the spirit of competition alive and well, passion for the genre was fervent and palpable. PBM companies - and not just companies, but individual PBM moderators - competed in earnest for players. They competed with their games. They competed with their advertisements. They competed for every nook and every cranny of advantage.

They competed for every player.

They were, in a nutshell, alive. They embodied the true spirit of competition. Now? They are but a shell of their former selves. And

we wonder why PBM seems either dead or dying?

Competition was a frenzy, back then. It was never-ending.

And innovation?

Innovation was real.

Back then, they didn't just give up. They had not yet resigned themselves to their fate - a fate that they didn't even want.

If the PBM industry either could not - or would not - provide remedy to the industry's failings that Mica Goldstone articulated, then how does the PBM industry ever expect things to get better?

Quite plain and simply, they don't. By and large, they've mostly just given up.

In that very same issue of Flagship magazine that Mica Goldstone's article was printed in, Issue # 116 (the November/December 2005 issue), there was also an interview with Rick Loomis of Flying Buffalo, Inc. In that interview, the following question was posed to Rick Loomis:

Do you think that PBM itself will survive?

And Rick's response? This is what he had to say.

"Of course. PBM (and PBEM) isn't just a business. It has changed a lot with the advent of the Internet and cheap computers, but there will always be people who like to play turn-based games with lots of opponents, hidden movement, and plenty of time between moves. It may never again be as big as it was for a while, but some of us never get tired of that kind of game."

If Rick Loomis was right, and if it is true that PBM isn't just a business, then the question begs to be asked, "Is the PBM industry just an industry?"

Or, is it something more?

And if it is something more, then what - exactly and specifically - is it? And beyond the answer to that particular question, there looms another - What is it that we WANT the PBM industry to be, no matter what the answer to that last question turns out to be?

Do we want it to be resigned to its fate? Do we want the various elements of the PBM industry that remain to continue to not talk? How is an industry,

where its major participants (not to mention some of its founders and long-standing advocates) do not really talk, to be expected to survive, much less thrive?

Before Rick Loomis created the commercial PBM industry all those many years ago, he started writing to gamers who advertised for opponents in the back of a popular gaming magazine, offering to let them play test his new game idea, if they would send him a postage stamp with each turn.

My point is not that Rick Loomis was right and Mica Goldstone was wrong. Rather, my point is simply this: That before commercial PBM companies existed, some blokes-in-bedrooms pre-existed them, one and all. Hell, Rick Loomis was one of them. Even he started somewhere, as does every one, as does every PBM company.

During the interview in question, Rick Loomis acknowledged that he's made lots of mistakes. One of the things that he attributed Flying Buffalo's survival in a competitive PBM market to stood out to me. It was where he said, "Mostly I think it's

persistence - keeping on slogging even through the slim times, which has led to longevity."

It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention. If it is true that the PBM industry has collapsed, then perhaps it is high time that PBM companies reinvent both themselves and their game offerings. Where there's a will, maybe there's still a way.

Flagship magazine chose to move towards main-stream gaming. I give credit to Carol Mulholland, the editor of Flagship, for trying.

The term "main-stream gaming" is an amorphous blob, though. Gaming, itself, is in flux, in an eternal state of change. My desire, as editor of Suspense & Decision, is not to chart a course for main-stream gaming. I have no desire to hide behind the veil of such an amorphous beast.

Rather, in full view do I fly the colors of play-by-mail gaming.

Once upon a time ago, PBM gaming carved out for itself a place on the gaming totem pole. But, at least it was on the pole. Far worse, it is, to now lie covered

under the moss of collective depression.

If the PBM industry, itself, has given up on PBM gaming entirely, then the final nail has already been driven into its coffin.

If the big PBM companies don't really talk, then they won't likely draw much attention - to either themselves or to the industry as a whole.

PBM has never been the biggest gaming genre on the block. But, at least in the old days, PBM made a lot of noise.

