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and exclusive previews

of upcoming Silven

Publishing products!

True Sorcery
exclusive excerpt inside

True Sorcery is the much awaited new release by Green Ronin. In this issue we bring you a worldwide exclusive look at 3 of the pages from the book.

Errata: Last issue we goofed! Our apologies to Silven Trumpeter editor Livia Caiazzo, mistakenly credited in the last issue as Livia Caiazzio. Thank you, Livia, for letting us know!

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Cover artwork courtesy of White Wolf and Green Ronin. Used with permission.

Editor's Note

June, 2006

Greetings, *Silven Trumpeter* readers! Long time no see!

We've decided to bring you something a little different this quarter, a diversion from our usual focus on traditional pen-and-paper. In more than one way, it's a look to the past. Once upon a time, the Silven Crossroads had a section devoted to the computer RPG, and in our feature article we take an in-depth look at the history of the CRPG - and where it's going!

Reading over this article for the first time, I couldn't believe how many memories it brought up. Do you remember *Zork*? I do - I played that series years and years ago on my family's now-antique (and still in the attic!) Apple Macintosh LC II. I gasped when I was reminded of the storyline from *Phantasy Star II*, and I groaned when I remembered hours lost on *Ultima Online.* By the time I finished the article, I had half a dozen games I wanted to go revisit, and another half dozen on the pile to check out.

But don't let that make you think we've forgotten the books and paper of the traditional RPG. As always, we've got fiction and gaming advice for players and GMs alike. Our review team tackles some of the hottest products available, and there's a ton of new material for the opportunistic GM.

Do you have something to say about this issue, any issue, or the *Trumpeter* as a whole? Drop me a line at Lyz@SilvenPublishing.com - it's a brand-new email address that goes directly to me. If you have something to say, that's the fastest way to be heard!

So read on, roll some dice, and maybe even click that mouse, but - most of all - enjoy!

Cheers!

Elizabeth R.A. Liddell
Editor-in-Chief
Silven Trumpeter

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Interview with Steve Kenson

by Eytan Bernstein

Eytan Bernstein: I'm here with Steve Kenson at the March 2006 ICON Sci-fi & Fantasy convention. Steve is a well-known sci-fi/fantasy author and game designer, having written a number of novels for the *Shadowrun* world. He is also a full-time staffer at Green Ronin, a major publisher of RPG material. We're going to talk for a little while about his various projects and experiences. So, without further ado: Steve, why don't you tell us about what it is you do for Green Ronin?

Steve Kenson: I am a line developer for Green Ronin. I am responsible for *Mutants & Masterminds* and *True 20*. *True 20* is just coming out with its core rulebook. It should be hitting the stores soon, having just been released in electronic format. I primarily design and develop products for those lines.

Eytan: Can you tell us about the thought process behind *True 20*?

Steve: Well, the *True 20* system came about because of a desire to do a simpler and more accessible form of the d20 rules. It is designed to be more accessible for new gamers or more experienced gamers who don't have the same amount of prep time when running their game adventures. So, we initially used the rule set for our *Blue Rose* publications, which was intended to be aimed at those gamers who are interested in the romantic fantasy genre. The system itself became very popular among people who were looking for a simpler, stripped down version of the d20 rules, so we eventually spun it off into an independent rule set and then developed it into an independent core book that will be supported by a number of different settings.

Eytan: Can you tell us a little bit more about *Blue Rose*?

Steve: *Blue Rose* developed out of the idea that romantic fantasy was an underrepresented genre in the RPG industry. Green Ronin and the author John Snead felt that this was a subgenre that was explored in fiction by a number of fantasy authors, many of them female, and ought to focus a good deal more on character development, interaction, and relationships. It features certain types of characters and types of settings that might be more uncommon in other fantasy subgenres. There haven't been a lot of RPG settings that explored those concepts, so *Blue Rose* was designed to encapsulate a lot of those concepts and present a simpler fantasy roleplaying system for fans desiring an alternative to classic fantasy.

Eytan: Do you believe that by simplifying the rules, it will help to encourage better roleplaying?

Steve Kenson poses with "Cosmo the Moon Monkey" from the Freedom City setting for *Mutants & Masterminds*, which he designed and developed.

Steve: Well, that was one of the original goals—to reduce some of the rules complexity to allow for a faster, more fluid roleplaying experience.

Eytan: Recently, Green Ronin conducted a contest, looking for new settings for the *True 20* system. Can you tell us what the contest was like and how the decision making process went?

Steve: We put out a call for *True 20* settings from other publishers. We were primarily interested in working with publishers because they could provide support for the settings after the initial release. We received a number of submissions and we evaluated them based on a number of factors, from their originality to their use and application of the *True 20* rules. We wanted to have the right mix of variety among the settings. We wanted the book to present a variety of settings so that we could show the breadth of the application of the system.

We are very satisfied with the ones we have received. We got a number of really good submissions, and narrowing it down was really difficult. We originally intended to create only four settings in the core rulebook, but we got so many good submissions that we contacted the publishers and said, "If we did a separate entry of settings outside of the core rulebook, would you be interested in having your setting included there?" A number of publishers said they would. So, we ended up separating out the settings, putting four in the core rulebook and another five in an upcoming sourcebook called *Worlds of Adventure*.

Eytan: So let's talk a little bit about one of the other lines you're involved with, *Mutants & Masterminds*. How is it different from other systems with related concepts?

Steve: I develop and I design for *Mutants & Masterminds*. It developed from an idea I had at the time, a setting that eventually became *Freedom City*. I was really interested in publishing this idea, so I made a deal with Green Ronin. This was at the height of d20 publishing. I would design a mutant-superhero RPG, and *Freedom City* would become its first core setting.

I initially approached creating a set of rules for a superhero game by determining what aspects of the d20 system worked well in a superhero game and what parts didn't fit with that particular genre. I found that the core d20 rules worked just fine, but certain elements—such as the level progression system—didn't really reflect the nature of the genre. So I put together a proposal that altered the system from a class and level system to a point-based character design system to accommodate the width of potential character types you could have.

I created a saving throw-based damage system that better reflected how combat and damage worked in superhero comics. I put together a proposal for Green Ronin. It was, in many places, a significant departure from the core d20 rules. At the time, Green Ronin was interested in giving it a try, so we put together the game for playtesting and people responded very positively to that. When the game was eventually published, the response was very positive.

Eytan: Prior to your work with Green Ronin, you did a significant amount of work with FASA's shared world, *Shadowrun*. Now, of course, FASA is no longer in existence, and FanPro and Wizkids produce *Shadowrun* products. Can you tell us about what your future plans for *Shadowrun* are?

Steve: Because I'm working full time with Green Ronin now, I've cut back on the amount of freelancing I'm doing pretty significantly. I'm only doing the occasional freelance project. My last big freelance project for *Shadowrun* is finishing up a trilogy of novels for Wizkids on some of the characters from the *Shadowrun Duels* action figure game. The last book in that trilogy, *Fallen Angels*, came out this month.

Eytan: Can you give us a brief overview of what the books in this trilogy are about?

Steve: The trilogy is basically intended as a reintroduction to the *Shadowrun* setting, so the goal is to start afresh with new material that could introduce new players and readers to the *Shadowrun* world. The books lay out the setting as well as the characters that inhabit it and the adventures they have. Basically, the trilogy follows the adventures of Kellan Colt, an inexperienced shadowrunner from the Midwest, who makes her way out to Seattle to break into the big-time. Her experiences of becoming a professional shadowrunner and working with people who are professional shadowrunners, learning what the ins and outs of the business are, and how to survive that society, are the focus of the novels.

Eytan: It seems that there are finally new novels coming out in the *Shadowrun* setting. There was a four- or five-year lull in which there weren't any novels in the series. The fans are really quite happy that this has kick-started again.

Steve: The response I've heard concerning the new novels has been very popular.

Eytan: From what I see, *Shadowrun* has gotten a big boost from these novels and the release of the fourth edition rules last year around Gen Con. Let's talk a little bit about some of the previous things you've done with *Shadowrun*. The *Silven Trumpeter* is dedicated to being an open and tolerant environment where different viewpoints are allowed, within reason. We encourage our writers to deal with whatever topics or viewpoints they want, as long as they're well-written. One of the topics we've focused on is not only the presence of gay and lesbian characters in gaming and game fiction, but, more generally, the existence of underrepresented or "under-understood" topics in the gaming world. Certainly, the exploration of gay and lesbian gamers is one area that we've just scratched the surface of. One of your creations, Talon, is among the few mainstream gay RPG fiction characters. Can you tell our readers about what the thought process is when you were writing novels with this character, the struggles of being true to the character and the difficulties involved?

Steve: For me, I guess it wasn't that difficult. As a gay man myself, I certainly had some of my own experience to draw on, and it was just one of those cases where the character sort of wrote himself that way. I had a particular idea of what Talon's background was like. He had an incident in his past that was key to the formation of his character. This is a major background element in *Crossroads*. I feel that the story of Talon has many similarities to the experience of the awakening [the event in the *Shadowrun* world in which magic returns to the earth] among magically talented people in that it parallels the coming out process. It focuses on the awareness that "I'm different from other people" and what that means.

Talon was somebody who grew up in an intolerant environment and had to deal with not only being gay, but being different in that he was magically gifted. So part of his background is that he met a mentor, a man who eventually became his lover, and lost him to violence, and that had a great deal to do with the kind of person he became. It wasn't that I set out to include a gay storyline as such. It was something that struck me as a natural

part of Talon's background, just like I would want to talk about something integral to the background of any other character.

Eytan: I think it really did reach out to a lot of people. On that thought, Ian McKellan recently, in an interview related to the *X-Men* movie series, said that the reason he continues being involved in the franchise is because he sees the experiences of the *X-Men* as being a metaphor for the process of coming out.

Steve: The great success of the *X-Men* has always been the fact that the idea of the disenfranchised outsiders speaks to a wide variety of audiences, especially teenagers, because what teenager hasn't felt like an outsider at one point or another, particularly teenage comic book readers? The great thing about *X-Men* is that you can see it as a metaphor for virtually any minority group that feels disenfranchised. I think the metaphor speaks particularly well to gay people, just by virtue of the invisibility aspect—mutants look like us and they can pass for human beings. That's an important element in the experiences of sexual minorities because there's that aspect of invisibility. As a friend of mine said, "It's not like a young African American man has ever come home to his parents and said, Mom, Dad, I'm African American."

Eytan: I totally agree. In fact, we had a recent thread in one of our articles that went along those lines. What do you see in the future concerning more gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other sexual minority characters in RPG fiction?

Steve: My general impression is that this sort of thing is on the rise, as we see more gay and lesbian creators participating in the process, but also as we see more gay and lesbian writers producing RPG products and fiction. In addition, more creators are reflecting trends in the real world and the greater visibility of gay and lesbian people.

Eytan: I recall some of Mel Odom's novels that have one or two gay or lesbian characters.

Steve: I think that's just a reflection of what authors see in the world around them.

Eytan: Is there anything you would like to see in the future to make this a more viable possibility?

Steve: I guess it's really just a matter that art and media are reflections of the world around us. I think that the more acceptance and understanding develops in our culture, the more we are likely to see it reflected in our entertainment—RPGs, fictions, and other media. I don't necessarily want to see a change in the media itself. I'd like to see the world change and the media to reflect that.

Eytan: Do you see yourself at all as a role model for young gay and lesbian authors?

Steve: I have to say the idea of me of a role model is really frightening, believe it or not. I guess I never really think of myself in those terms, but if my work serves in any way to inspire someone, that's great. It's fantastic and I really hope that's

the case. I don't think I necessarily set out to do that, but if that's the case, it's incredible and I hope more gay and lesbian authors feel free to express themselves. I think there is a great untapped area of expression; we have a lot of experiences to share.

Eytan: I absolutely agree; it's definitely an area of experience that has immense potential for interesting stories. Finally, is there anything else you'd like to say or anything in publishing in the coming year that you'd like to tell the readers about?

Steve: Well, obviously there's my *Shadowrun* trilogy—the last novel just came out this month. Wizkids is definitely continuing with a number of other *Shadowrun* novels. We've got a lot of exciting products schedules for Green Ronin's coming schedule. The *Mutants & Masterminds* second line is still going quite strong. We just came out with the *Masterminds Manual*, a game master's resource with various optional rules and material. And, *True 20 Adventure Roleplaying* should be hitting stores this month. We're very excited about that. It's been very highly anticipated, and response has been very positive so far. I'm looking forward to the future products we have planned for both lines.

Eytan: Any final comments?

Steve: Thanks for the interview!

Reflections Looking Back

by Nghi Vo

Mirrors reflect faithfully, honestly and precisely, but what if one day your reflection smiled while you were frowning, lifted a hand where yours was still? It would still be your reflection, your image in silvered glass, but something wholly different as well. When the familiar is invaded by the fantastical and grotesque –or worse, revealed to have been such all along- the junction of the strange and mundane becomes a terrifying place. Things beloved and common take on a new menace while the fantastical becomes just one more irritation.

In this issue's installment, we'll examine urban fantasy, that melding of the real and the fantastic. Many gaming companies have discovered that this place where the normal world and the grotesque meet is fertile ground for roleplaying. Whether you're gearing up for a corporate raid or just trying to preserve your humanity after transforming into a bloodsucking creature of the night, the following sources ought to give you plenty of ideas for your campaign.

Borderland, the first of a series of anthologies set in Bordertown, depicts a mid-size American city that got caught in the crossfire when Faerie came back. First published in the 80's, in the middle of a mostly forgettable stream of urban fantasy, this shared world drew such big names as Will Shetterly, Charles De Lint and Craig Shaw Gardner, and stands out as a classic in an over-saturated genre. Most stories focus on the inhabitants of Soho, Bordertown's version of the Haight-Ashbury, a haven for runaways, rebels, posers and fugitives. Those who play *Shadowrun* will instantly recognize the streets of Soho as the sort of place shadowrunners might come from. These anthologies also spawned a duet of novels, *Elsewhere* and *Nevernever*, by Will Shetterly, and *Finder* by Emma Bull. *The Essential Bordertown* comes especially recommended for the tongue-in-cheek guides to surviving and thriving where one is as likely to get mugged by elves as humans.

Hopping across the pond, Neil Gaiman takes his enraptured audience to the realm of London Below in his novel *Neverwhere*. Existing side by side with the surface metropolis is a darker realm: part medieval fiefdom, part fantasy novel, completely dangerous. Richard Mayhew has his normal, safe life ripped away from him and finds himself stranded in this place, where everything he knew about the "real world" is blown to bits. In a book with much to recommend it, some of the best parts are Gaiman's throwaway references to a world that is much more than what Richard, poor panicked thing that he is, is seeing.

Sewer folk, rat speakers, and a sacred brotherhood at Blackfriars, just for starters, lead their lives in the labyrinth of London Below. This novel was based off the miniseries of the same name, also written by Gaiman; a visually stunning and very well acted work.

Sometimes the skewed reflection is just a bit off, eyes a different color, a different shirt. Other times the reflection is covered in blood and gore, perhaps with limbs torn off and replaced in new and interesting arrangements, or the face that stares back is not entirely human. Such is the case with the world of Sonja Blue, a jet-setting party girl who falls prey one night to a suave vampire and wakes up without a memory and a strong aversion to sunlight. Through various harrowing encounters Blue learns what she has become and dedicates her life to destroying vampires and searching for the one who made her. Vampires are not her only concern. Blue must face many members of the *enkidu*, the Pretending Race that live alongside humans and prey on them. There is a very "World of Darkness" feel to Blue's adventures, so much so that it led to a crossover between the world of Sonja Blue and that of Vampire: The Masquerade. The choices in Blue's world are never easy ones, and every shadow can hide a seraph as easily as a werewolf. Sonja Blue's adventures are written by Nancy Collins and can be found in *Sunglasses After Dark, In the Blood* and *Paint it Black*, all of which are collected in the omnibus *Midnight Blue*.

Similarly, Laurel K. Hamilton's Anita Blake series deals with a human woman fighting vampires, were-creatures of nearly every variety and the occasional god, armed only with her trusty Browning and martial arts skills. The series is set in a very

familiar St. Louis, where monsters are revealed to have been real all along… and now they want to vote. Into this uneasy territory comes paranormal specialist and necromancer Anita Blake. Especially in the first few books, the crime scenes are extremely well researched and worth examining for that extra hint of realism to add to your game. (Some of those scenes are not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach; one memorable chapter deals with an extremely grisly description of a human flaying.)

The Talisman, the first collaboration between Stephen King and Peter Straub, takes the theme of the fantastic coinciding with the mundane one step further. Jack Sawyer is twelve years old and watching his mother die. His discovery of a parallel world called the Territories, where analogs of the people he knows (called twinners) exist in a quasi-medieval world, grants him hope of perhaps saving his mother and her twinner, the Queen of the Territories. King and Straub show off their impressive talents as Jack flips between the Territories and America, revealing that neither place is without magic, or without menace. It is worth noting that this book is closely linked to King's *Dark Tower* series.

Sean Stewart's *Galveston* is place where a flood of magic during the Mardi Gras of 2004 divides the city into two parts. On one side, life continues as best it can cut off from the mainland. On the other, perpetual Carnival reigns under the malicious eye of the god Momus. Any trace of magic can result in banishment to the night-side of Galveston, or being "sent to the krewes." Galveston marches on its narrow path under the eye of the fierce Jane Gardner. Jane is dying, however, and her daughter Sloane is a reluctant successor. Things have a way of changing, even in normal cities, and soon, night will fall and Carnival will break onto the tidy streets.

Moving away from the big city, Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* takes place at Blackstock College during the 70's, where young Janet Carter goes to pursue an English degree. She falls in with a crowd of classics majors who all seem more than slightly mad. As Janet struggles with the normal college trials, she begins to realize that all is not as it seems. The ballad of Tam Lin, featuring a girl who goes to save her lover from the queen of Faerie, is cleverly wound around a coming-of-age story full of literary references and brilliant moments. In this novel, the Queen of Faerie rides the hills of Minnesota. Far from being a civilized thing, she is eerie and vengeful, as at home in the Midwest as she would be on a Scottish moor.

China Mieville's *King Rat* is a wonderful tribute to those great survivors of the urban landscape. Framed for the murder of his father, Saul Garamond is rescued by the gaunt and malicious man known as King Rat. Saul is shocked to learn that he is the lost prince of the rat nation and is expected to take his place in the war against the Rat Catcher, who once piped an entire city of King Rat's citizens into oblivion. The world Saul knew is gone, replaced by a desperate guardian and a pack of rodents looking to him for salvation. This novel illuminates a world of war and frenzy that lives alongside normal safe things, and when one world crosses the other, the results are shattering.

Back in America again, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* follows the adventures of Shadow, an ex-con who finds himself at loose ends after the death of his wife. Reluctantly wooed into the service of a grizzled, one-eyed grifter by the name of Wednesday, Shadow ends up fighting leprechauns for coin tricks, playing checkers with the deadly Russian Czernobog and helping out at a funeral parlor run by Egyptian gods. Wednesday is more than he seems, as is everyone in this entrancing novel, and Shadow is entwined in what could be the con of the centuries. The real pleasure of this book is the background, which is dotted with magic in hiding. Nearly every reading turns up something new and this novel gives a very plausible explanation to the question of what happens to gods when their worshippers grow neglectful and their blood sacrifices few.

Smart, slick and cynical, Jonathan Nasaw's *The World on Blood* tackles vampires in Los Angeles, where bloodsuckers are divided between happy-go-lucky partiers and remorseful penitents. The penitents have formed Vampires Anonymous, a twelve-step program designed to help the addicted with their problems. While the book does occasionally overplay its vampirism-as-addiction slant, it never compromises its shiny, forgetful, fun-loving L.A. setting. Trips from blood clinics to wild house parties set a mad, frenzied pace.

A discussion of urban fantasy would be incomplete without again mentioning Canadian fantasy author Charles De Lint. His urban fantasy works, set in the sleepy town of Newford make the fantastic seem breathtakingly plausible. *Dreams Underfoot*, a short story collection, is a good selection of his short work and *Memory and Dream* provides a longer stay in Newford. *Mulengro: A Romany Tale*, is darker than his later work, but offers a glimpse not only into dark magics but also into the modern lives of the people known as the Rom. Slightly less urban but no less mystical is Terri Windling's *The Wood Wife*.

This first novel from award-winning editor Windling takes the reader to Tucson, Arizona and more significantly to the arid, brilliant desert. When David Cooper, a well-regarded English poet, drowns in a perfectly dry gully, his will reveals the inheritor of his house to be Maggie Black, a fellow poet. Maggie has never met Cooper, save through his letters. After she takes possession of the house, she finds the desert filled with people who are significantly more than they seem. Windling twines artists with desert spirits and the result is a novel that reminds us that magic is what you make of it.

In the realm of graphic novels, nothing says London quite like John Constantine, the trench coat-sporting, chain-smoking mage of the *Hellblazer* series. Constantine regularly deals with ifrits, horned riders and ghosts, but his gift (or is it curse?) seems to be his knack for interfering in the affairs of demons and angels. He can't seem to keep clear of it and more than once, London becomes the backdrop for the desperate, dangerous games he must play. This series is marked with a sense of gallows humor. One day, Constantine will be a touch too slow, a hair too careless and the gates of hell will bite down on his soul. Of course, until that day, he'll enrage Heaven and Hell alike, leaving behind nothing more than victories against

impossible odds and the corpses of sacrificed friends. This series, as well as its film counterpart *Constantine*, makes an invaluable source for *In Nomine*.

The meeting of the magical and mundane can turn players' expectations on their heads. Fantasy tropes can be hysterically funny, deeply disturbing, or both when placed in a modern setting. The old shaman who speaks to birds sullenly tends the counter of a pet store and the barbarian warrior ends up a berserker cop. The books mentioned above mirror the world we live in and force us to remember that not every shadow has an explanation.

Other Literary References
There's just too much in the urban fantasy genre to detail in one article, so here are a few more notable references that might spark your interest and help fuel your next game.

War for the Oaks – Emma Bull
The Garret Files series – Glen Cook
Hellboy – comic by Mike Mignola, published by Dark Horse Comics
Chronicles of Amber series – Roger Zelazny
Various works by Harlan Ellison

The Maiden and the Dragon

by Artemis J. Wetzel

A dragon traveling one winter's eve
Did see a thing he could not believe.
A maiden with ivory skin so fair,
Filling jars with snow that had fallen there.
And harshly her tattered cloak did blow,
As she stood and shivered in the heavy snow.
So gentle and warm was the light in her eye
That the mighty Dragon began to cry.

And so a disguise he did don that day,
With selfless intent to take the fair maiden away.
Away to a place so safe and warm,
Disguised as a woodsman gathering wood for the storm.

But on his arrival to her home he finally did see
That the cold young maiden rocked a child, not yet three.
So the mother's intentions for the snow now shined true,
To heat for her child now blue, a bath to warmth renew.
The great mighty Dragon knew that they must take flight,
Or their time would be up by dawn's first light.

And so fast on his back did he bear them away,
And in the guise of the woodsman, with them he did stay.

the Sibyl of Rheix

by Nick Bousfield

Cail spat into the well and waited.

Beside him, thin and lithe, Yarrow counted four heartbeats before hearing the sound of water meeting water. His face twisted; the sun in his eyes.

"He said the well would be dry."

The larger man shrugged, but did not speak. His hand strayed to the hilt of the sword at his waist, his finger running softly up and down the line of tally marks on the crossguard. The marks were many; more than Yarrow could count. His own hand dropped to the coil of rope tucked into his belt.

"Work fast. Night is coming." Cail's voice was little more than a whisper. When Yarrow looked up, he saw the man gazing into the woods opposite, not moving. The hand on the swordhilt stilled.

"All right, but he said the well would be dry."

Cail offered no reply. Yarrow made to speak again, then thought better of it, busying himself with his rope. One end secured, he threw the other over the lip of the well and watched it fall away into the depths.

Drawing his eyes from the trees, Cail peered down into the well. Under his gaze, the shadows in the deep shaft seemed to shift and darken. He spoke again in his dry whisper: "I'll go first. You follow."

Cail moved slowly, swinging his leg over the stonework, chary of catching his sword and pack on the rough masonry. Yarrow watched him as he climbed, following the rope down into the gloom. For a moment, he thought of the marks on the broad-shouldered man's sword, the three bodies he'd helped Cail weigh down and sink under the waters of Callowmere Lake, the thin cord running into the well, and the sharp dirk at his belt.

Then he thought of the story the Sibyl had told them. Thought of the things the old magician had shown them in his books. Thought of the jewel. And of the lady.

Yarrow looked into the sun one last time then took hold of the rope.

***

It was only by luck that they found the place. Hours of walking the grey cobbled streets of Morsgate, asking questions of dour, dull townsmen and their frightened wives had caused Cail's face to darken and his mood to sour until no one would even meet his gaze.

Noon came. The thin, brittle sunlight that warmed Morsgate turned the town into a bleached warren of pale stone. Yarrow began to feel uneasy. Accustomed to shadows and twilight, the cold light made his eyes feel raw and his skull feel tight, as if pressed in a vice.

A yard or so ahead of him, Cail eyed a yeoman, plainly considering whether the man was worth the effort of dragging into a doorway and questioning. Yarrow followed his gaze then let his eyes wander into the alleyway opposite. He thought he saw something there in the dark space, hidden from the sun's rays. A sign; a crescent moon and a yew tree.

"Cail, look."

"What?" The big man's voice had risen to a growl. Yarrow gestured toward the alleyway.

"There, the sign hanging on the wall: that must be the place."

Cail peered into the shadows. At his side, his clenched left hand slowly uncurled; the fingers straying to the hilt of his sword. Then, followed by Yarrow, he stepped forward off the street and into the alley.

***

Stagnant water lapped at Yarrow's waist. The well was most certainly not dry.

He looked upward to the mouth of the well. The sky was a blank circle, offering no hint of sun or cloud. About him the mildewed stones of the well shaft dripped wet foulness and gave off a rotten odor.

Cail was gone. A passage led away from Yarrow, stretching out under the ground. From its direction, he supposed it must lead toward and under the forest. Further down the passage, a light flickered; Cail had lit a torch.

Suddenly conscious of the distance between them, Yarrow moved to rejoin his companion, pushing his way through the cold well-water. Underfoot, he could feel years of sediment being stirred up and swirling around his legs. He wondered if the Morsgate authorities were unscrupulous enough to dispose of dead vagrants and thieves by hurling their bodies into any nearby hole deep enough to accommodate them: old mineshafts, disused wells…

Something brushed his foot. An odd sensation; as if someone had taken a feather and run it across his limb like a blade. Yarrow froze, peering into the inky waters, waiting for something to curl around his leg and drag him under. Nothing came. Shuddering, he stretched out a hand to the damp wall and started walking again, eyes fixed on the dancing speck of light ahead.

By the time he reached Cail, water had soaked up into his clothes, climbing to his chest and making him shiver. Yarrow stood as close to the man's spluttering beechwood torch as he could, trying to absorb some of its warmth.

In the flickering torchlight, he saw that the rough walls of the passage had widened and given way to a chamber lined with clean-hewn blocks of stone. The ceiling, high and vaulted, stretched above them. Stained green by moss and mildew, it seemed as if a leafy forest canopy had been petrified and buried. On the opposite wall was an archway blocked by a gate of heavy black metal, untouched by corrosion. Above it, on the keystone of the arch, a face had been carved, ugly and inhuman.

"The gate," muttered Yarrow, remembering the old man's book. "The gate will bar your way."

Cail's voice sounded strangely soft. "Yes", he said. "The gate and the guardian."

***

The interior of the house was larger than Yarrow had suspected. The tiny door under the sign of the moon and the yew had led to a narrow corridor and then opened into a large, smoke-filled room. There was a odd smell to the smoke, like camphor, tinged with another spice. Yellow light seeped from the oil lamps carelessly arranged on book-strewn trestle tables.

Leaning over them was a stooped figure, wrapped in a worn robe of purple samite.

Cail spoke: "We've come about the jewel."

The man did not look up but his hand, poised over a tome, paused for a heartbeat. He then straightened, reaching over his shoulder to pull the embroidered hood of his faded robe over his head, settling it low over his eyes.

"There are no jewels in Morsgate", he said, turning toward them.

His face was almost hidden by the shadow of his hood, but Yarrow could see that he had a thin grey beard, stained with ink and wax. Cail hissed his impatience.

"Don't play games with us. We heard the story from the Sibyl of Rheix. The Sibyl doesn't lie."

The old man chuckled; a dry, hollow sound. Reaching into his robe, over his chest, he withdrew something: an amulet, small and golden, strung on a thin cord. In the gloom, Yarrow could just perceive the shape of a crescent moon and a yew tree.

"This is the symbol of my school", he said. "I have studied the ancients and their teachings. I have walked with their shades in the dark places between our worlds. They may have spoken to you through your pretty Sibyl but I think they have not told you enough."

As the wizard spoke, Yarrow watched his hand clutching at the talisman. The thin knuckles had become white, the veins standing out from the sallow flesh. He felt his lip curl.

"Old fool," he muttered.

The man jerked and his voice rose. "Fool, is it? Fool that I want no business with you or your plundering? Very well. If it will send you from here, then know this: the jewel rests in an emerald fastness, held by a lady."

Turning impatiently, he took a volume from the trestle behind him. Opening it to a page marked by a long strip of parchment, he turned the book around to display an arcane diagram, surrounded by cryptic notes in an alien language. Squinting, Yarrow recognized the faint lines as a map, describing the environs of Morsgate.

The old wizard laughed again.

"No use to you, though, you who call me a fool. The lady is an ancient-in-darkness. She will only give up her jewel in an exchange. She craves the light."

Cail stepped forward, his hand resting on the tally-marked hilt of his sword.

"We know," he said. "We came to you for the map. Tell us what it says."

***

The sound echoed around the chamber; a clicking, tapping noise that died away almost as soon as they heard it.

Cail drew his sword, the metal shining bright, sweeping the torch to and fro with his other hand, searching for the source.

"Get that gate open. Quickly," he barked.

Resisting the urge to leave Cail to his search, Yarrow darted past him, pulling from his belt a bundle wrapped in oiled cloth. Reaching the gate, he quickly inspected the hinges, then turned to the ornate lock built into the center of the portal.

Again, the clicking noise. Louder this time, like hail on a slate roof.

Delving into the bundle, Yarrow selected a thin steel rod, hooked slightly at the end. Inserting it into the lock, he began to probe its mechanism, feeling the shape and form of the tumblers within. Pushing gently, he felt one move into place.

He was working on the second when he heard a curse and, turning as much as he could, looked back over his shoulder.

Cail was standing behind him, his sword brandished and the flaming torch held high. Rearing up in front of him was a massive black wormlike thing, covered in a glistening chitinous shell. Scores of pale, pus-white eyes were dotted on both sides of the beast's round head and running down each flank was a seemingly endless row of stick-thin, clawed legs. The creature had little fear of Cail or his sword, and the man was only keeping it at bay by swinging his torch.

"Get it open!" Cail shouted, taking another swing with his blade.

Gasping with fear, Yarrow returned to his task. The second tumbler went. Behind him, he heard the splashing sounds of Cail and his opponent thrusting at one another. He could feel the third and last tumbler going when hideous squealing filled the air. Risking another glance, Yarrow saw that Cail had succeeded in shaving off several of the beast's limbs. They floated in the water like horrible pieces of driftwood.

With a faint click, the final tumbler fell into place.

"It's done!" Yarrow pulled on the heavy gate, forcing it open enough for him to squeeze through, then pushing against it from the other side.

Backing toward it, Cail spoke over his shoulder. "I'll come through. When it tries to follow-"

He got no further. The creature thrust forward, striking his upraised arm, lacerating the flesh with awful fangs that gaped sideways from its maw.

Cail bellowed with rage. Ignoring his pain, he brought the torch round, holding it to the thing's eyes. It shrieked in agony and withdrew, writhing, to sink under the water.

Staggering through the gate, which Yarrow attempted to wedge closed, Cail leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. After a moment he began to bind his arm with strips of cloth from his pack. Then he looked down the passage. Yarrow took the torch and held it up. Several yards ahead, they saw the passage opened out into another chamber.

"She's through there," he said.

***

The purple-robed scholar told them what they needed, eventually. He translated the dead language the map had been annotated in, telling them how to find the apparently dry well and about the guarded portal that would block their way.

Yarrow was suspicious. The man's mood had lightened considerably as he worked. Something was amusing him. Cail seemed uncaring, ignoring the wizard's jibes.

"She wants the light, all those years in dark tunnels…" He giggled. "Will you pay the price, hmm? Do you have what she will ask of you?"

Shifting uncomfortably, Yarrow turned to his companion.

"We've got what we needed. Leave the old fool to his books."

Cail did not move. "Not yet. We need something more."

The wizard's giggling stopped abruptly.

"Yarrow, go outside. Keep watch." Cail's voice was low, his habitual whisper rougher than before. Knowing not to disregard Cail's order but fearful of its consequences, Yarrow rose from his seat, but paused for a moment.

"Go!" Cail rasped. Then, to the old man, "You dwell alone? You feed yourself? A blind man?"

Glancing back as he slipped out of the room, Yarrow saw Cail reach forward and knock the wizard's hood back. His eyes were two milky white pearls. A strangled gasp came from his throat: "My… daughter…"

Yarrow stood in the alleyway for some time, watching the slow movement of the shadows as the sun inched closer to the horizon, before the door opened and Cail joined him. He had a small pouch in one hand.

"Find some shrouds," he said. "Enough for three bodies."

Yarrow stared at him. "Three?"

Cail gazed into the street, his face blank in the dying sunlight.

"She had a son."

***

Deep underground; an emerald fastness.

The vault was round, formed from square and octagonal tiles, made of some light green stone that shimmered in the torchlight. Occupying the chamber, rising out of the water, was an altar. Steps had been cut into it.

At its apex, a statue of a woman.

Formed of milky green stone, she seemed to be growing out of the pedestal on which she stood, beautiful in her silent stillness. Her eyes, blank and unseeing, stared out at the two men. Each of her hands was outstretched. The right empty, palm up. The left closed, as if cradling something hidden in her hand.

Cail's voice jolted Yarrow from his awe.

"Climb up. Give her this."

He passed Yarrow the pouch he'd taken from the wizard's house. Curious, Yarrow opened it.

From inside the leather bag, two clear blue eyes stared back at him.

"His daughter's," said Cail. "Eyes for the Lady-in-Jade. She craves the light. She wants to see."

Yarrow's mouth was dry as he turned back toward the statue and began to walk slowly toward it. The moss-hued figure seemed to grow in stature until it loomed over him. Climbing the steps, he wondered if he'd be able to reach the right hand.

He stopped, one pace away, and looked up at the Lady. Her face, serene in repose, gazed sightlessly past him. Bringing the pouch up, he fumbled inside, hating the damp, soft feeling of the viscera within.

"Careful," he heard Cail caution.

Gently holding the things in his hand, Yarrow stretched up to deposit them on the outstretched right hand of the statue. Then, pushing back his urge to turn and flee, regardless of whether Cail had managed to kill the thing at the gate, he carefully stepped back.

For a long moment, there was nothing.

Then, softly, quietly, there came a sound, like the wind through the trees of a faraway forest, turning the leaves and bending the grass. And hidden in it, a deeper sound, like the movement of some great living thing.

Under their gaze, the stone fingers of the Lady-in-Jade's right hand moved, closing over the eyes. At the same time, the fingers of the left curled open to reveal something gleaming on her palm; a gemstone, exquisitely cut and polished, blue as the clear sky.

Dazedly, Yarrow reached out and took the jewel. It was cold and heavy and for a moment he clutched tightly, like an anchor.

"We're finished here," he said.

The worm thing was dead, floating in the water in the outer chamber, its eyes burned out and leaking milky fluid. They did not stray too close.

Climbing the rope back to the surface, Yarrow saw that night had come. Cail had to extinguish his torch to climb and so they emerged in darkness into the field by the woods circling Morsgate.

Cail came up first, with Yarrow following. Pulling himself up, the smaller man found his companion standing in the shadows, staring into the woods, his fingers running along the hilt of his sword.

Following his gaze, straining his eyes, Yarrow thought he saw the shape of a woman dancing amongst the trees, a blue glow around her head, her mouth open, as if singing.

And for a moment, floating on the wind, Yarrow heard a voice, raised in song; a voice he had once heard before, in a temple, in Rheix.