And, PBM gamers had a lot of fun, not to mention they also had a lot of different games to choose from.

The title of Mica Goldstone's article was, "The Changing Face of Play-by-Mail."

Perhaps its time for the face of PBM to change, once more.



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Chronicles of the Mad Scientist

By: Mark Wardell

Mark@WyEastGames.com

I've been sitting on the fence about this for some time trying to decide whether or not to go public with my ranting. Well, clearly you can see that I decided to take the plunge.

I believe the current system for the PBM Game of the Year award is failing to serve the interest of the general PBM gaming community. It's failing to excite PBM game moderators to insure their games are nominated; it's failing to excite PBM game players because it's not designed for them, in fact they're largely excluded from the process; and if it can't excite moderators or players, how is it going to excite a non-PBM gamer into trying a PBM game?

The submission process is obscure, and the timing is inconsistent, some years we've turned in our nominees in May or June, this year it was March, and I won't even get into when we start the process, but

it's never early enough, especially with shifting deadlines, and it's never at the same time each year. Not only do I feel like I'm playing a game where I don't know the rules, but I'm not sure knowing the rules would offer me any advantage in the process, they'll just change when I'm not looking anyway.

On top of this we're once again about to engage in a discussion about what games should, or should not, be included in consideration for the award. We've had this conversation before, but it may not have been settled. For the record, I don't believe that we gain anything by diluting what a PBM game is to satisfy an inconsistent and uninspiring award process. My position is a PBM game is a turn based game designed to be played by mail, with turns submitted to a game moderator who processes them and returns the results. Mail in this context

NOTE: *Still recovering from a bout of holiday sickness, rather than author an article for this month's column, Associate Editor Mark Wardell opted to share an e-mail that he sent last year to the Origins PBM Awards jurors - an e-mail that he said received zero response from anyone that he sent it to. He has since been dropped as a voting juror, and listed only as an alternate. So, what do our readers think? Is the Origins PBM Awards process in disarray? Is it a joke? Is it a viable mechanism for recognizing PBM games in today's day and age? Or is it a relic of a bygone era, one that is institutionally irrelevant?*

- Managing Editor Charles

is understood to mean snail mail, email, or submission on a website. A game designed to be played face-to-face, be it a board game or a RPG, which is being played by mail, does not

make it a PBM game. To include those games for award consideration leaves us judging the method of play over the design intent. This is not how I would want a game I designed judged.

I have no data to support this, but in the back of my head I wonder if this blurring of the lines of what makes a PBM game might be a contributing factor in the lack of engagement by moderators and players alike in the award process. And should you think this lack of engagement is normal, it's not. As a customer of GMT Games (a board game company) I am fully aware of what games of theirs have been nominated, and what games they're competing against. For at least some companies and their customers there is a great deal of engagement in this process.

I am also coming from the position that there are more PBM games that could have been nominated than we had under consideration, making the need to "expand" our niche of the hobby by expanding what makes a PBM game irrelevant. What we need is more engagement, and more excitement, by the

PBM community in the PBM community itself. What we've had this year, and in fact most of the previous years, is not it.

What I envision is a PBM award system designed from the ground up by and for PBM gamers and moderators, which perhaps can also be designed to feed into the Origins PBM Game of the Year award process. I feel this would be something that both PBM moderators and gamers could get behind.

By way of some quick brainstorming, I present the following.

The awards process will be administered by an awards committee composed of a minimum of five PBM enthusiasts, additional members may be added as needed, perhaps in the form of sub-committees with a specific focus. A well-formed committee will have PBM gamers of different backgrounds; game moderators and players; and individuals with different preferences for the game genres (sci-fi, fantasy, etc.). Serving on the awards committee should be a three year term of service, with no limit on the number of terms served. Terms should be

staggered to ensure the entire committee would not be replaced in a single year.