The voice of the Sibyl.

Appendix II: True Names

The more powerful the spellcaster, the harder she is to kill. Powerful mages slow their aging, cast spell effects with great skill, and can protect themselves with several ongoing spells at a time. Eventually, such characters are nearly invulnerable, capable of surviving dismemberment, decapitation, and so on. Some GMs may decide to add a check against this rampant power: a common vulnerability of all spellcasters—their true names.

When you begin down the road of sorcery, you distance yourself from your roots, developing powers to twist reality to suit your own needs. Your true name tethers you to the rules of reality. If revealed, your true name can strip you of all your power, render you vulnerable to weapons, or even kill you.

Identifying the True Name

Using a spellcaster's true name against her is a complicated process. The first step is to identify the target's true name. Such a process is often difficult, as most spellcasters work to hide their true identities, often moving far from the place of their birth when they discover their magical abilities, consistently using only false names or nicknames, meticulously eradicating their true names from any text, and silencing or killing those who know them. Researching true names is difficult, involving luck in finding the information, and then being able to decipher the text (as authors often hide this information with ciphers).

To find the true name you must succeed on an appropriate Decipher Script check on a body of information containing the name. If the check succeeds, you find a portion or the entire name depending on the source. Additional Decipher Script checks may be required if the name is concealed in code.

You may try to use magic to force another to reveal her true name. No *Charm* spell effect can do this, and the DC of a *Compel* spell effect used in this way is increased by +100. More importantly, if the target of a *Compel* spell effect succeeds on her saving throw, she can attempt an opposed Charisma check with you; if she wins the contest, you are forced to reveal your own true name to the original target. Obviously, this is a risky practice.

Empowering the True Name

Once the name is uncovered, you must imbue the name with words of power. This act requires 1 day plus 1 day per magnitude of the subject (Dabblers and Students of Magic count as Magnitude 0). At the end of this time, you must succeed on a special Intelligence check against a base DC of 20 modified as follows.

Condition	DC Modifier
Named target is a Dabbler or Student of Magic	+0
Named target is of the First Magnitude	+5
Named target is of the Second Magnitude	+10
Named target is of the Third Magnitude	+15
Named target is of the Fourth Magnitude	+20
Speaker of the name has 5 or more ranks in Spellcraft	−2
Speaker of the name has 10 or more ranks in Spellcraft	−4

Condition	DC Modifier
Speaker of the name has 15 or more ranks in Spellcraft	−8
Speaker of the name has 20 or more ranks in Spellcraft	−16
Speaker of the name has 5 or more ranks in Decipher Script	−2
Speaker of the name has 10 or more ranks in Decipher Script	−4
Speaker of the name has 15 or more ranks in Decipher Script	−6
Speaker of the name has 20 or more ranks in Decipher Script	−8

Success and failure have variable results based on the degree or success of the check.

Check Result	Consequences
Succeed by 10 or more	Empower full name
Succeed by 5 or more	Empower partial name
Success	Empower fragment of name
Failure	Nothing
Failure by 5 or more	Backlash: speaker takes 1d6 points of nonlethal damage per magnitude of the target (1d3 damage for Dabblers and Students) and must start the process anew at a +5 to the Intelligence check DC per previous failure if using the same source.
Failure by 10 or more	Severe Backlash: speaker takes 1d8 points of damage per magnitude of the target (1d3 damage for Dabblers and Students) and must start anew, at a +10 to the DC per previous failure if using the same source.

CONSEQUENCES OF TRUE NAMING

Depending on the success of empowering the true name, you gain a certain degree of power over the subject.

FRAGMENT

Empowering a true name fragment allows you to affect the spellcaster more easily than before, granting a +1 insight bonus to attack and damage rolls against the spellcaster whose name is uttered in the round in which it's spoken.

If you have the appropriate item creation feat, you can embed a fragment of the name into a weapon. To do so, you must make a Spellcraft check against a DC equal to 10 + the level

True Names as Components

You can embed your true name into the verbal component of a spell effect to achieve greater results. This allows you to add your caster level to your Spellcraft check, however, you must succeed on a Fortitude save (DC 10 + one-half your class level) or become fatigued for 1 hour.

Doing so poses a certain risk, because another character can try to pick up the name by succeeding on a Listen check opposed by your caster level check. If the other caster doesn't know (through the Talent feat) the spell you're casting, she suffers a -10 penalty on her Listen check, as she must differentiate between the normal magical words of your spell and the true name you've added.

You can also incorporate the true name of another spellcaster in your spells in order to increase their effectiveness against that spellcaster; see **Consequences of True Naming**.

True Names in Magic Items

You can embed your true name into the verbal component of a spell effect used in the creation of a magic item. This allows you to add twice your caster level to your Spellcraft check, however, the spell effect deals twice the normal drain.

Doing so poses a certain risk: another character can try to pick up the name through contact with the item. Momentary contact with an item containing a true name (including being struck by a magic weapon, but not contact with the effects of a magic item, such as a lightning bolt cast from a wand that has a true name embedded in it) allows a DC 20 Detect Magic check to reveal the presence of a true name (but not the name itself). Prolonged contact (either handling the item for at least 1 minute, or actually using the item) reduces the Detect Magic DC to 15.

Once a spellcaster is aware that a true name is embedded in a magic item, she can examine the item (Search check), trying to find the name visibly on the item's surface, usually disguised in decorative filigree or engraving. A Decipher Script check may be needed to separate the name from its surrounding disguise.

You can also incorporate the true name of another spellcaster in a magic weapon (but not other types of magic items) in order to increase its effectiveness against that spellcaster; see **Consequences of True Naming**.

of the spellcaster. If you succeed, the weapon deals 1 point of Constitution damage in addition to the normal damage dealt.

Finally, you can incorporate the fragment into the verbal component of a spell, increasing the casting time by 1 action, but for the named person the save DC increases by +1. If the spell normally functions without a verbal component, you must add it as an extra component, increasing the Spellcraft DC by +5.

Partial

Empowering a partial true name allows you to affect a spellcaster in more significant ways, offering you a +5 insight bonus to attack and damage rolls against the spellcaster for 1 minute.

Alternatively, you can use the partial name to temporarily empty the spellcaster's spell energy pool. Simply hearing her partial true name spoken reduces the spellcaster's current spell energy to 0.

If you have the appropriate item creation feat, you can embed the partial true name into a weapon. To do so, you must make a Spellcraft check against a DC equal to 10 + the level of the spellcaster. If you succeed, the weapon bypasses hit points altogether and deals damage directly to the target's Constitution score.

Finally, you can incorporate the partial true name into the verbal component of a spell, increasing the casting time by 1 action, but increasing the spell effect's save DC by +5 for the named person. If the spell normally functions without a verbal component, you must add it as an extra component, increasing the Spellcraft DC by +5.

Full

Empowering a full true name grants you complete mastery over the spellcaster, allowing you to permanently empty the target spellcaster's spell energy pool. Simply hearing her full true name spoken permanently removes the spellcaster's spell energy.

Furthermore, all magic wrought by the affected spellcaster (*e.g.*, any ongoing spells or permanent effects) ceases as if it were never cast. If the affected spellcaster has the Defy Time feat, it no longer provides her any benefits.

Although the spellcaster is effectively crippled, she may regain something of her former power if she takes the Siphon Magic feat (see page 15).

If you have the appropriate item creation feat, you can embed the full name into a weapon. To do so, you must make a Spellcraft check against a DC equal to 10 + the level of the spellcaster. If you succeed, the weapon bypasses hit points altogether and deals damage (+2d6 points) directly to the target's Constitution score.

Finally, you can incorporate the partial true name into the verbal component of a spell, increasing the casting time by 1 action, but increasing the spell effect's save DC by +10 for the named person. If the spell normally functions without a verbal component, you must add it as an extra component, increasing the Spellcraft DC by +5.

The Silven Bestiary
Mind Power

by Kyle Thompson

They say you can do anything you put your mind to. This issue of the Silven Bestiary holds this statement in high regards. This is the first Silven Bestiary to feature psionics, and, therefore, it should be big. That's why it is the first Silven Bestiary to contain four monsters. Here are four new psionic monsters to place in your campaign, as well as a handful of new psionic powers (denoted by a †). Without further ado…

Cragarok
Large Elemental (Earth, Psionic)
Hit Dice: 12d8+60 (114 hp)
Initiative: +1
Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)
Armor Class: 20 (-1 size, +1 Dex, +10 natural), touch 10, flat-footed 19
Base Attack/Grapple: +9/+15
Attack: Slam +10 melee (1d8+2)
Full Attack: 2 slams +10 melee (1d8+2)
Space/Reach: 10 ft./10 ft.
Special Attacks: Psi-like abilities
Special Qualities: Damage reduction 10/magic, darkvision 60 ft., elemental traits, telepathy 100 ft.
Saves: Fort +13, Ref +5, Will +7
Abilities: Str 15, Dex 12, Con 20, Int 17, Wis 13, Cha 16
Skills: Concentration +20, Hide +11, Listen +16, Psicraft +18, Spot +16
Feats: Greater Psionic Fist, Iron Will, Psionic Fist, Psionic Meditation, Unavoidable Strike
Environment: Elemental Plane of Earth
Organization: Solitary or pair
Challenge Rating: 7
Treasure: None
Alignment: Usually neutral
Advancement: 13-18 HD (Large)
Level Adjustment: +9

Suddenly, what appeared to have been no more than a pile of rocks floats into the air, forming a roughly humanoid figure. The body of this being seems to be held together by some invisible force; its head and limbs seem to float about six inches from the torso.

Cragaroks hail from the Elemental Plane of Earth. These creatures are often found wandering the Plane of Earth alone or in pairs. They communicate little, using telepathy due to the fact that they lack a physical mouth. They are very intelligent beings, and wizards and sorcerers often summon them when they seek information.

Some less educated people mistake cragaroks for simple earth elementals, and those who voice this opinion often don't live to say it again. Cragaroks take great offense to being called earth elementals, because they feel they are superior due to their higher intelligence.

Cragaroks are between eight and ten feet tall, their bodies composed of rocks that appear held together by an invisible force. They have no facial features.

COMBAT

Cragaroks often try to avoid combat, but when forced to fight they are dangerous opponents. When in a confrontation, a cragarok is relentless. It uses any of its psionic abilities, especially in melee. It frequently regains and expends its psionic focus, using its Psionic Fist feats to their full potential.

Psi-Like Abilities: 2/day—*dissipating touch* (8d6*), *rock blast*†; 1/day—*control body* (DC 17), *inertial armor* (+7 bonus*). Manifester level 8th. The save DCs are Charisma-based.

*Includes augmentation for the cragarok's manifester level.

Enlightened Hound
Medium Magical Beast (Psionic)
Hit Dice: 6d10+6 (39 hp)
Initiative: +3
Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)
Armor Class: 15 (+3 Dex, +2 natural), touch 13, flat-footed 12
Base Attack/Grapple: +6/+6
Attack: Bite +6 melee (1d6)
Full Attack: Bite +6 melee (1d6)
Space/Reach: 5 ft./5ft.
Special Attacks: Psi-like abilities
Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, scent
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +8, Will +4
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 17, Con 12, Int 13, Wis 11, Cha 14
Skills: Hide +12, Listen +9, Move Silently +11, Spot +9, Survival +0*
Feats: Alertness, Iron Will, Run
Environment: Any land
Organization: Solitary, pair, or pack (5-20)
Challenge Rating: 3
Treasure: Standard
Alignment: Usually neutral
Advancement: 7-15 HD (Medium)
Level Adjustment: +4 (cohort)

What appears to be a black Labrador Retriever approaches you. As it nears, you notice strange markings about its face: small bands of lighter colored fur swirling around its eyes.

Enlightened hounds are related to normal dogs, but very distantly. They have shiny black coats and the physique of a black lab. Each enlightened hound has a different pattern of stripes trailing down its face.

Enlightened hounds are rare, and those that exist in the wild are often found traveling in hunting packs. Wealthy men who want a challenging hunt track down and kill enlightened hounds for sport.

A pack of enlightened hounds runs much like a barbarian tribe. There is a leader or chief. Everyone else has their own, important responsibilities within the pack, and no one argues about their responsibility.

Enlightened hounds are intelligent enough to speak Common and even communicate with each other in their packs using the Common tongue.

COMBAT

Because enlightened hounds almost always hunt in packs, their tactics involve ganging up on enemies. Enlightened hounds try to outflank an opponent when forced to fight in melee. Otherwise, a pack of enlightened hounds uses psionic powers to harm and hinder opponents, usually working to push the balance of the fight to their favor before entering melee.

Psi-like Abilities: 1/day—*crystal shard* (4d6*), *deceleration* (Large or smaller, DC 13*), *defensive precognition* (+2 bonus*), *déjà vu* (DC 14*), *empty mind* (+3 on Will Saves*), *offensive precognition* (+2 bonus*), *psionic grease* (DC 13), *vigor* (20 hp*). Manifester level 4th. The save DCs are Charisma-based.

*Includes augmentation for the enlightened hound's manifester level.

Skills: An enlightened hound receives a +1 racial bonus on Hide, Listen, Move Silently, and Spot checks. *An enlightened hound has a +4 racial bonus on Survival checks when tracking by scent.

Kara'vat
Tiny Magical Beast (Psionic)
Hit Dice: 1d10-1 (4 hp)
Initiative: +4
Speed: 40 ft. (8 squares), fly 40 ft. (perfect)
Armor Class: 16 (+2 size, +4 Dex), touch 16, flat-footed 12
Base Attack/Grapple: +1/-8
Attack: Bite +2 melee (1d3-1)
Full Attack: Bite +2 melee (1d3-1)
Space/Reach: 2 1/2 ft./ 0 ft.
Special Attacks: Psi-like abilities, telepathy 30 ft.
Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, scent
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +6, Will +0
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 18, Con 9, Int 11, Wis 10, Cha 11
Skills: Hide +14, Listen +4, Move Silently +8, Search +2, Spot +4
Feats: Alertness
Environment: Any
Organization: Solitary, pair, or nest (3-20)
Challenge Rating: 1/3
Treasure: None
Alignment: Always neutral
Advancement: —
Level Adjustment: —

A small, rodent-like creature stares up at you from the floor. At first, it seems like a normal white mouse, but suddenly, tiny white wings

unfold from its back, and the rodent soars into the air, squeaking in what seems like glee.

Kara'vats are small, white rodents with tiny white wings. Besides the wings, they look just like white mice.

In addition to their "cute" appearance, kara'vats are frequently seen as much less of a nuisance than normal mice. Kara'vats tend to not only be friendly, but they feed on small bugs, keeping houses all the cleaner. Unlike normal rodents, they do not scavenge through food stores.

The kara'vat is a born trickster. It is not malicious in any way; a kara'vat tends to play tricks only on the fellow residents of its chosen home. Some people dislike kara'vats for this reason, though, feeling they are annoying.

Kara'vats can telepathically send simple emotional feelings to people.

COMBAT

Kara'vats avoid direct combat and instead flee. If escape is risky, they use their psionic abilities to aid their escape.

Psi-like Abilities: 1/day—*distract* (DC 11), *demoralize* (DC 11), *déjà vu* (DC 11), *psionic daze* (DC 11). Manifester level 1st. The save DCs are Charisma-based.

Skills: A Kara'vat can be very stealthy and therefore receives a +2 racial bonus on Hide and Move Silently checks.
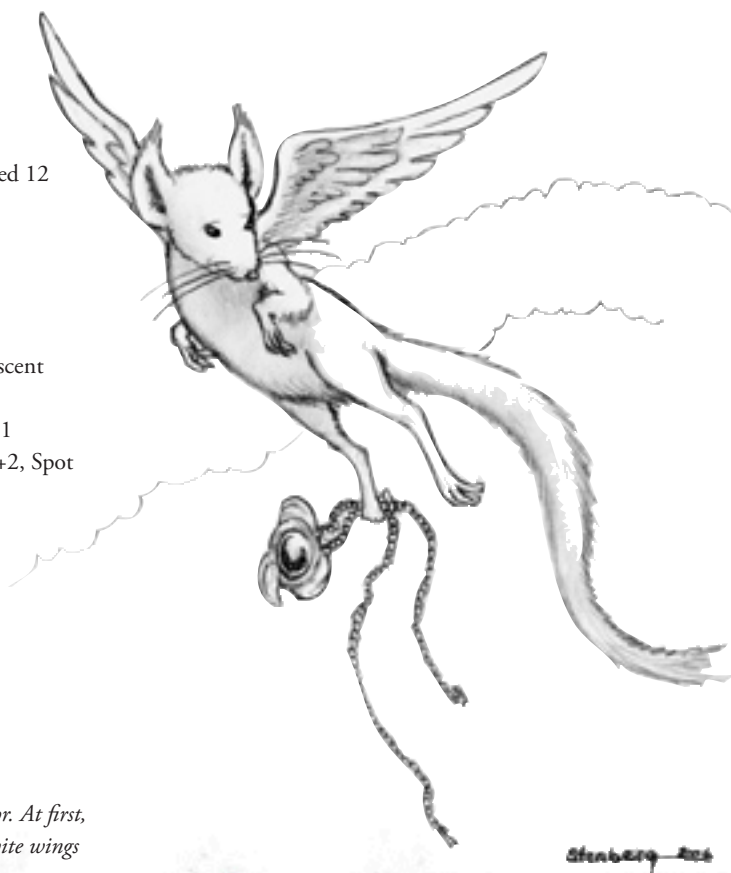
Riptave

Huge Elemental (Psionic, Water)
Hit Dice: 12d8+48 (102 hp)
Initiative: +3
Speed: Swim 80 ft. (16 squares)
Armor Class: 19 (-2 size, +3 Dex, +8 natural), touch 11, flat-footed 16
Base Attack/Grapple: +9/+23
Attack: Bite +13 melee (2d6+9)
Full Attack: Bite +13 melee (2d6+9)
Space/Reach: 15 ft./10 ft.
Special Attacks: Drench, psi-like abilities, water mastery
Special Qualities: Concealment, darkvision 120 ft., elemental traits, keen scent, telepathy 100 ft.
Saves: Fort +11, Ref +7, Will +5
Abilities: Str 22, Dex 17, Con 16, Int 16, Wis 13, Cha 16
Skills: Concentration +18, Hide +9*, Listen +16, Move Silently +18, Spot +16
Feats: Narrow Mind, Psionic Body, Psionic Charge, Psionic Endowment, Speed of Thought
Environment: Elemental Plane of Water
Organization: Solitary
Challenge Rating: 8
Treasure: None
Alignment: Usually neutral
Advancement: 13-18 (Huge); 19-25 (Gargantuan); 26-30 (Colossal)
Level Adjustment: —

Suddenly the water churns violently, yet there seems no cause. Then the silhouette of a shark appears in the middle of the chaos, but it is hardly tangible.

Riptaves are shaped like sharks but composed entirely of water. This grants them perfect camouflage underwater. Riptaves do not eat and therefore are not predators like sharks are, so they don't hunt. A riptave is very territorial, though, so if it has control of a certain area, it attacks anything that attempts to go through its territory. When a riptave attacks, it fights to the death.

While riptaves are from the Elemental Plane of Water, some find themselves appearing on the Material Plane, where they usually remain from then on. A riptave can send telepathic messages but normally does not say much.

COMBAT

Riptaves are vicious fighters, using their mighty bites combined with psionic attacks to kill foes. However, a riptave only attacks when it feels that it or its territory is threatened.

Concealment (Ex): Because it is composed of water, a riptave has concealment underwater, giving it a 50% miss chance.

Drench (Ex): A riptave's touch puts out torches, campfires, exposed lanterns and other flames of nonmagical origin if they are Large or smaller. A riptave can dispel magical fire it touches as *dispel magic* cast by a sorcerer of the same level as the riptave's HD.

Keen Scent (Ex): A riptave can notice creatures by scent in a 180-ft. radius and detect blood in the water at ranges of up to a mile away.

Psi-like Abilities: 2/day—*boil*† (2 10-ft. cubes*), *energy ray* (cold only, 8d6+8*), *mind thrust* (8d10, DC 17*), *vigor* (40 hp*); 1/day—*inertial armor* (+7 bonus*), *psionic blast* (2 rounds, DC 16*). Manifester level 8th. The save DCs are Charisma-based.

*Includes augmentation for the riptave's manifester level.

Water Mastery (Ex): A riptave gains a +1 attack and damage bonus if both it and its opponent touch water. If the opponent or riptave is landbound, the riptave suffers a -4 penalty to attack rolls and damage. (These modifiers are not included in the statistics block.)

A riptave can be a serious threat to a ship that crosses its path. The riptave can easily overturn small craft (5 feet of length per HD of the riptave) and stop larger vessels (10 feet long per HD). Even large ships (20 feet long per HD) can be slowed to half speed.

Skills: A riptave has a +4 bonus on Hide checks underwater.

New Psionic Powers

Want to boil a large quantity of water, or send rocks flying at your enemies in a way that makes their jaws drop? To give complete coverage to psionic monsters, the Silven Bestiary presents the following two new powers.

Rock Blast

Psychokinesis
Level: Psion/wilder 4
Display: Auditory
Manifesting Time: 1 standard action
Range: Close (25 ft. + 5 ft./2 levels)
Target: Up to three targets, no two of which can be more than 15 ft. apart
Duration: Instantaneous
Saving Throw: Reflex halves
Power Resistance: No
Power Points: 7

You tear three large, solid chunks of ground from the earth around you using only the power of your mind. These stones then fly at your designated targets (you may choose to have more than one stone hit a single target), each dealing 3d6 points of bludgeoning damage. However, all targets are allowed a Reflex save for half damage.

Augment: You can augment the power in one or both of the following ways.

1. For every 2 additional power points you spend, this power's damage increases by 1d6 points.

2. For every 4 additional power points you spend, you tear an extra rock from the ground, allowing you to strike an

Body of Water	Duration
Small pond (10 ft. to 50 ft. across and 5 ft. to 20 ft. deep)	5 rounds
Large pond (60 ft. to 200 ft. across and 5 ft. to 30 ft. deep)	3 rounds
Lake (210 ft. or greater across and 5 ft. to 200 ft. deep)	2 rounds
Ocean	1 round
River of at least 5 ft. in depth	1 round

additional opponent as long as it is within 15 ft. of another target.

Boil

Psychokinesis [Fire, Water]
Level: Psion/wilder 3
Display: Auditory
Manifesting Time: 1 standard action
Range: Long (400 ft. + 40 ft./level)
Area: 10-ft. cube
Duration: See text
Saving Throw: None
Power Resistance: No
Power Points: 5

An amount of water becomes instantly superheated to boiling. This boiling water injures any creatures within the area, dealing 5d6 points of fire damage per round.

The boiling water only lasts for so long before surrounding water cools it back to normal. See the table below for the duration of the heat, depending on the size of the body of water.

Any body of water that is less than 5 ft. in depth is only evaporated by this power. This power only affects water in liquid form.

Augment: For every 2 additional power points you spend, the ability affects an additional 10-ft. cube.

The Many Faces of Gaming:
Gamers in the Non-English World

by Eytan Bernstein

Previously, this column has dealt with the issues facing gay, female, and disabled gamers. This installment will explore the nature of the gaming world outside of predominantly English-speaking countries. Like previous explorations, this author presupposes that the gamers in this subgroup have little more in common with each other than they do with English-speaking gamers. Their only specific link is that they face certain difficulties when pursuing their hobby in an industry that is dominated by English-speaking designers and companies. Problems of translation and a lack of fluency in English limit the breadth and quality of available gaming materials. This is the focus of this discussion, which is based on research from gaming message boards, as well as information provided by both non-Anglo *Silven Trumpeter* insiders and an interview with Leo Vesperini, a veteran in the non-English industry.

One of the most significant issues that faces gamers in countries where English is not the first language is translation. In some countries, games can only survive and flourish if they are translated into the native language. France is a good example. As Leo mentions in the interview below, sales figures can be as much as 80% better if a game is translated into French. The problem is that some companies don't have the resources or interest to translate their games. This is especially true in countries with unique languages but small populations.

In a country where people tend to speak English fluently, such as the Netherlands or most of the Scandinavian countries, many gamers buy the original version rather than purchasing a poorer quality text in their own language. They then use English products in their games, translating where necessary. Often, native-language versions are created by those who are bilingual but not trained specifically in the skill of translation. These products are difficult to understand, riddled with errors, and frequently sound awkward to native as well as multi-lingual speakers. Gamers appreciate quality translations, especially of very technical games, but good translations are not as prevalent as many would like.

The prevalence of games unique to specific countries varies widely. Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, have games written specifically by natives of those countries. Sometimes these games are popular and do well, but often they do not, crowded out by more popular international titles. This is especially true in countries where English is spoken by nearly everyone. The one significant exception to this is the success of the game *Das Schwarze Auge* (The Dark Eye) in Germany and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. In Germany, this game competes with and usually eclipses the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Germans are among the most avid European gamers, so it is not surprising that they have their own unique native roleplaying game. What is noteworthy is that outside games have flourished in Germany as well. *Shadowrun*, originally published by FASA, is now mostly published by FanPro, a German company. White Wolf's *Vampire: the Masquerade* and its newer incarnation, *Vampire: the Requiem*, as well as *Call of Cthulhu* and D&D, also have followings in Germany.

Many of the gamers that prefer English versions like to keep their games in one language as much as possible, but some do not mind mixing in English terms. It may be impossible to avoid this, given that many of the technical terms in roleplaying games are difficult to translate. Some say that they even use English as a means to denote the speaking of a foreign language in their games. Thus, if the game is D&D, and the characters are speaking Elven, they use English as a way to indicate the language's exotic nature. It adds a nuanced quality to the game. Others attempt to speak English when playing in English-speaking settings—a Cthulhu game set in 1930s New England, for example—in order to get a more authentic feel. Switching languages can also be used when language barrier is a significant issue in the setting. This gives bilingual players an advantage over players that speak only one language. The bilingual gamers can further explore what these language barriers are like and how they impact the game.

In a country where English is spoken, but not universally, games that are translated sell in drastically greater numbers. This is true of France and Brazil, as well as many Eastern European countries. In these countries, people often play older versions of the games because newer versions are not available for a variety of reasons—discontinued translation lines, lack of resources, etc. If the population is great enough, in France for example, it might be worth translating a large number of games into the native language. If however, the population is smaller, this expense is probably not financially justified.

Fluency is intrinsically linked to translation; as discussed above, the popularity of English versus translated games depends greatly on volume and level of English fluency in a given country. In countries with less English fluency, younger gamers can only become involved in the hobby if they have older bilingual gamers to teach them, or if there are local language translations available. Many of these gamers actually learn English in order to be able to use original texts. Many books are available in both print and electronic copy, but the vast majority of small press or even medium run books are only available in English. The biggest titles may have translations, but many companies will only print their marquis titles in translation. Thus, gamers must either learn English or get a translation.

In many places, these are two reasonable options, but in some, these may be serious detriments that prevent gaming development.

Along with this issue of availability comes the problem of discrimination. This issue ties our discussion to the notion of non-Anglo gamers as a discriminated minority in this hobby. On this issue, the non-English speaking gamers seem to be significantly more civilized than their Anglophone counterparts. Frequently, when members of a majority live their daily lives without thought of those who are different, they become suspicious or frightened by newcomers with unusual needs or interests. This is no different in language than it is with gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability. The multilingual gamers are used to dealing with people with other needs and abilities, so they are more acclimated to tolerance. For instance, in Finland most gaming conventions are conducted in Finnish, but the players usually have no problem playing in English if they have non-Finnish speaking visitors. They welcome this, given that their English is usually quite good.

Anglo gamers are not always as welcoming as their more multilingual and multiculturally aware counterparts. Recently, *World of Warcraft* players in non-English speaking countries have expressed significant outrage about being discriminated in the online game. They feel that they have earned an undeserved reputation for participating in the game for financial reasons, rather than for enjoyment. In *Warcraft*, it is possible to sell online gold as a commodity on eBay and other stores. Because the majority of these salespeople seem to come from non-English-speaking countries, many non-Anglo *Warcraft* players suffer for it at some point. English-speaking *Warcraft* players frequently require participants to write a few sentences in English, disallowing anyone whose grammar shows signs of a lack of complete fluency. This happens despite the fact that there are probably more players in non-English countries than in Anglophone nations. Clearly, not all of these people are gold hoarders, but this does nothing to prevent the stigma attached to them.

Options for non-English speaking gamers are on the rise. Many video, computer, and roleplaying games are now being translated. RPGs lag behind the other two, however, primarily because they require the player to read through complex rules that can be difficult for gamers fluent in English, let alone those with developing vocabularies. Immersion in English, or living in a country where being bilingual is almost universal, diminishes these problems, but they can be a big hassle if the gamer happens to live in a country where the study of English is not ubiquitous.

More visual games have an advantage in that the terms they use are often quite common in the genre and the gamers can rely on the visuals, tone of voice, and sound effects for cues. Though the gaming industry expands slowly, more and more products will be produced for gamers who don't speak English, or who prefer to play in their native language. Many RPG companies, however, don't consider translation, especially by trained people, to be worth their expense. While they aren't intentionally sending a message of intolerance, they are essentially saying that the interests of these gamers are not worth it to them. In many cases, the population of gamers who would read the books is sizeable, but the companies still don't translate their games. In other markets, the population of gamers may not be as financially lucrative, but a certain amount of advertising saturation could turn these markets into very lucrative playing fields.

Ultimately, this issue still remains one of individual choice, initiative, and cultural variability. The drive to translate, interest in gaming, and willingness to learn another language vary from one country to the next. Sometimes, these variations are as localized as small national regions, socioeconomic classes, or even certain gaming groups and clubs. It would be a sign of great faith and change in the industry if major English-dominated game companies began to take the interests of non-English gamers more to heart, but this is probably not going to happen in a dramatic way in the near future. It is clear that video and computer game manufacturers have recognized the potential for market growth in these sectors, but RPG makers have been somewhat slower to follow suit.

For greater information and inside perspectives on these issues, use the links below. The following two threads from RPG.net deal quite extensively with this subject:

http://forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?t=259138
http://forum.rpg.net/archive/index.php/t-49478.html

There is also a PRWEB press release describing the recent problems of discrimination facing non-English speaking *World of Warcraft* players. Numerous other articles deal with this sentiment, but this one is succinct in its description of the feelings of those involved. For additional insight, see the interview below with Leonidas Vesperini, an industry insider with a more intimate understanding of the problem.

Leonidas Vesperini is the Editor-in-Chief of Mana Rouge, a large French magazine dedicated to French gaming, especially collectible card games and mass market collectible games. Each month's issue of Mana Rouge has a big focus on Magic: the Gathering, hence the name and organization of the magazine.

This interviewer had a chance to meet Leonidas at a Gen Con press conference last year. With the current topic being non-English speaking gamers, Leonidas is an excellent inside source. He is knowledgeable about the issue from the perspective of both an industry leader and an ESL gamer.

Eytan: Hi Leo. It's nice to speak with you again. Can you tell the *Silven Trumpeter* readers some information about yourself?

Leo: Hi Eytan, good to speak to you, too. So, my name is Leo,

I'm French, 38 years old, married (to an American woman) and the proud parent of two young children. And as you said, I'm the Editor-in-Chief of *Mana Rouge*, a magazine dedicated to CCGs, with a board game section as well. I've been working in the game industry for more than 10 years, mostly in France. I started with roleplaying games, and I switched to collectible card games about six years ago. I'm a gamer. I love RPGs (*RuneQuest*, *Shadowrun*, *L5R*, *Warhammer*…) but I don't have time to play them anymore. I still play a lot of CCGs (*Magic*, *Versus*, *Anachronism*, and others), miniatures games (*Warhammer 40K*, *Star Wars*), board games (new releases) and some video games. I attend most of the major conventions in France and in the US and the large Magic tournaments around the world. I'm always looking for the next hot stuff to reveal to my readers!

Eytan: I know you were previously the Editor-in-Chief of *Lotus Noir*, a prominent French gaming magazine that no longer exists. How did you come to be involved with *Mana Rouge*?

Leo: It's a little complicated, but I'll try to be as brief as possible. I was the Editor-in-Chief of *Lotus Noir* for five years, but the publisher at the time, Darwin Project, went bankrupt because of poor management. Instead of focusing on what Darwin did best (publishing magazines), the decision maker chose to diversify and started publishing more and more games, distributing cards, etc. *Lotus Noir* was still doing very well, but the company filed chapter 11 because of the other activities. Many people were not paid when this happened, including printers, suppliers, but also journalists and artists, who were not paid for three consecutive months. The decision maker at Darwin who had had similar problems in the past wanted to create a new company, ignoring all the debts "thanks to the bankruptcy." He wanted me to be part of this unscrupulous project, but I refused.

Instead, I decided to create a new magazine, with the whole team that worked with me on *Lotus Noir* and who chose to go with me. I found a big press group, a publisher called Histoire & Collections who has been doing this for 22 years and has published over 20 different magazines. They agreed to work with me, and this is how *Mana Rouge* was born. The first issue was published in September 2005. Issue #9 (May) was just released, and we even published two special issues: one dedicated to *Pokémon*, and the other to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* The third one, dedicated to *Dragon Ball CCG* (a new game just released in France and very different from the game published by Score in the US) will be released in June.

But that's not the end of the story: A new *Lotus Noir* has since been released. The same decision maker from Darwin convinced someone to create a new company and to publish this magazine again. None of the people who did *Lotus Noir* with me are involved in this new magazine, which is very different from what it was when I did it (it dealt only with *Magic: The Gathering*, almost no other games). The situation is a little complex for readers, who first saw *Mana Rouge* as the "new *Lotus Noir*", and then, a couple of months later, discovered that *Lotus Noir* was published again. But after all these months, they are starting to realize that one of them is not quite what it claims to be. *Mana Rouge* is by far the leader on this market.

Eytan: Your official title is Editor-in-Chief. What are your day-to-day duties for this job?

Leo: First of all, I decide of the content of the magazine. I plan page-by-page what's gonna be in it. I have to take into account all kinds of constraints: budget, space, information we can unveil, availability of writers, etc. Then I commission people to write the articles. I ask publishers to submit art relating to their games and get journalists to take photos of events they cover. I also personally write some articles and interviews, especially when I meet artists, game designers, or publishers at game conventions or tournaments. When the articles arrive, I read them and check that they're okay. I have to meet the deadline, which means controlling the day-to-day progression of the magazine. I check the pages when the layout is done. I have to give to the accountants a sum-up of who's done what and how much they should be paid. Last but not least, since it is a magazine based on news, I have to know the market. Which means meeting a lot of people: I meet each French publisher once a month. I also go to GAMA in Las Vegas, Gen Con Indy, Gen Con Paris, Gen Con So Cal, some Pro Tours and Grand Prix, etc. I travel a least once a month.

Eytan: What is the goal or mission of *Mana Rouge* as a publication? How are you and the rest of your staff working to achieve this?

Leo: Our goal is to support the game market in France (and French-speaking countries, to a lesser extent), especially for collectible card games. When the market is doing fine, our sales are good. We try to achieve this by informing our readers of all the new releases in this market, but also by providing them with all sorts of technical articles that will help them discover CCGs and improve their skill: game aids, statistics, price guides, analysis of the best decks, reports, etc. All new games or expansions are reviewed in *Mana Rouge*, and we have a big section for *Magic*, the leader and still best-selling CCG.

Eytan: *Mana Rouge* is organized according to the five colors of *Magic*. Can you describe the contents of each color and why that color was chosen?

Leo: Of course. We have several *Magic* references in the magazine—the section colors, but also the sidebars in the articles, which are divided into three different categories: beginner, advanced, and expert, same terms as in the *Magic* products.

On the packaging of Magic: The Gathering cards in France, the different player levels are, literally translated, Beginner, Connoisseur, and Expert.

The Green section is for news. We review the "blooming" and never-ending releases of all new games or expansions. We also have a two-page section dedicated to board games, a very strong market in Europe.

The White section is for the focus. In this big feature article (6 to 12 pages), we "illuminate" the most important release of the month, a new game, a new *Magic* release, or a big retrospective on a famous game.

The Blue section, color of "knowledge and great wizards," is, of course, dedicated to *Magic*. Several pages of analysis, tips, decks, short novels in the *Magic* universe, etc., are written by the best specialists in *Magic*: French pro players, such as Olivier Ruel (currently the best player in the world), Nicolas Labarre, or Yann Hamon. We have three different levels of articles, some for beginners, some for middle-level players, and some for pro players. As their expertise in *Magic* increases, readers can understand more and more of the complex articles.