Awards to be considered would be:

Best Sci-Fi PBM Game of the Year

Best Fantasy PBM Game of the Year

Best Sports PBM Game of the Year

Best Historic PBM Game of the Year

Etc, other categories would be added as needed

Best PBM Game Newsletter of the Year

Best New PBM Game of the Year

Best PBM Game of the Year

David Webber Award of Excellence

Nominations for awards must be made by a fixed date each year, with voting completed six months later, and awards presented the following month. For example, with a December 1st nomination deadline, voting would be done by the end of May, with awards announced in June.

Anyone may nominate any PBM game for an award,

but the moderator/publisher of a game may request their product be removed from consideration if they desire, and the awards committee could reassign a game if it was nominated in the wrong category (an empire building sci-fi game would not be considered as best sports game of the year, but a chariot racing game could be nominated for both best historic and best sports games). Every game nominated for an award will automatically be included in consideration for Best PBM Game of the Year Award.

Voting for all categories except the Best New PBM Game of the Year, PBM Game of the Year and the David Webber Award of Excellence will be some combination of popular vote, and awards committee. Best New PBM Game of the Year, The PBM Game of the Year and David Webber Award of Excellence will be decided only by the awards committee.

If the timing of this were done right, and there were some consistency to the Origin awards process, the top five games under consideration for the PBM Game of the Year Award could also be submitted as

nominees for the Origins PBM Game of the Year award.

This is not a perfect system by any means; there are some rough edges here and there that still need to be worked out. It might also seem odd to talk about a new set of awards when we seem to have trouble with a single award. But I believe that an award designed by PBM gamers, for PBM gamers, will generate more interest than an award voted on by people who don't play PBM games, who question what a PBM game actually is, at a convention most of us don't attend. If we develop more interest and excitement in our own awards, that will spill over to the Origins award and raise awareness of PBM gaming beyond what we're seeing now. This isn't being purposed to compete with, or replace, the Origins award, but offer something more meaningful to PBM gamers that can also support the Origins award and make it more meaningful as well.

I am willing to commit at least three years of working to make this happen, and build it into something that will work for the overall PBM community, but I will not do it alone, in fact I

could not do it alone even if I wanted to. So having put the idea forward, I'm looking for feedback and volunteers. All of us have PBM experience or we wouldn't be here, what do you think? Am I just whistling in the wind? Are any of you willing to at least help knock off some of those rough edges, design a workable and fair process, and then just perhaps take a turn on the committee that gets it off the ground?

Some would say this is a radical suggestion doomed to failure. I would remind us that if we continue to do what we've always done, we'll continue to receive what we've always received. If we're happy with the status-quo in PBM gaming then cool, happy day, we don't need to do anything. If not, then we need to do more than we've been doing, maybe this isn't the magic bullet, but maybe it is. And if you think this is a radical idea, well, let's just say I've got another one for you, but I'll save that for another day.

Okay, let the flaming begin.

- Mark -

Where We're Heading...

We are at T plus two, and all systems remain a go, Houston.

The clock continues to tick, and we stand, now, at two issues to our credit, the smoke of our launch with issue # 1 now beginning to trail off into the distance behind us. We did not explode on launch, and we did not implode leading up to that PBM historic event. So, what now?

As we gain proverbial altitude with each issue, hopefully, we will continue to increase and to enhance our perspective on the state of both the PBM industry and the PBM hobby.

It's pretty obvious to any but those who are intentionally and willfully blind that play-by-mail gaming has survived intact into the 21st Century. Getting here, however, has not transpired without loss. Rest assured, losses to the PBM industry and hobby have been sizable. Cataclysmic, however, may

be a bit of an overstatement.

The world of play-by-mail may have collided with the Internet comet, but apparently, while it turned out to be an extinction level event for numerous PBM companies and games, more than a few either survived or adapted. Countless legions of PBM players were annihilated and lost to the sands of time, either immediately upon impact or in the aftermath, thereof – yet, a stalwart few survived to stir anew.