The Black section is the price guide. We invite our readers to "sell their soul to the demon" of card trading! All of the *Magic* cards are there, as well as all the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards too. We also include a price guide to one specific game that changes every month, based on recent releases (*Versus*, *L5R*, *Pokémon*, *Vampire*, etc.).

The Red section, finally, is dedicated to the "hot-headed" game community. We here have reports of the biggest tournaments in the world (*Magic* Pro Tours, *Versus* Pro Circuits, national championships, etc.) but also reports on the major game conventions (Gen Con, Essen fair, etc.). This is where we have the big interaction between readers and the magazine. The mail is there, presented by our two mascots, the very sexy twin sisters Manon (for Mana) and Scarlett (for Rouge). We also have some columns where readers send their decks, and where our specialists will explain how to improve them. The calendar of all upcoming tournaments in France is here too. Readers have a column where they can exchange or sell cards. And finally, we have Dork Tower, a famous cartoon translated into French.

Eytan: I've heard talk that there were plans for a US version of the magazine? Are these plans still in effect?

Leo: No, not really. We don't believe we could do well in a country that is not ours, so we wouldn't risk trying to publish a localized version ourselves. Our policy is to have a partnership with whoever is interested. If, say, a German publisher was interested in producing a German version of *Mana Rouge*, or even to adapt some of our articles and layout, it would be no problem for us, we could work with them and let them publish a well-targeted magazine in a country and a network they know. I've had some contacts already, but not in the US yet.

Eytan: Is *Mana Rouge* available in areas outside of France that speak French (such as Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada)? Are there any plans to expand its distribution?

Leo: Yes, it's distributed in all those countries. Mainly Belgium and Switzerland, where it's doing pretty well (Belgium better

than Switzerland). In Canada, our distribution is limited, but we should have a distribution in the core stores soon. We also sell some magazines to Portugal, and we've been contacted for small shipments to South Korea! We want to expand our distribution as much as possible, but, of course, our best markets are French-speaking countries.

Eytan: How popular are RPGs and CCGs in Europe? How is gaming expanding?

Leo: Roleplaying games were very popular in the late 80's and early 90's. Ever since *Magic* was published, their popularity has dropped constantly. Today, RPGs are a small market. Only D&D, *Warhammer RPG*, and two or three other games sell more than 3,000 copies a year (ten times less than 10 years ago). CCGs are doing better, but not as good as two years ago. *Magic* is the best selling game, with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* close behind. *Pokémon* is probably the third game in the market, and did an impressive comeback two years ago. Fantasy miniatures games are doing very well (a more steady market than cards), collectible miniatures games are not as popular as three years ago, and Star Wars miniatures are currently the best selling collectible pre-painted miniatures games. Board games have become more and more popular, and online RPGs, such as *World of Warcraft*, have become extremely popular. That's the new craze here.

Eytan: The gaming world seems like it is very much dominated by English speakers. Despite this, I've seen a number of magazines and other publications that cater to non-English-speaking gamers. How is the market for gamers who don't speak English (or who speak English as a second language)?

Leo: In Europe, a lot of games are translated into the local language. Therefore, even though most of the games in the world are American, non-English-speaking gamers can play them, since most of them are translated now. In non-English-speaking countries, the game market is much stronger with the localized versions than with the English original versions. Only core gamers will play a non-translated English game.

Eytan: What challenges do you face as a publisher working in a world dominated by English media? Do you experience challenges related to language in your work?

Leo: In the game industry, you need to speak English, not necessarily to play the games (they are usually translated, as I said earlier), but to speak with the decision makers, who, for the most part, are American or English. Publishers constantly need to speak with American companies, and as a journalist, I definitely need to speak English. It's helped me a lot, not as player, but as a professional of the game industry.

Eytan: Your English is excellent, but can you grant any insight into what it might be like for a gamer who speaks no English? Are there any areas of the gaming world that would be closed to people who don't speak English?

Leo: In France, a game that is only in English will never be as popular as a translated game. If you don't translate a game, your sales expectations are around 80% smaller than if you translate it. Only core gamers will play a game in English. For instance, D&D minis and Star Wars minis are not translated into French. Star Wars is selling well, but mostly for collection. D&D minis would sell much more if it was translated into French. Right now, only core gamers play those games in France.

Eytan: Is there anything interesting in your future or the future of *Mana Rouge* that you can tell our readers?

Leo: I hope to see a localized version of *Mana Rouge* in some other countries by the end of the year, or at least an adaptation of our articles and layout in some already existing magazines. I believe *Mana Rouge* has original assets, and that it will be appealing to a lot of gamers, not only the French ones. I hope some of your readers will see it and enjoy it!

Starlanko and the Potential Paladin
Part 21 in the Starlanko Series

by Matthew J Hanson

"I think it's clear that this arrangement works to our mutual benefit," explained Starlanko the Magnificent, an enterprising wizard who specialized in finding, cataloguing, and reselling new and valuable spells.

"You're a hard bargainer, Starlanko, but I think that the terms are acceptable," replied Daverast, the wizard from whom Starlanko hoped to purchase a handful of powerful abjurations. Throughout the negotiations Starlanko neglected to mention that he already knew three wizards who would pay double what Starlanko was offering.

"I'm pleased to hear it. Naturally I don't keep such a sum of gold on my person, but I can ensure that you will have it by tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Then I believe we are concluded." Daverast rose and placed a hand on his office doorknob.

Starlanko took his cue and began to leave. "A pleasure," he uttered.

Daverst opened the door, and a gangly teenager spilled into the room.

"Ah. This is my son, Jimai. Jimai, Starlanko."

"Gosh, golly, gee." The boy must have been half Starlanko's age, but after he recovered and stood his full height, he was at least six inches taller. He stared down with wide eyes. "Are you really Starlanko the Magnificent?"

"That's what I've been told."

"And are you really an..." Jimai paused, all the better to relish the final word, "...adventurer?"

"I consider myself a businessman first and foremost, but I suppose I go on adventures every now and then."

"I heard you slew an evil dragon that had been terrorizing the countryside."

"It wasn't a very big dragon."

"Ah shucks. I always wanted to be an adventurer, like one of those bright shiny guys who rides around on the fancy horse and fights evil."

"A paladin?"

"Yeah." Then Jimai's expression faded, and he shuffled his feet. "But adventuring's real dangerous."

"I suppose that's true. It was a pleasure meeting you, Jimai, and I'd love to stay and regale you with tales of daring do, but I'm sure your father is a busy man, and I'd hate to clog his office doorway."

"Oh, you'd tell me some of your stories?" Jimai asked.

"That would be just swell. We can go anyplace you like."

"I'd hate to take you away from your daily chores."

"All done."

"Or your studies."

"I'm on break."

"Perfect then. As long as it's okay with your father."

Jimai turned to Daverast, his eyes full of hope, "Can I, Pa?"

Daverast bit his bottom lip as he smiled. The he spoke, "Of course you can son. Oh, and Starlanko, one more thing about our business." Daverast pulled Starlanko close and whispered into his ear. "If anything happens to my boy, I'll kill you."

The common room of the Ambrosia Inn was bustling with activity, as Starlanko expected, but Jimai took in the scene as though the patrons were on fire. Starlanko led the youngster to the table where a burly man and a limber elf sat, cradling drinks.

"Jimai, these are my associates, Redreck the Fierce and Vox."

"Oh boy, it sure is great to meet you guys. Vox, your story of redemption is an inspiration to misguided criminals everywhere."

"And this is Jimai," Starlanko said. "He's the son of our latest client."

"A pleasure," Vox said, her voice dripping with an irony that seemed to pass above Jimai's head. Redreck nodded to the newcomer.

A server approached the table. "Can I get you two anything to drink?"

"A glass of mead please," Starlanko replied.

"Oh gosh golly," Jimai stuttered. "I'm not sure I should be drinking alcohol."

"I most fiercely agree with thee," spoke a voice that seemed to come from nowhere. "Spirits muddy the mind and can fuel foolish tempers."

"Just a glass of water for my guest," Starlanko said to the server.

Jimai was still spinning his head searching for the search of the voice, "What was that?"

"Excuse my rudeness," Starlanko explained.

"I neglected to introduce you to the final member of our troop." The wizard nodded to Redreck, and the warrior handed Starlanko back the wizard's sword.

"Jimai, this is Funbane."

"A talking sword? That's super keen!"

"Nay Sir Jimai, I believe thou art mistaken. I am not *keen*."

"No, I just meant you're as cool as...the Blade of Bendosi."

Upon hearing this, Starlanko momentarily thought he saw Funbane take on a rosy hue. "Sir, I thank thee for the compliment, but I am but a humble *+1*

longsword. The Blade of Bendosi is the legendary slayer of Archfiend Klezzax and his minions. And while not as well known, the Blade of Bendosi also defeated the Dread Wolf of Parat, which had seven heads, each with a single eye."

"Gosh, that wolf thing sounds scary."

"That's nothing," came a gruff voice from the bar. The speaker was Barret the Fox, a skilled woodsman and veteran adventurer who had aided Starlanko many times in the past. He swaggered to Starlanko's table. As he spoke the other patrons in the bar hushed their own conversations. "There's a monster more terrible than that Dread Wolf of Parat, or the Tarrasque, or the Dragon Mother herself. It's a creature so foul that none have ever seen it and lived. Its claws are like swords. Its teeth are like spears. It can kill with a blink of its eye. Worst of all, every year it demands the sacrifice of a hundred children."

"What is it?" Jimai squeaked.

"It goes by many names, but it calls itself simply… the snipe." The ad hoc audience laughed and went back to their own business. But the speech gave Starlanko the glimmer of a plan.

"Gosh golly gee wiz," muttered Jimai, oblivious to the laughter around him.

"I am surprised," Funbane said, "that I have not ere heard of this snipe."

"Don't worry," Starlanko rose as he tried to comfort the distressed sword and boy. "The snipe is only a legend. Funbane, why don't you inform Jimai with some more highlights from the history of nobility." Starlanko walked to the bar and sat next to where Barret the Fox had recently been sitting. The ranger soon joined him.

"The kid seems a little wet behind the ears. Where did you dig him up from?"

"His name's Jimai, and he's all right," Starlanko explained. "His father is a client of mine, and I get the feeling that he's not allowed to have any fun. He wants to be a paladin, and I figure as long as I'm babysitting him, I might just give him a little quest."

"What sort of quest?"

"It's a little something my masters at the academy called a 'fetch quest.'" Starlanko explained the details of his plan to Barret. A plan where Barret played a simple but important role.

"You don't mean it!" Starlanko the Magnificent exclaimed.

"I do," Barret replied.

"Somebody has actually found an intact copy of the *Codex of Seasons*?"

"Yes, and it's in this very city. It's in the hands of an elderly librarian named Pargius, and word has it that he's looking to sell."

"Oh, I wish I could get my hands on that book. But alas, I have a magic experiment that I must perform, and I cannot possibly hope to go myself. I don't suppose you could get the book for me, Barret, my old friend?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"Woe is me. Can't anybody help me?"

"I could get it!" Jimai exclaimed.

"I don't know, Jimai, it would be a dangerous task filled with peril to your life and happiness. Are you certain you're up to it?"

"I sure am, Mr. Starlanko."

"I wish you could. But you don't have a weapon. There would be no way to fight off the terrible monsters that would doubtlessly attack you. And I have no idea where we would find a sword at such a late hour."

"I beg thy pardon master," Funbane interrupted, "but could I possibly be of use in this endeavor?"

"By Barselbum," Starlanko smiled, "that just might work."

Jimai had gone first to the house of the ancient librarian, just as Starlanko requested, but the librarian informed Jimai that he had already sold the *Codex of the Seasons* to Millard's Book Emporium. Jimai naturally headed to Millard's Book Emporium to see if he could secure a copy, but the book had already been purchased by a scholar named Fininus Leggron.

Fininus had not yet sold the book to a third party, and indeed he was willing to part with the tome, but only in exchange for the Orb of Sunrise, which was currently in the possession of Tappery Pogg. Tappery wanted the Hat of Pomposity owned by Jublia Vank. Jublia wanted the Bottled Nymph's essence owned by Klemax the Great, slayer of Abodon the Vile.

Fortunately Klemax wanted nothing more than for an exterminator to dispatch the rats infesting his basement. With Funbane's assistance, Jimai made short work of this task. He then followed the chain back to Fininus Leggron, and by the time the sun was setting, he had the *Codex of Seasons* in his hand. At least he hoped it was the *Codex of Seasons*. The books title was in a strange language that Jimai could not decipher. Unfortunately, unknown to Jimai or Funbane, they were being watched.

"Gee willikers, these quests sure can take a lot of time," Jimai said to Funbane as he noticed the sun setting on the horizon.

"Indeed," Funbane replied. "The longest quest that I can recall was the Cradet family's quest to recover the hundred Lost Coins of Baliston. The search involved four generations, and most of the family had—"

"You! You give book!" A squat figure jumped from the shadows. It was a small humanoid with a flat face, wide nose, and large pointed ears. Jimai had never seen one before, but from countless tales he recognized it as a goblin.

"No!" Jimai responded. "I've sworn to protect this book, and I'll never give it to a foul creature like you."

"You give book now or we hurt!" The goblin jumped up and down to emphasis the point.

"Death first!"

"Sir Jimai! Look behind thee!" But Funbane's warning came to late. As Jimai spun, a javelin nicked his left thigh. It was not a grievous wound, but it drew blood. Despite the wound Jimai was undaunted. He cried, "For justice!" and charged the nearest goblin. Funbane came alive in his hand. The sword seemed to know exactly where to strike, and tore the goblin in twain. The previously unremarkable blade now shone with an intense

white light. The goblins did not flee. A half dozen swarmed Jimai surrounding him on all sides. Jimai managed to dodge several blows, but inevitably a few strikes from the goblin's morningstars battered Jimai's flesh and bones.

Fortunately Jimai's first strike had not been a fluke. Ever strike he made with Funbane dropped another goblin to the cobblestone, never to rise again.

Finally the last goblin fell.

"Huzzah!" Funbane cried, "A victory heartily won!" Jimai smiled, but he lacked the strength to speak. Under the terrible weight of his many wounds, Jimai collapsed, still clutching tight to the *Codex of Seasons*.

From one of the rooftops above, another figure detached itself from the shadows, dropped to the ground, and crossed to Jimai's defenseless body.

When Jimai awoke he was in a bed in a strange room. He took a second to remember what transpired, then bolted upright.

"The Codex!"

"Relax. It's safe," reassured Starlanko the Magnificent. The wizard sat in a chair beside Jimai's bed. "You're lucky Vox happened to be passing that way. She found you and brought you back to the inn. I've taken the liberty of healing your wounds. I heard what happened. You acted with profound bravery, and that is admirable, but in the future remember that your life is more valuable than any possession."

"Shucks, it wasn't about the books Mr. Starlanko. It was about the quest. A paladin never abandons a quest."

"I'm afraid things aren't quite so black and white in the real world. What if you could save a hundred innocent lives by giving up your quest?"

"Well...golly, I never thought of that."

"You'll have plenty of time for such soul searching in the years to come. Now let's discuss the mater of your reward," Starlanko said.

"A good deed is its own reward."

"Well then, I ask that you accept a gift. A paladin cannot fight evil without a tool, and as we've established you are currently without, and I have one more sword that I can possibly wield..." Starlanko unstrapped Funbane from his belt.

"Jeepers! You don't mean...like I could keep him?"

"That is, if it's all right with Funbane."

"It has been an honor to serve thee Master Starlanko, and thou hast shown me a kindness I shall not soon forget. But I feel that Sir Jimai is destined for a greatness the likes of which we have yet to behold, and if there is a way to aid in his quest, I consider it the greatest privilege a sword could be granted."

"Ah, shucks. But I don't know if my father will like it."

"Then you don't have to tell him," Starlanko replied.

"But the paladin's code—"

"It called lawful good, not lawful stupid," Starlanko interrupted. "And speaking of your father, you really should be getting home. And...you don't need to mention your little adventure to your father."

"Gee. Thanks Mr. Starlanko. This has been about the best day I've ever had."

"I thought I told you to keep an eye on him," Starlanko said to Vox after Jimai left, escorted home by

Author's Bio
Matthew J. Hanson is an aspiring d20 designer and playwright from Minneapolis, Minnesota. His character of Starlanko the Magnificent is also featured in *50 New Ways to Blow Things Up*. In addition to his work for Silven Publishing, he has contributed to books from E.N. Publishing and Expeditious Retreat Press and published the occasional article in *Dragon* Magazine. If you would like to learn more about Matthew, please visit his website at www.matthewjhanson.com.

Redreck the Fierce.

"You told me to watch him. You didn't say I had to fight his battles."

Starlanko decided it was too late to argue and retired for the night. After crawling into bed, he realized he was not alone.

"Hello," spoke an unseen intruder. "My name is Zech the Dark. I work for the Bandit God, and I've come for the sword."

To Be Continued...

The Domination of Computer Role-Playing Games

by James Quigley

Once again, video game experts are claiming that we are witnessing the death of the computer role-playing genre. There are solid, technical reasons for the doubters to believe this, which deal mostly with the lack of high fantasy games currently being developed in the video game market. But role-playing is not only about high fantasy. It is about living as another persona in a setting far removed from the cares of everyday life. The role-playing game is not only here to stay, but it is stronger than ever when one considers the range of fantasy, modern, and future backdrops coming to a monitor near you. New technologies are driving the intensity of the role-playing experience, and new visionaries are developing ways for players to vividly live the adventure. We are seeing capitalism at its finest, and as the fans demand, the innovators in the field will continue to produce.