Rather than strike the colors of play-by-mail for all time, however, these few either dug deep or adapted.

Their world of PBM gaming ripped apart by the tidal forces of change and technology, things would never be the same, again.

The real story to be unearthed, however, is about neither change nor technology. Rather, the real

story is about the essence of turn-based gaming, and how it remains a creative and positive force at all times, and how we continually bend these gigantic tidal forces to do our bidding, as players and as moderators.

PBM Gamers have a long and storied history of conquest and wars. Within the context of PBM gaming, we have waged battles of epic scale in genres ranging from historic to fantasy to futuristic, and nearly everything in between.

So, that change and technology attacked us with the Internet is hardly undue cause for alarm, I dare say. Once again, we have been provided with food for thought – not to mention new tools with which to work our will.

Our will, of course, is to design and to play games – turn-based games. Games with depth and heft and substance. Games fueled by imagination. Games to make our PBM forefathers

proud. Games that will give birth to new generations of our kind.

So, where are we heading?

We're headed from PBM company to PBM company, from moderator to moderator, from player to player. We're headed to you, or to someone very much like you.

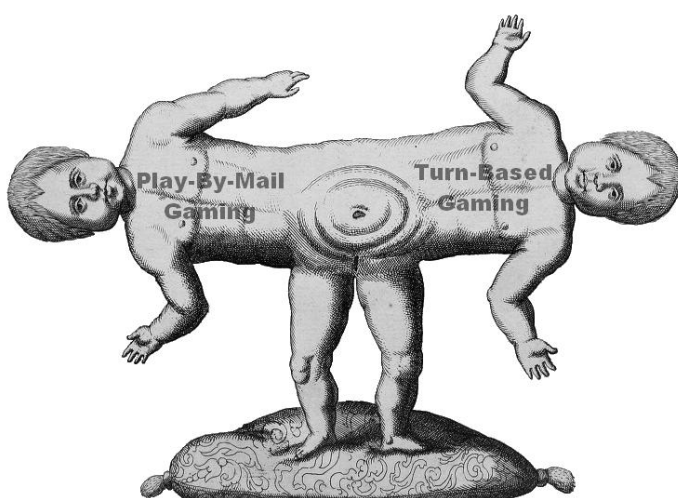
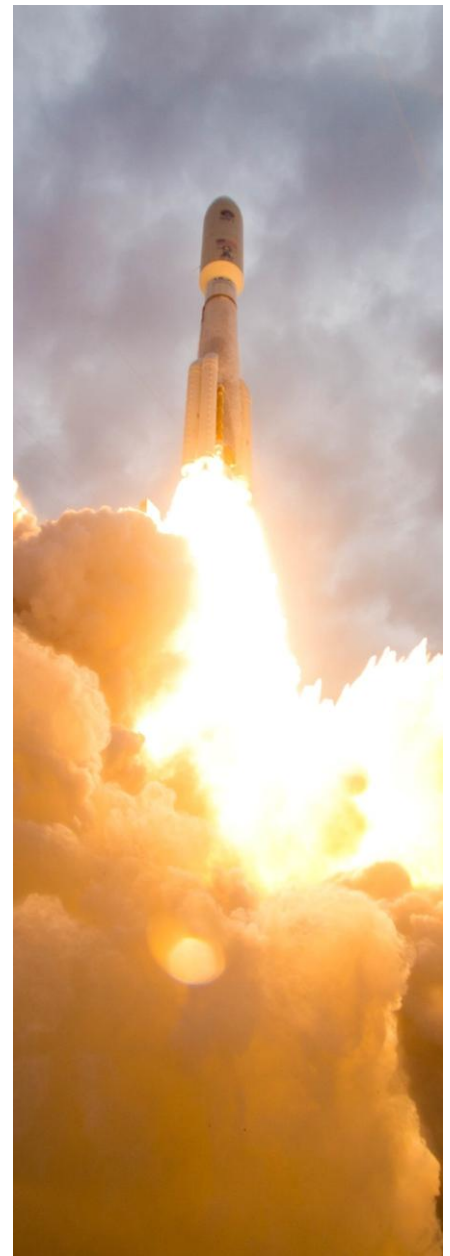
We're headed to communities of gamers, to pockets of gaming enthusiasts, who, very much like yourself, survived the forces of change and technology that overtook us, one and all.