In The Beginning: *Adventure, Rogue,* MUDs, and *Zork*

Innovators have been the driving force behind the computer role-playing experience, working with available technology in order to create new worlds for us to save or conquer. It wasn't until 1976 that the first CRPG, *Adventure,* was made available to a wider audience because of its addictive play and through DECUS (Digital Equipment Computer User Society), a group of programmers that exchanged software on magnetic tape. This was more of a hack-and slash adventure game, although it did introduce 'thinking' monsters. The creator, Don Woods, was a fan of the fantasy genre, and his textual game sent CRPGs on their way by introducing computer-controlled opponents that performed random actions. This added a new chance element to the game that attracted players. The first commercial version
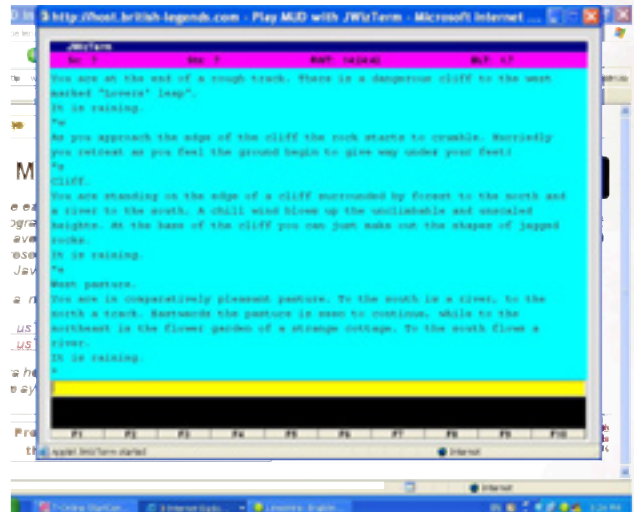
(C) Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle. Image used with permission. British Legends, or MUD1, is a textual game. Ê Although it doesn't look exciting compared to today's on-line role-playing games, it did start the fire.Ê This is 'Daddy' to the MMORPG and MUD communities of today.

Questions with Richard Bartle, Creator of MUD (aka *British Legends*)

What motivated you to create *British Legends*?
British Legends is just the name that CompuServe foisted on us for what we always called MUD ("Multi-User Dungeon"). I co-wrote the game with Roy Trubshaw. Our motives were simply to have fun!

How much of the code was innovated by you?
I wrote about 75% of the code and Roy wrote the other 25%. His was the hardest part, though! There were also a handful of lines of contribution from Brian Mallet and Ronan Flood.

Did the game content of *British Legends* increase over time or remain static?
It increased over time, although not by much. *MUD1* [original version of *MUD* code- JQ] was added to extensively over the years, but by the time it got to CompuServe it was reaching its limits and I began to work on *MUD2* instead. Some things were added, and some oddities fixed, but by then there was no wholesale introduction of new areas or anything that had characterised the earlier days.

When did you know that *British Legends* was a success?
When I wrote it.

The original *MUD* can be played on http://www.british-legends.com

of the text adventure game was *Zork*, published by a team from MIT in 1980 under a company called Infocom. This team advanced the technology by programming for personal computers and adding greater complexity to the puzzle solving aspect of the textual game.

Also in 1980, a pair of students, Michael Toy and Glenn Wichmann, took an infant mapping program that used letters and symbols for terrain and added pen and pencil RPG elements to it, creating *Rogue*. Like other CRPGs coming into the market, the freeware *Rogue* dealt with multiple dungeon levels that could be traversed. It also focused on a level-based system and did away with the puzzle aspects of *Adventure*, becoming the first popular action CRPG. It also introduced a random level design generator, so that the dungeons would be randomly created by the computer with each new game, and so always different. There was a 'boss' at the lowest level that needed to be defeated to win the game. If this sounds familiar, it should. This was *Diablo* before graphics. MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) also started to come into their own around 1980, in the era's standard all-text form. The original, *MUD*, was created by Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw and was available on CompuNet in 1984. It became popular on CompuServe in 1986, under the name *British Legends*. People all over the world would login their characters using their 300-baud modems and interact with people they've never met face-to-face.

Graphics Are Introduced

Graphics for CRPGs had yet to be introduced--the standard of graphics at the time being the imaginative usage of ASCII characters to create picturesque patterns. A teenager who worked part-time in a media store shattered this trend. To start his amazing career, a 19-year old Richard Garriott entered the fledgling CRPG market by introducing the first graphical dungeon crawl in 1980, *Akalabeth*. It followed a growing trend in fantasy games: allowing character generation, using hit points, introducing items for use, and setting up a heroic plot. The first-person game was more limited than programs such as *Rogue*, since the graphics took up more data space than textual and ASCII games. Because of this, there were only ten creatures to defeat in the original game, all derived from the works of Tolkien and Gygax. Despite these limitations, *Akalabeth* was successful enough to bring Richard Garriott the revenue to continue later game design with the *Ultima* series--at the old age of 20.

CRPGs were now considered commercially successful, and two types would set the standard for the next few years. Surprisingly, Richard Garriott dropped his first-person dungeon crawler for a 2D design with an overhead perspective, similar to *Rogue,* but with graphics and a seperate world map. The first of this series was called *Ultima.* The first-person perspective was not ignored; *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* was published in 1981 by Sir-Tech, and was created by Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead. They introduced the party concept to the first-person perspective, so the player could now employ a small group of adventurers into the dungeon crawl. The party concept took off, and even future *Ultima* games would implement the idea.

There were no other major innovations forthcoming for CRPGs in the early 80s, but companies used the available technology and their own tinkering to produce several solid games. *Wizard's Crown*, published by Strategic Simulations, Inc. (SSI) in 1985, used a combat system that attempted to employ as much realism as possible, and had equipment that could degrade until becoming broken. Also, you could have characters 'fall prone' to make them tougher to hit. Otherwise, the top-down tactical map was reminiscent of prior CRPGs.

Two very popular games that did even more with available technology were also published in 1985: *Phantasie* and *The Bard's Tale*. *Phantasie* was developed by SSI and was strongly influenced by the *Ultima* series. Unlike other clones of the time, it experimented heavily with other gaming aspects that would be picked up later, such as the placement of characters in front and rear ranks on a graphical battle screen. *The Bard's Tale* was a clone of the *Wizardry* series, but introduced graphics that were stunning for the time. Also, it featured a new character class outside the normal fighter and mage templates. The bard character was the backbone of the party; his musical talents could be used to cause damage to numerous enemy combatants per round or buff the party's combat capabilities.

1987 would bring *Dungeon Master* to the Atari ST, a first-person 3D game. It dropped turn-based play for a real-time version and allowed for greater interaction with the surrounding environment. Characters in the party would automatically turn towards the enemy, so you didn't have to worry too much about a creature hacking away at an unresponsive party member while you tried to figure out what was going on. *Dungeon Master* also required the player to be more of an active participant when it came to such activities as casting a spell. The player had to input the spell's verbal command and ensure that the caster had the proper spell components equipped. The success of the game was helped by a well-written background story, a trend that was well on its way by this time. Games were now becoming so complex that it took more than a handful of guys to write the programming. Companies, rather than individuals would now claim responsibility for creating games.

The Innovation of Story and Setting

By the mid 80s, CRPGs began to form with several elements: high fantasy, character classes, a leveling system, dungeon crawls, and tactical control in combat. The story was usually just background filler. The hero had to save the kingdom for the rulers of good from the evil wizard, or demon, that planned to destroy the world. From that introduction, the rest of the game became a hand-and-slash affair until the end, when the player would read a normally brief conclusion of the events.

A mixture of computer and console games eventually shattered this staleness in plotlines. *Ultima IV* was published in 1985, and featured its own letter system using runes, and came with a cloth map and metal 'ankh' in the published box edition. The perks didn't stop there, however, as players were treated to a game that was different in a large number of ways. First, although this was an adventure for a party of adventurers, the main character was the only one that could be created by the user, while his fellow heroes had to be found and recruited. All the NPCs (non-

player characters) in the game could be conversed with, and the responses were quite diverse for a CRPG of the time. The main character was called the 'Avatar', and character generation was resolved by having the player answer several questions on morality. The answers dictated the type of character that was developed. Although the game was heavy on combat, the main quests could only be solved by correctly answering moral riddles. There was also no main villain to defeat, the final goal being the creation of a new philosophy for the kingdom to live by. This was innovative even by today's standards, where few CRPGs can break away from the trend to fight a final boss in order to claim victory.

One of the first CRPGs to break away from the high fantasy standard also sported a strong storyline. *Wasteland* was published for the Apple II in early 1987 and featured a post-apocalyptic setting. Unlike any of the CRPGs before this time, *Wasteland*'s party members had personalities that came into play after you recruited them, making them more than just a short introductory speech before recruitment. Party members could grow angry at the main character and turn against him if forced to perform acts against their natures. *Wasteland* used a new skill-based system versus the typical leveling-up advancement system. The game also featured a small number of puzzles to solve, testing the player's mind as well as his tactical skills. *Wasteland* went out of its way to describe scenes of violence, encouraging the player to inflict damage against enemies. Also, since the world was already nearly destroyed by nuclear war, the main quest was more about survival than the typical kingdom-in-danger plotline. Overall, it had many elements that separated it from its ancestors, while still keeping their best traits.

Although the American computer RPGs were first to crack the doors on deep plotlines and character interaction, a Japanese console RPG kicked them open. *Phantasy Star II* was published in 1989 for the Sega Genesis, mixing a high technology world with high fantasy elements such as swords and magic. It was the first CRPG to build a strong relationship between the main character and a party member before having said party member get killed by a villain midway through the plot. The background story dealt with the over-reliance of a society on technology, a familiar theme in modern Japanese culture. These innovative story elements were a first among CRPGs and created a strong emotional tie between the players and the games. More importantly, these games would never have been developed if it weren't for the writers who envisioned how to make a breathing world for the gamer to become enveloped.

The Programmer Under the Stairs

As mentioned earlier, moneymaking games had become so advanced by the end of the 1980s that a handful of programmers were no longer sufficient for the creation of new CRPGs. This is not to say that individuals were not important, for individuals used teams of programmers as tools to create the virtual landscapes of the early 90s. The CRPGs of this time cannot be called innovative, although they did use the coming technology to create games of visual beauty and greater size. The most interesting movement of the time was underground: individuals and small groups of people creating successful CRPGs from the privacy of their own homes.

As people had become more familiar with personal computers and their basic programming languages, it became possible for larger segments of the population to tinker with existing source code. *Rogue* spawned a number of descendants, such as *Moria, NetHack,* and *Angband.* Each one of these games was open sourced into the Internet, shared among fans of CRPGs, edited into numerous new forms, and sent out again. The genres of these games included science fiction, Zelazny-mythos, high fantasy, and more. There is a *Rogue*-like game for whatever style of CRPG suits your fancy. Some experiments with the freeware source codes have even resulted in multiplayer *Rogue*-like games and even those with limited graphics-using tiles.

Small, out-of-the-house businesses also continued to produce CRPGs that were of surprising quality when the limited manpower is considered. Jeff Vogel started the *Exile* series single-handedly in early 1995. The story dealt with a group of adventurers who had to lead a colony of political prisoners forced to live under the earth. The style was similar to prior *Ultima* games, although the creatures and storyline were unique. Jeff Vogel still publishes his work through his private company, Spiderweb Software.

Questions with Jeff Vogel, Creator of the *Exile* series

What prompted you to create *Exile* and what inspired the innovative setting?
Exile was created as a way to let off steam during grad school. Nobody was more surprised than me when it made money. *Exile* is a combination of an idea I've had for a long time and bits of influence from writers like Robert Silverberg and Julian May.

What difficulties did you overcome in creating and publishing the game?
The creation and publication went as smoothly as could be expected. The main difficulty was the same one everyone faces: just getting it done. Wading through the day-to-day grind of making content and doing bug reports without giving up.

What would you say contributed to the success of the series?
Writing single-player RPGs that were non-buggy, huge, cheap, and had good storylines, and doing it even when that genre of the game was "out of fashion."

Spiderweb Software, Inc can be visited at http://www.spiderwebsoftware.com

MUDs also benefited during this time as college students from all over the world developed new campaigns and were allowed to maintain them on university databases. The source codes to many MUD variants became open source and were eagerly grabbed by gaming hobbyists and fledgling programmers. An unofficial competition soon broke out internationally, with the best free MUDs claiming larger worldwide membership. Because of this explosion of grassroots programming, the CRPG world was about to witness a new revolution of innovative games. The high school and college students that cut their teeth on the freeware source codes from the early 90s would go on to help program games a few years later. Others that kept programming games as a side hobby used their talents to design new *Rogue* variants, focused on story creation with platform editors, and wrote textual worlds in the MUD community. A quick search for *Rogue*-like games, shareware CRPGs, and MUDs show such a wide assortment of games that one thing is certain: the hobbyists still create worlds.

The Coming of Action CRPGs

Although there was no true definition of what made a commercial CRPG, they all shared a few important elements: puzzle solving, plot, NPC interaction, character customization, an advancement system using levels or skills, and dungeon crawl action. Not all CRPGs followed this trend, although each game had to possess more than one of these traits to qualify for inclusion in the genre. A new factor was about to make these games popular outside their usual fan base: realistic graphics.

Diablo was published in 1996 and became the most popular CRPG of its time, although not without the gnashing of teeth from many of the genre's fan base. The game caused controversy by calling itself a CRPG, although it lacked puzzles, a storyline, and NPC interaction. What it lacked in personality, it made up in limited character customization, a leveling system, and a strong dungeon crawl. Although the player interface was almost entirely a point and click-click-click-click matter, the game was basically *Rogue* with graphics. Since *Rogue* was always considered a CRPG, *Diablo* had to be considered part of the genre also, although it was separated by the industry with the description 'action' role-playing game. The moneymaking power of action CRPGs like *Diablo* would be strongly felt by the start of the millennium.

The Online Community

In the early 1990s people who had cash to burn graduated from textual MUDs to graphical massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), such as the first *Neverwinter Nights*. These games were expensive, and it wasn't until Electronic Arts' *Ultima Online* came out in 1997 that the price tag was reduced enough for such games to become popular. The game featured a skill system that enabled characters to craft their own items and sell it to others. This meant that you were not just a random adventurer, but also a possible merchant with a home in the community. It was possible for a player to focus entirely on crafting items, never adventuring, but instead serving other adventurers who would be looking to properly arm themselves for battle. In the long run, *Ultima Online* became archaic and lost customers due to the new kid on the block in 1999, *EverQuest*.

EverQuest featured better graphics, incorporated an easier advancement system, and was run by a company – Sony Online Entertainment – that was willing to spend more money producing quality expansions and total revamps (like *EverQuest II*) to their game than Electronic Arts. *EverQuest* soon surpassed *Ultima Online* and had a stronger run, but suffered the same weaknesses all MMORPGs of the time eventually experienced. The design of an MMORPG eventually becomes obsolete with the advent of newer, more streamlined programs.

The friendships made on-line are arguably the strongest appeal to MMORPGs, since players are equally powerful with no one stealing the spotlight as the main hero. The personalities of individuals in a server's community usually carry an on-line game past its prime, but eventually people move on as friendships drift apart or power gamers appear and reduce the sense of fraternity. Like action CRPG fans, the lovers of MMORPGs would further splinter the market, creating a decline in story-based CRPGs that would not be noticed until the end of the 1990s.

Putting It All Together For the First Time

The last half of the 1990s saw CRPGs published that successfully melded the main elements of the genre. *Fallout* was introduced in 1997, a CRPG set in a wasteland created after a nuclear conflict. Although the game did not feature physical puzzles, the strong NPC personalities and many side quests allowed the player to affect the areas he interacted with. These interactions would result in different endings for each region the player visited, with some results disastrous for the people of the towns. Through the skill advancement system, it was possible for a player to ignore combat abilities and focus entirely on technical or social skills in order to beat the game creating a wider range of role-playing experiences.

BioWare and Black Isle Studio created *Baldur's Gate,* which would become one of the best selling CRPG series of all time after being published in 1998 and using an isometric view. It was followed by *Planescape: Torment* a year later. Both these Black Isle Studio products followed an intricate plot, many side quests that greatly added to the content, strong NPC interaction, and allowed for 'good' and 'evil' endings. The ability to play as an evil villain appealed to many of the fans as a welcome and different departure from the norm, and added to the replay value. Where *Baldur's Gate* was innovative for its real-time simulation of the tabletop *Dungeons and Dragons* game, *Planescape: Torment* showed an ability to transfer deep philosophical questions on the nature of man and the universe into exciting game play.

The undisputed king of the CRPG market from this era was *Final Fantasy VII,* which mixed the role-playing elements admired by hardcore fans of the genre and successfully sold it to the faster-paced action gamers. The plot of the game was your standard epic tale, but featured a few fresh twists. The villain of the story, Sephiroth, was a former warrior who went rogue, and had a logical, vengeful reason for wanting to destroy civilization. The game also went out of its way to promote a bond between one of the party members and the main character before killing off that party member (causing *Phantasy Star II* fans to suffer from traumatic flashbacks). There were numerous

and interesting side quests and puzzles, and although there was no character generation there was an advancement system. Also, the game allowed the player to customize each of the party member's abilities with items found throughout the game. What pulled people in from outside the CRPG fan base was the large amounts of short animated clips and superb sound score by composer Nobuo Uematsu. Not only was *Final Fantasy VII* an amazing achievement for CRPGs, it is also considered by many outside the genre to be the best game of all time.

The Decline of Story CRPGs

Although fans were flooded with products of high quality storytelling during the end of the 90s, the quantity dropped off in favor of MMORPGs and action CRPGs such as *Dungeon Siege* in the first few years of the new millennium. Even Black Isle moved towards more action and less story, starting the *Icewind Dale* series in 2000 using the engine created for *Baldur's Gate*. Creating a highly detailed background in a computer game added more cost to development, and companies began to make the conscious decision to concentrate more on technological innovations.

The second game to bear the title *Neverwinter Nights* was published by BioWare in 2002, and was a perfect example of the technological approach. The game was beautiful in graphic detail and translated *Dungeons and Dragons* pencil and paper rules smoothly into computer form. *Neverwinter Nights* was made to be played on-line by a dungeon master who would create his own campaign using the game editor and then invite friends to log-on and use their generated characters. BioWare also promoted the individual development of single-player campaigns from fans that sent their work throughout the Internet to be enjoyed by others. The game was a commercial success for these on-line accomplishments, although the packaged single-player campaign created by BioWare was a shallow, repetitive hack-and-slash. BioWare had abandoned storytelling, depending on the creative energies of the fan base to take care of the rest.

Some companies elected to create new game engines and developed decent storylines, but then cut game play. Big Blue Box developed *Fable* in 2004 for the XBox, and an expansion that came out a year later. The game let a player choose to be either a good or evil character and allowed for a large selection of character customization. They also added an aging affect, which was a nice touch, but was strange to watch since the main character seemed to be the only person growing older. This $50 game could be completed easily within ten hours, and that includes the added content from the expansion as well as finishing each side quest. Many CRPGs were becoming notoriously short affairs, but the lack of playing time in *Fable* bordered on the ridiculous, especially as you could watch your character go from small child to elder swordsman in one sitting.

A similar cost-cutting measure came to the attention of gamers when *Knights of the Old Republic II* was published by Obsidian in December 2004 for the XBox and 2005 for the PC. The main character was a fallen Jedi in the *Star Wars* universe who begins to regain lost powers after being forced to battle agents of the Sith. The player witnessed the start of an engrossing storyline

Questions with Dashus, Member of Team Gizka, who are restoring the lost segments of Knights of the Old Republic II.

In your estimation, how much of the originally planned game was lost? How much will you restore and do you plan on adding anything extra?

Depends on your definition of "lost." Game development is not as cut and dry as many think it is. Plots are tuned and retuned throughout the development cycle especially for complex games such as RPG's. There are a couple quotes laying about, I believe of Chris Avellone, the Lead Designer, talking about how, after E3, they realized they wouldn't have enough time to complete the game as it had been planned out so they were forced to cut M4-78, the droid planet. With it went literally all of the plot associated with [droid party member] G0T0, he was reduced to "sidekick," and all other plot points had to be rearranged. It's hard to give an exact percentage since many things were likely reincorporated in a different form. But if we're going by the "original original" plot for comparison, probably 15% was lost with another 5-10% being reincorporated. As for us, we won't be restoring everything. As an example Obsidian had a marvelous idea for the endgame where influence and/or alignment and/or other decisions would change who the final boss would be. As such they had lines for both of those characters in the end game but they each only have partial voice-overs (VO) for the sequences. In an effort to prevent the restoration from going on indefinitely we've limited ourselves to restoring cut dialog only if a) the character never speaks (in which case we can record all of that character's VO) or b) the cut dialog has VO (and of course if the dialog is useful in explaining stuff). So since we don't have enough VO to restore the second boss we'll be sticking with the one in the game. We'll probably restore about 80-85% of the cut content and we don't plan on adding anything new if it can be avoided.

The work you're doing seems pretty intensive. What motivates a group like yours to spend so many hours restoring the lost game segments?

Insanity. Kidding, of course (I think). Honestly I'm not sure. For me it's the chance to improve something I already enjoy. I enjoy optimizing and streamlining things and most (if not all) programming involves that sort of work. You'll probably get various other reasons from everybody else (and perhaps some of the same).

What is the official position of Obsidian Entertainment in regards to your work? Are you worried they might pull the plug on your work, like Square did to the Chrono Trigger Resurrection project?

There is no "official position" on us as far as we are aware. We've thus far been allowed to work on the mod and have a thread on Obsidian's forums and that's the extent of our connection with them and them with us. Chrono Resurrection was in a slightly different situation than we are. That group was literally attempting to make a carbon copy of the 2D game in 3D, whereas all we're doing is a lot of programming to make stuff that already exists in the game files work/appear.

that had a stronger intensity than the game's prequel, then suffered through a horrible last quarter of the game.

At the end, the main character was dropped alone into a dungeon crawl as the game seemed to forget the existence of most of the other party members. Forum discussions of the lackluster ending prompted users with computer know-how to access the program script and discover files that were never used in game. These files showed details of the fate of the lost party members that would have greatly strengthened the storyline if added. Instead of an excellent game, players were left with a mediocre product that felt as if the soul had been ripped from it.

Although the official word is that Obsidian decided that the extra content was extraneous, the word from the Internet rumor mill says that LucasArts and Obsidian published an unfinished product in order to make the Christmas rush. Rumor also has it that Obsidian wanted to create a free patch for the PC version that would have restored the lost contents of the game (adding about 20% more content), but LucasArts refused to provide the money. Either LucasArts didn't want to admit it cut content, didn't care about the poor ending, or it felt that the patch would be unfair to XBox users.

Who do the consumers blame, though? Obsidian for not completing their product in time as required by contract, or LucasArts for letting an unfinished product be released so that they could try to make a fast buck? It is hard to decide, since neither LucasArts nor Obsidian released official comments on the situation. What is known is that CRPGers who sought games with enchanting plotlines felt forgotten.

Seeing the Whole Picture: Perception vs. Reality in the CRPG Community

Log into any CRPG forum and you can read what the fans say about the future of the genre. Within a short time you'll find comments about how CRPGs are dying, with the blame normally being thrown at action CRPG or MMORPG games. Some of the comments are so angry and vitriolic that I expect some of these commentators are to be found on street corners with signs declaring the end of the world is upon us (or maybe the end of Sosaria). But despite the lumps CRPG fans have taken recently, there have been some important game developments over the last few years some may have missed.

Unlike the *Ultima* series, Sir-Tech concluded its *Wizardry* series on a positive note in 2001, successfully modernizing their first-

(C) Bethesda Softworks. Image used with permission. The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind game had moments where the graphics were visual pictures of artistic beauty. Sometimes it was worthwhile to walk around just to enjoy the scenery. Of course, something nasty would frequently mar the vacation by jumping out and trying to kill you.

person technology and leaving its older fans with a warm feeling of nostalgia. This game, *Wizardry 8*, came nine years after Sir-Tech's last game, *Wizardry 7: Crusaders of the Dark Savant*. The game play of *Wizardry 8* is a hack-and-slash affair, but with a strong background story and several interesting possible endings. What Sir-Tech went through to produce this game is the real tale, however. The company suffered through a lot of financial problems that delayed the completion of the game, and had to sell off property rights to buy time to finish the product. Afterwards, the people at Sir-Tech decided it was time to take their well earned profits and call it quits, but still dedicated time for their fans by developing patches to the game before the last lights were turned off.

Bethesda Softworks published *Elder Scrolls: Morrowind* in 2002, and was incredibly successful with the CRPG community. The game was the same price as *Fable* and *Knights of the Old Republic*, but allowed for greater environment control by the player, many more NPCs to interact with, and a couple hundred total hours of game play if the player explores the entire world. There was some criticism about the slowness at the start of the game, as the character is set free without knowing the main goal until hours into the scenario.

This was considered an innovation of storyline, however, as the player had to slowly reveal clues in various quests and side-quests before the danger to the kingdom was finally discovered. With NPCs who moved and reacted to the character's actions, along with good voice acting, *Morrowind* made the player feel as if he was the hero uncovering a secret plot. *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* has also come out this year, and performs like *Morrowind* with better graphics and a faster pace.

Sony Computer Entertainment decided to announce that they would make their next *Final Fantasy* game a MMORPG, and published it as *Final Fantasy XI* in 2002. Their last two single-player titles (*FF IX* and *X*) suffered from mediocre sales, and the company decided to ply their famous title onto on-line gaming. Fans began to wonder whether this reflected a permanent direction for *Final Fantasy*. They will be pleased to find that the next couple of *Final Fantasy* games will be once again single-player affairs.

Many didn't notice the superb, but almost forgotten, *Kingdom Hearts* game, which blended Disney characters with past titles from the *Final Fantasy* worlds. Most CRPGers who saw the game raised a wary eyebrow at the endeavor, but *Kingdom Hearts* was a surprise win for the fans of single-player CRPGs. This linear game did an excellent job of making the player relive his childhood memories, and it was heartwarming to watch the Disney character interact with the main character in manners that were loyal to the feel of the cartoons.

The experiments in technology being worked in current MMORPGs also bode well for both single-player and on-line fans. *City of Heroes* was published by NCSoft in 2005, and was very successful with both on-line and comic book fans. Together with the profitable action CRPG, *Freedom Force* (Irrational Games, 2002), it further shows that such games do not have to be high fantasy to attract fans.

Guild Wars is the MMORPG that isn't massive. It was published in 2005 by NCSoft, but avoided the problems that come with allowing large numbers of 'heroes' in each campaign by limiting each game world to eight or less players. Instead of an on-line game where each player is one hero among many equal peers, each player is a hero with few peers, which allows a greater feel of importance for the subscriber. Oh... and unlike other on-line games, *Guild Wars* has no monthly fees.

Published by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004, *World of Warcraft* is probably the most popular MMORPG at this time, and has been experimenting with quick, but numerous side quests as an innovation to questing. This adds to the addictive value of the game, as players convince themselves that they have time for one more quickie before hitting the sack. *World of Warcraft* is also tinkering with the advancement system, such as making quests a preferable way to raise levels instead of repeatedly beating up on the same monsters.

We're Taking Over

Fans of CRPGs shouldn't get too bent out of shape about the popularity of the action CRPG. The action CRPG has not killed the storytelling CRPGs, but instead has helped to move CRPGs into the mainstream. The most popular products of the last few years have come from the *Grand Theft Auto* series. The last title of the series, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, was published by Rockstar North in 2004 and has so many elements from the genre, that it can be considered a CRPG. The game has a skill advancement system, strong NPC dialogue with the main character, diverse character customization, and a solid plot line. Although it is placed in a modern setting with an anti-hero, rather than a high fantasy setting with a heroic protagonist, it is has more elements of a CRPG than *Diablo* or *Dungeon Siege*.

Also, several CRPGs are in development and will fall into our laps in the next few years. Obsidian Entertainment and SEGA of America have just announced that they will be developing a new console RPG for machines such as the Playstation 3, but are keeping the details secret for now. Obsidian is also developing *Neverwinter Nights 2*, with promises of streamlining the game editor, as well as creating a better single-player campaign.

BioWare is developing two titles, one for the action CRPG fans and another for those who prefer better storytelling and puzzle solving. *Mass Effect* will be an action game with a futuristic, sci-fi setting, and should be worth a look as they also plan to make a diverse galaxy to explore. *Dragon Age* is another title that will be in a high fantasy setting based on a world and ruleset developed solely by BioWare's staff. With the problems game companies have had collaborating with large companies such as LucasArts, this may be a trend beneficial to all of us. That said, an unconfirmed rumor states that BioWare may publish the next MMORPG for the Star Wars universe under LucasArts. Hopefully BioWare has a clause that states they may take as much time as they need to complete the game.

Technology in the Next Ten Years

Recently, we've been hearing all about the next generation console systems. The buzz sounds nice, but all we are really getting for our money are more powerful consoles, which

translate to better graphics and interfaces to set-up surround sound. Hopefully the increase in technological capabilities will not hinder the budget spent on creative stories. There are segments of technology out there that will go beyond the sight and sound improvements in gaming. Nintendo, for example, has to be admired for taking a particular risk. Realizing that it might not compete with the visual power of the XBox 360 or the Playstation 3, Nintendo has decided to focus on a new hand controller instead of internal memory. This hand controller acts and looks like a small TV remote control, possessing two simple buttons, instead of the complex, bulky gamepads that we've come to expect. The controller has a sensor inside, which registers the player's hand movements so that they may be mimicked by the character in game. Imagine plugging in two of these controllers into a console, generating a character and giving him a shield in the left hand and a sword in the right. Now you set up your game so that your right controller handles your sword swing, while you can simulate blocking motions with your left-hand controller. Your character's movement and facing is handled by direction buttons on either controller. This is where technology will take us next.

Some other ideas may be a mixed blessing. Bethesda Softworks has created a downloadable patch that you must pay for in order to attain. For a few extra dollars, a player may purchase new equipment in the *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* game. This idea has the potential for both "good" and "evil". Bethesda Softworks has sold a complete, solid game. Anything they create, such as horse armor, or perhaps extra items, is a bonus and not necessary for a player to enjoy *Oblivion*. Also, if interest is high enough, we can expect Bethesda to continue making extra content as long as its profitable to do so, something that all of us CRPGers would love to see after we complete an entire game that we loved and start to suffer through withdrawal. On the "evil" side, expect less scrupulous companies to publish incomplete games and then charge for the content they should have placed in the first place. Will such a thing happen tomorrow with a game you buy? Probably not. Will it happen sometime in the next ten years? Yes, but companies who try this will fail to gain customer trust and loyalty.

Finally, companies are attempting strong innovations with computer monitors. It is unlikely that virtual reality headsets or eyepieces with visual displays will ever become popular, since most people prefer not to have something over their head or eyes. However, people are still comfortable with monitors and will soon see improvements in style and image quality. HDR (High Dynamic Range) screens are being designed which will be the next breakthrough after HDTV technology. This technology will offer a slight increase in pixels, but a much greater increase in range of color. The ability to show a wider range of colors will bring a stronger vividness to both the television and computer monitor experience. Currently, the Industrial Light and Magic and Sunnybrook companies are among the leaders in this new field.

Other companies are reviewing how to bring the virtual reality experience to the computer monitor. One solution being developed is a monitor that stretches in a half-circle around the user, allowing for a panoramic effect. This will allow gamers to see threats or puzzles in their peripheral vision, adding to the realism. This type of monitor has little importance for office work, but should be a hit for those that work with imaging technology and for gamers. Of course those of you with a larger wallet will be able to enjoy these new technologies sooner than the rest of us, but everyone should anticipate a trickle-down effect that will make some of these gaming goodies more affordable in the next decade.

Conclusion

The claim that computer role-playing games are becoming a genre of the past is ridiculous, and should be recognized as such. CRPGs cannot be considered to take place solely in a high fantasy setting, nor do they have to focus on repetitive combat. Games such as *Grand Theft Auto* show how CRPG elements have greatly infected other genres. MMORPGs dominate the on-line game community. Also, series such as the *Elder Scrolls* and *Final Fantasy* are still going strong for the single-player fan. Future technology should allow for a greater sense of interaction with virtual worlds, an advancement especially suited for the CRPG community. Instead of dying out, the computer role-playing game is slowly dominating the industry.

Author's Bio

James Quigley has been playing video games ever since he discovered the Atari 2600 many years ago. Due to having a tiny bit of a life, he had to limit his time to one genre: computer role-playing games. A graduate of the US Air Force Academy and a recent visitor to Afghanistan and Iraq, he has an appreciation for tactical simulations generated by a computer. He is currently finishing his Master's Degree in Early American History. James Quigley has also been an editor for the *Silven Trumpeter,* and has written for Dog Soul, the Wanderers Guild, and Steampower Publishing. He is currently teaching school in Trier, Germany while trying to start a career in fictional writing. James is starting a new family with a newborn daughter who is gifted with strength of both will and lungs. One day James may rediscover sleep.

NPCyclopedia
Psionics

by Eytan Bernstein, Matthew J. Hanson and Sean Holland

So you have purchased the Psionics Handbooks, and one of your players has decided to use a psionic class. You want psionics to be part of your world. The problem is that you use a lot of pre-made modules, and those don't include a lot of psionic characters.

Whatever your needs, if you use psionics and you use NPCs, this book is for you. NPCyclopedia: Psionics features eleven different psionic NPCs. Each contains a detailed background, adventure hooks, combat tactics, and statistics for every level from 1 to 20.

d20
system

Uncommon Rewards

by Pike Stephenson

Dividing treasure at the end of an adventure is an experience every player eagerly looks forward to. When a character receives his first magical item or coffer filled with gold, a sense of accomplishment settles upon all involved. A great and glorious reward befits the hard work and effort put forth. But after the 10th or 20th haul, treasure can begin to lose its luster:

"Who wants the *+2 longsword*?"

"I've already got one for a backup."

"My sword Cleaver won't allow me to carry anything but him."

"Give it to the mage."

"What am I going to do with it? Slice cheese?"

Shiny coins and magical treasure can only excite characters for so long. But fear not! Alternatives exist that aren't as flashy or extravagant, but which will leave a lasting impression. Not all rewards must revolve around combat or filling the characters' ever-deepening pockets. Rather than dropping another *+3 vorpal dagger of life drinking* on the characters, why not try something more common? Sometimes, the simplest rewards can be the most gratifying.

Try out these four alternatives, each of which offers its own unique flavor and opportunities to enhance the roleplaying environment: titles, badges, provisions and favors.

Titles (Monikers of Pride)

Titles come in many forms, from simple words denoting status, to longwinded phrases related to a specific moment. Four basic styles can influence how you develop and use titles: character-specific, event-related, regional and race.

How is a title a reward? Status has its perks. Local nobility might actually give characters the time of day, or the characters could be sought out for further adventures solely based on their new reputation. Certain doors that were formerly closed could open a crack from time to time as the need arises. If the characters adventure often within the area where they were rewarded, the new status could have a lasting effect. Rubbing elbows with the fictional elite makes for more interesting gaming.

Character-specific titles come from duties and services performed by the characters. Typically, gracious barons, city stewards or local town leaders grant them in the form of a ceremony. When there isn't enough coin to properly say thank you, bestowing a title offers special prestige that the common journeymen would not have. Titles can be as simple as one-word names that relate to the character type. Calling warriors Blades, Lancers or Shieldmates can be a tremendous honor among the fighting community. For priests and wizards, titles such as Sage, Faithlord, Banisher or Smiter would work quite well. Just as British royalty bestows the title "sir" among its favored elite, these titles can carry a lot of weight throughout the gaming world.

Using words synonymous with "good," "worthy" or "successful," you can develop a line of titles to bestow upon the characters. Valiant, Honored, Goodfellow and Master express accomplishment. Master itself can be a steppingstone to greater titles such as Swordmaster or Spellmaster.

Titles don't even require real words to sound impressive. Playing in a fantasy world opens the doorway to a plethora of languages that can sound cool, impressive and intimidating. Why not Trok, Loryx, Phatyma? There are no limits to the imagination.

Event-related titles can come from small, rural areas that enlisted the characters' help to face a specific threat. These small communities have little to offer other than their gratitude, so they would try and win the characters' favor with a title. These could refer to major battles, cataclysmic events or sweeping changes in the local political topography. Generally, the title should reflect upon the entire group instead of singling out a particular character or profession.

Slayers of the Waking Dead, Saviors of the Amber Plains, Heroes of the Homestead and Guardians of the Goblin War reflect the event and carry a distinction that fuels the muse of most bards. In smaller communities, the character shouldn't expect much in the way of perks to the title, but every time they arrive in town, an entourage of excited children and star-struck locals is sure to follow.

Regional titles are monikers that transcend a single town or city. They still lack true power, but are recognized throughout the territory and possibly beyond. This has its advantages during long travels or passages through borders protected by their appreciative benefactors.