Our world torn asunder, many are they that remained, scattered across the vastness of the Internet in either Asgard-like cities floating in Cyberspace or in life pods of individual determination.

To some, we will likely appear as friends coming over the horizon, whereas to others of our kind, our appearance will seem sudden, and not to be trusted.

The new reality that we all face may seem to us as a harsh and foreboding landscape of gaming that, at most, bears only a remote and passing resemblance to what we knew - and loved - so well, not so very long ago.

However, we are not the Borg. We are Suspense & Decision. Our purpose is not to assimilate all into one, but to gather interest and to grow it. We invite you to join us on this journey without a map. We welcome you!



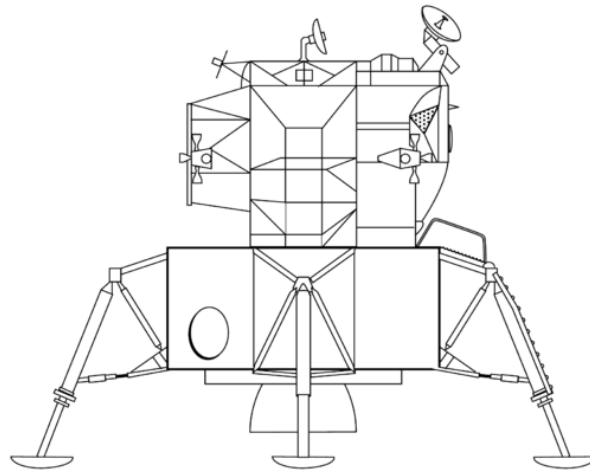
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Lunar Landing: Exploring the Moon Colonies of Play-By-Mail

With the Information Superhighway sprawling from one end of the gaming universe to the other, and with the Internet threatening to overshadow gaming in all of its many wondrous incarnations, the time has come to begin launching probes to, and landing survey teams on, the surviving colony worlds that fly the PBM flag - and to the new realms populated by the ancestral descendants of PBM gaming.

The PBM world, as we once knew it, is gone. Only trace vestiges of it remain. Hundreds of PBM companies, and hundreds (if not thousands) of PBM games, have disappeared. The evidentiary record is

sparse, though sufficient to determine that, once upon a time ago, the postal genre of gaming was a world lush with PBM games of seemingly every type imaginable.

Because all exploration has a beginning, we must start somewhere. Accordingly, our exploration target for this issue is:

The Flying Buffalo Gamer Forums

<http://fbi.october.com.au/forum/>

Upon landing at this site, the sparseness of life present here becomes quickly noticeable. Exploration of the site reveals that the total

number of forum postings for the year 2013 through December 29th was six. Two were posted in January, two more were posted in July, one was posted in September, and one was posted in October.

The total number of topics was 105. The total number of postings on this forum site was 518. This covers a span of time that stretches from January 1st, 2006 through December 29th, 2013 - almost eight full years.

As of December 29th, 2013, the date of most recent posting activity for each of the categories of this forum were as follows:

Forum Category	Date of Last Posting
General Discussions	October 13th, 2013
Starweb	May 3rd, 2011
Battle Plan (and WWBP)	January 24th, 2013
Riftlords	Never
Feudal Lords	February 15th, 2009
Galactic Conflict	May 3rd, 2011
Mobius	January 10th, 2009
Nuclear Destruction	May 13th, 2010

A warning sign at the top of the forum that states, ***"Please note: Anyone posting ads not relating to FBI or FBI games or posting other unsolicited spam will be removed from this forum, will have all their posts removed, and will be banned from rejoining,"*** likely acts as not just as a deterrent to actual spam, but to actual PBM-related postings, as well. If recent, or even overall, forum activity is any indication, then this chosen approach has not proven itself to be either a successful formula for fostering Flying Buffalo-specific discussions, nor as a boon to the PBM industry, in general. Cross-pollination of PBM gamers to this site seems unlikely, given such a stringent approach to limiting and inhibiting broader discussions of PBM gaming there.

One positive item worth highlighting is that this forum's most recently

registered user registered on that forum on October 13th, 2013. However, forum posting activity has not picked up there, since that date.

The wholesale lack of vibrant activity, particularly with regard to recent posting activity, indicates a PBM community in decline.

The real question, however, is not whether Flying Buffalo players gather at this particular forum, but rather, where do they gather - if, indeed, they gather at all, anymore?

A secondary landing at the Starweb Play by Mail/Email game Facebook pages revealed a grand total of just 82 likes, as of December 29th, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/StarwebPBM>

Starweb's place in the annals of Play-By-Mail greatness is not in

question. The game has instant name recognition in PBM circles. It was one of the very first PBM games in existence, and it has endured for some four decades.

Yet, none of that changes the fact that The Flying Buffalo Gamer Forums is virtually bereft of life. The site is not completely dead, but user activity there is so extremely light, that Internet passers-by could be forgiven for mistaking it for a lifeless moon.

CONCLUSION:
Terraforming recommended.



Dante's Inferno

The Trials and Tribulations of Publishing a PBM Magazine

If you've ever thought about publishing a magazine of your very own, I encourage you to give it a try. The worst that you can do is succeed.

As I placed the final touches on issue # 2 of Suspense & Decision magazine, preparing to get it out the electronic door, Dante's Inferno came to mind. What more appropriate a title for a magazine column than that, eh?

Although I must confess my rudimentary level of experience accumulated to date, I cannot help but to stand back and admire the panoramic view of the many levels of Hell that publishing a magazine entails.

To be certain, this is but a proverbial Hell, one entirely of my own making. The task wasn't forced upon me. Indeed, I have even received unsolicited advice, recently, from a rather infamous PBM personality regarding what they suggest that I do, based upon their own prior experience. I was assured that publishing this magazine is a "fun

enterprise," now, but that I will need something to sustain me, once the initial blush of enthusiasm from die-hard moderators and players inevitably fades. Upon what the "fun enterprise" characterization was based, one can only speculate.

In order to follow that advice, though, it would entail that I publish Suspense & Decision less frequently, charge for advertisements placed within its pages, and that I decide upon a fixed page length for each issue. The point of the advice, I suspect, was to encourage me to adopt an approach that is more sustainable over the long term, lest the magazine fall by the wayside before its time.

The advice is sound. If I were wise, I would embrace it to the last tittle.

Alas, my destiny with this magazine lies elsewhere, it seems. At this stage, I cannot afford the luxury of even thinking that we might have a long term. I set a one year time frame in which to try and get this magazine up and running and published with a sense of regularity.

The Hell that is magazine publication has always existed. It was only very recently, though, just one issue back, that I dared to bust through the gate to this fiery abode of electronic print. Since misery enjoys company, I made certain that I dragged Mark Wardell with me on this trek through self-inflicted torment.

I spent a lot more time on issue # 2 than I did on issue # 1. Honestly, a lot more time than I probably should have spent. May my agony be your reading pleasure!

My attempts to invite existing PBM companies to submit articles or ads has only met with limited success, to date. Apparently, at least some of them do not find free advertising to be an attractive model. Go figure!

Reading a magazine of this nature appears to be more popular than writing articles for it.

Just as magazine Hell has many levels, likewise, it has many mysteries. All things considered, I adjudge it a fine place to set up camp.

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