In rural settings filled with marauding nomads and barbaric tribes, animal titles could show allegiance to a particular group.

On Titles and Power

Not a single nobleman worth his weight in copper would knowingly allow any title of power to be bestowed upon a commoner. Perks are one thing, but power is more precious then life itself. Give them their baubles and silly titles to amuse and please, but nothing more. So while a character may easily earn titles depicting prowess and skill, it is rare that he will be granted a title of Lord, Baron or other true nobility.

Bearclaw, Hawkeye, Wolfpaw – all match an aspect of an animal and denote an affiliation but not an integral connection to a tribe. Friendly relations with tribes and races that don't understand the subtleties of negotiating would save the characters from a fierce spearing.

Racial titles come from a cultural perspective. Similar to regional titles, these would resemble objects or beliefs that a race holds dear. An example would be the classic dwarven race. Brew, battle and building are cultural icons that would influence the words and types of titles they would grant. Calling a human warrior who helped protect a mine from collapse or invasion "Ironheart" would exemplify the dwarves' passion for metallurgy. Other possible ideas would be Forgeborn, Sternblade or even Silverstein – for protecting a cache of untapped kegs.

On the opposite end, a race such as elves that holds beauty, nature and magic in high esteem would incorporate these loves into its titles. Orcbane and Oakfriend are two examples. Their love for beauty could also lead to naming outsiders after precious gems. Malachite and Bloodstone are semiprecious gems that denote a friendly attitude between recipient and race. Topaz and Fire Opal are more expensive gems that show a deeper bond. Ruby and Sapphire would be the highest honors.

Badges (Emblems of Glory)

Badges are symbols of honor to be worn with pride – or secretly – to visually identify a character to a specific task, event or even allegiance to a community or cause. Badges come in all shapes and sizes: patches, painted shields, pendants, rings and even tattoos. In large cities or regions controlled by powerful nobles, these badges would carry a simplified version of the ruler's heraldic crest, showing servitude toward the regime. In some cases, tabards would be granted to wear over characters' armor and gear. If the tabards don't suit the character, hand-sewn patches could be added to their ensemble. Also, where time, or magic, permits, shields could be embossed with the coats of arms to brightly display the crest.

In smaller regions and towns, sewn patches or even placards crafted from beaten brass or copper – or whatever metal is readily available – would suffice. Where coin is tight, the badges would appear crude, the metal not as clean and prepared as you would find in well-equipped smithies. Yet the badge would still be something to be revered.

Jewelry has always been a prominent staple in fantasy roleplaying and fiction. Torques, necklaces, crowns and rings have adorned many characters and designated them as something of importance. Depending on the wealth of the area, these items would range from colored beads laced along a leather thong to elaborate pieces of silver and gold encrusted

with precious gems. Pendants can be easily pinned to surcoats and shirts, but are also easily concealable. One flash of the badge tells many tales. Signet rings, an oft-listed item in certain game books, would now hold some value after being presented to a character for his outstanding efforts.

Of all of these, none is more permanent then the tattoo. Originating from tribal lands cut away from modern civilization, these "badges" honor tribes, denote kinship and loyalty, and even tell tales of life struggles. To be honored with such a gift binds a character to that region or tribe for life — which could be handy or fatal. In some cases, characters might receive the tattoo unwillingly, not wanting to be honored or recognized for their service. As beautiful and ritualistic as they are, tattoos set the stage for a lifetime of roleplaying.

Provisions (Supplies and Demands)

When all else fails, the simplest rewards can often be the handiest and most appreciated. Offering goods and services to a team of adventures that has braved the darkest dungeons and fiercest foes may seem weak, but a warm bed and a hot meal can lift the spirits of the heaviest soul. More then a simple meal, small towns can offer free room and board for a season, stable rights in town, access to the local watering hole, small repairs on the characters' gear, or even a free item or two from the general store. Money is a precious commodity, so these services should not be taken lightly.

In large cities, access to larger provisions should always be offered. Granting characters permanent stay at one the most exclusive inns available makes for a tasty treat. Having their own weaponsmith available to hone weapons and replace favored pieces ties characters to the region so they feel like residents, not just occasional guests. Did I say residents? How about granting them a house or semi-rundown fort in a remote part of the city? A permanent structure for them to call home brings the characters back time and time again (to spend their hard-earned coin, of course). If a local nobleman knows that he has powerful adventurers on retainer, it could be a feather in his cap as well.

In higher levels of play, characters amass other things besides treasure, such as followers, hirelings and trophies from past exploits. Having a permanent residence in which to secure them offers security and stability to the adventurers' turbulent lives.

Favors (Quid Pro Quo)

Last, when pouches are empty and nothing is left to give, a simple favor could do the trick. Promises of assistance in the future, information at an appropriate time, or access to a guarded area are mere ideas that can easily fit into any campaign. Characters may not know that the person granting them the favor is of noble descent or a sly rogue looking to gain something from his favor, but if it enriches the roleplaying experience, then it is worth a mountain of gold.
As with goods and services, favors could be as simple as a promised meal or a borrowed steed when in need, to copies of secret charters or an audience with the king in times of serious trouble. The bigger the favor, the larger the reward.

Tying rewards into your game

All of these ideas can work alone or in conjunction with each other. A badge could come with specific perks, such as legally wearing weapons within city limits, perhaps without peace bonds. As the saying goes, rank has its privileges. A ring could denote a character's good standing with a local lord and grant one favor without question. A regional title could allow a character to use the services of any armorer within the territory for repairs and upgrades. Or a tattoo could magically open portals to a secret society of wizards that trades components and rare materials to PCs willing to transport their goods.

Implementing these ideas helps wandering characters establish roots, and draws them back to areas to which game masters wish them to return. As the memories of past exploits deepen, and are evoked by the presence of their rewards, players will drop the barrier and play it closer to the heart when it comes down to their characters. Having something more at stake draws a deeper emotional response.

Primarily, these rewards offer a fresh alternative to the standard bag of coins. Overall, they can and will enrich the roleplaying experience of all involved. Think back to some of your favorite movies when the heroes received their ceremonial rewards. Do you recall the swelling of pride on their faces? You can bring that to your players as well.

Spell Bazaar

by Jeff Harkness

Class Key

Asn = Assassin
Clr = Cleric
Drd = Druid
Rgr = Ranger
Sor = Sorcerer
Wiz = Wizard

Welcome! Welcome to the Bazaar!

Step lively now, I've some new merchandise just arrived that you may find of use. You have gold, correct? Good. I think you'll find these scrolls to your liking. If not, I've always got more.

Let's start with this little number. I hear it comes all the way from the Palace of the Sundered Flame, carried out in the belongings of an escaped harem girl. It was then found in the belly of a salmon pulled from the Serpens River by a fisherman. That fisherman sold it to a friend of a friend, and here it is, ready for you. Quite the journey, eh? Take a look…

Fiery Dreams. Painful dreams of burning alive become reality.
Enchantment [mind-affecting]
Level: Sor/Wiz 2, Fire 2, Drd 3
Components: V, S, M
Casting Time: 1 round
Range: Long (400 ft. + 40 ft./level)
Target: One creature
Duration: 1 round/level
Saving Throw: Will negates (See text)
Spell Resistance: Yes

You create a particularly unpleasant dream of being burned alive for a sleeping victim. The victim slowly suffers 1d4+1 points of damage each round, for a number of rounds equal to the caster's level (to a maximum of eight) as the dream becomes reality and blisters his skin. The victim may make a Will save each round while asleep to resist the effects for that round; thus, a victim sleeping through an eighth-level casting of the spell would make 8 separate Will saves. If any Will save is successful by 6 or more, the spell ends.

At the end of the spell, the victim awakes. If he took any damage, he is considered fatigued upon awakening. Spells and magical items that confer resistance to heat counterspell

fiery dreams, turning the effects back upon the caster unless a successful Will save is made.

Material component: A pinch of ash, sprinkled over the spot in which the target will sleep.

Not to your liking? Well, I never liked that one either. Fah! Death dealing in dreams? What craven mind would contemplate such a thing, huh? But it doesn't interest you? Not in the slightest? No? Well then, let's move on. Ahhh, now this, this may be more what you seek. Let me dust it off and let's take a look. The book you are looking at is no ordinary book … well, yes it is. But what it contains is extraordinary! This book was found in the tomb of an ancient king, beside the gold coffin in which he lay. Which king? I … I'm … It is not safe to say, my friend, for a curse befalls those who speak his name. But forget that for now, look at this spell. They say he used to raise his enemies as the walking dead, then punish them again in their afterlife …

Purifying Grip. Touch attacks do extra damage against evil-aligned beings and undead.
Evocation
Level: Clr 1, Pal 2
Components: V, S, DF
Casting Time: 1 standard action
Range: Touch
Target: Creature touched
Duration: Instantaneous
Saving Throw: None
Spell Resistance: Yes

You cause a glowing halo of pure white light to ring your hands, which fills the area around you with a calming peace. On a successful touch attack, this light deals 1d6 points of holy damage per two levels of the caster (maximum 5d6) to evil-aligned beings and 1d8 points of holy damage per two levels of

the caster (maximum 5d8) to undead. Evil-aligned undead are affected as undead, rather than evil creatures.

Fah! Worthless! I cannot believe I offered you that, that *drivel*! Not to a fine, discerning customer such as yourself. You are obviously men of action! You desire quality! Something truly worth your gold. You did say you have gold, correct? Good, then let me pull out this parchment and show you something truly unique.

This came to me from a … shall we say … temptress, who offered it as payment to protect her life. I know not what became of her after I saved her, but I have preserved this for many years in case she should ever return. But I can see you are a man eager to part with his burdensome gold. For you, I shall forget her pleasantries and sell this treasure …

Rebellious Skin. Skin twists as if turning inside out.
Necromancy
Level: Sor/Wiz 3
Components: V, S, M
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Touch
Target: One creature
Duration: Instantaneous
Saving Throw: Will negates
Spell Resistance: Yes

You cause a being's skin to twist and pull free of the flesh beneath, as if possessed of its own mind. The pain and tissue damage caused by the tearing of skin from muscle causes 1d6 points of damage per caster level (maximum 8d6). Any creature suffering more than 30 points of total damage from a single casting of the spell must also make a Constitution check or lose 1d4 points of Charisma permanently.
Material component: A pinch of malleable wax

Again, I have offended you! Why would a creature as beautiful as she have carried a spell so ugly? Oh, my shame! Let me put it away quickly and show you my other wares. Something not so distasteful, perhaps?

Let us forget my past mistakes as we gaze upon this ceramic tile. See the writings here? Yes? They are what you seek, I can tell. This tile was found in the refuse cast out of a wizard's tower. I dare say the old fool never even knew what he had thrown away. Bad luck for him, but for you, it could be a find beyond belief …

Flesh Knife. The hand becomes an edged weapon.
Transmutation [Evil]
Level: Asn 1, Wiz/Sor 1
Components: V, S
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Personal
Target: You
Duration: 5 min./level

Your hand hardens into a weapon, which you can then use as a normal blade. The fingers merge to form a wide knife that deals 1d6 points of damage per two levels of the caster (maximum

5d6), plus any Strength bonuses. The spell comes at a price, however: The first time the spell is cast, one of the caster's fingers withers and drops off after the duration expires.

The digit cannot be restored short of a *wish* or *miracle*; the lost finger is considered a divine judgment. Assassins after a heavily guarded mark favor the spell, especially if they must shed their weapons to get close to the target. A missing finger is considered a distinguishing mark among many assassins' guilds. Further castings do not result in the loss of a finger, although some fear an assassin's whole hand might wither if the spell is used too often.

I shall throw this one out after you leave! More death! I can see that is not what you wish to find in the bazaar. Then this, this is the one you want. It came in today, and I have barely had time to glance at it. A mud-spattered servant came to me and told me tales of kings and demons and lost loves. He claimed to be on a mission to find a princess to marry his demon prince … or was she the demon tricking men into loving her then peeling off their skin? I cannot remember. Fah! But who would believe such things? Not I! I could not stomach his lies and sent him on his miserable way! Let the truth be all you need, I always say. But still, let us unroll his offering together and fathom its secrets …

Wood Window. Create a window in wood or trees to see or throw items through.
Transmutation
Level: Drd 1, Sor/Wiz 1
Components: V/S/M
Casting Time: 1 round
Range: Medium (100 ft. + 10 ft./level)
Effect: Opens portal between trees
Duration: 1 min./level
Saving Throw: Will negates (See text)
Spell Resistance: Yes

You cause a 2-ft. wide by 3-ft. tall "window" to open on a tree or upon a wooden wall. This portal can be linked to any tree or similar wooden object within range of the spell to allow the caster to see into the new area – or to spy upon enemies. Once the spell window is opened on a wooden surface, it cannot be moved. The window that opens away from the caster glows with a silver light, making it difficult to hide from enemies (+10 bonus to Spot checks).

Spells and items may be cast through the window as long as the portal remains open. Ranged spells and weapons that enter the window appear at the second opening instantaneously. The window is two-way, however, so spells can also be cast from the destination window to reappear in the caster's window.

Alternately, two beings can converse normally through the window, as long as neither attempts to enter the portal. Their speech conveys clearly to the other. Living beings trying to enter the window from either side causes the spell to end. The being is forcefully ejected backward from the window as it closes.

If wood window is cast against a sentient plant, the creature can make a Will save to resist the opening of the window. If it

fails, the spell takes effect as described above. The creature takes no damage, and can attempt to "force" the window closed each round with a new Will save.

Material component: A slice of bark with a hole punched through it.

You have no use for such a thing, eh? You prefer your windows on buildings where they belong, correct? You are truly a wise man. And talking through this window to others? Bah? Nothing like face-to-face communication in this world. But this next number shows why that's sometimes a bad thing. Maybe it'll help you reconsider some of the other items I've displayed for you. We can always revisit them to take another look. Of course, I'll make it worth your while, a small discount for such a discerning buyer as yourself. No need to thank me yet. Look upon the wonderments held on this scrap of cloth. It used to form part of a traveling wizard's very wardrobe. Why he wrote upon his clothing, I cannot say. But I'm guessing he washed very little, eh? Eh? A joke, you see? Otherwise he'd have washed away his knowledge? No? I shall not attempt another such witticism with such a wise man as yourself. But turn your attention to this wonder …

Plague Eyes. Caster's eyes deliver a debilitating disease.
Necromancy [Evil]
Level: Clr 5, Destruction 5, Druid 6, Sor/Wiz 5
Components: V, S, M
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Close (25 ft. + 5 ft./level)
Target: You
Duration: 1 round / 3 levels
Saving Throw: Fort negates
Spell Resistance: Yes

You deliver a debilitating plague through your stare. Each character within range of this gaze attack must attempt a Fortitude save each round at the beginning of his turn. Those who fail their save contract a withering disease (damage: 1d6 Con) that strikes without any incubation period. This spell remains in effect until dispelled or the duration expires, and may not be cancelled by the caster.

An opponent can avert his eyes from the caster's face, looking at the creature's body, watching its shadow, or tracking the caster in a reflective surface. Each round, the opponent has a 50% chance of not having to make a saving throw. The caster gains concealment relative to the opponent.

An opponent can also choose to shut his eyes, turn his back on the caster, or wear a blindfold. In these cases, the opponent does not need to make a saving throw, but the caster gains total concealment relative to the opponent.

The caster can actively attempt to use its gaze as an attack action. You choose a target within range, and that opponent must attempt a saving throw. If the target has chosen to defend against the gaze as discussed above, the opponent gets a chance to avoid the saving throw (either 50% chance for averting eyes or 100% chance for shutting eyes). It is possible for an opponent to save against the gaze attack twice during the same round, once before its own action and once during the caster's action.

Looking at the caster's image (such as in a mirror or as part of an illusion) does not subject the viewer to a gaze attack. The caster is immune to her own gaze attack. If visibility is limited (by dim lighting, a fog, or the like) so that it results in concealment, there is a percentage chance equal to the normal miss chance for that degree of concealment that a character won't need to make a saving throw in a given round. This chance is not cumulative with the chance for averting your eyes, but is rolled separately.

Characters using darkvision in complete darkness are affected by a gaze attack normally.

Material component: The eye of a poisonous snake, swallowed as the spell is cast.

I, too, would turn and walk away from that pitiful offering! Who would wish such a spell? More likely to kill your friends with such as this one, am I right? No, do not thank me for throwing it on the midden heap. It is the least I can do.

But I have nothing more today that may interest you. You are truly a particular buyer. I will have to try harder, scour the very lands and seas for ancient and unusual visions that you will sorely desire. Of course, such wonders will cost a little more, but you have gold, correct? Then we shall meet again! And I shall amaze you with my latest finds and stories.

So come back soon, O discriminating buyer, and bring your friends! And your gold! And remember … the bazaar never closes!

Watch your step ...

by Jeff Harkness

Author Bio
Jeff Harkness has written or edited more than a dozen D&D adventures and sourcebooks, including *Burok Torn: City Under Siege* and *Creature Collection Revised* for White Wolf, and *Glades of Death*, *Eldritch Sorcery* and the upcoming *Splinters of Faith* for Necromancer Games.

Banek stepped lightly through the rigging, shuffling through the hanging ropes, pulling himself along the mast's crosstrees. He was already far above the wooden deck bobbing below, walking among the ship's yellowed sails. Ah, but this was his world, high above the heads of the nightwatch pacing the deck.

"Watch your step, lad."

Banek tensed. The thief didn't like surprises. He made his living sneaking through the shadows, climbing through second- and third-story windows to get at things someone else thought best to lock up at night. He'd stood on the bed amid lords and ladies sleeping, blissfully unaware of him hoisting their treasures out of hiding spots. Being caught off-guard was disconcerting – and more than a little annoying.

A low chuckle came from slightly above and to his right, from a pocket of deepest darkness beneath the swaying crow's nest. Whatever waited in there had chosen the perfect spot.

"Ease up, lad, join me. Just be careful. Some of these timbers are nothing but splinters held fast by sailors' prayers."

Banek pulled himself over a beam and slid along to the crow's nest. The man lurking in the darkness was a grizzled veteran of the seas, his skin as leathery as the warrior Durkolt's scabbard. His eyes were sharp and clear, though, and he stood easily despite the ship's back-and-forth rocking. Banek had trained with some of the finest pickpockets and cat-burglars, and this elder looked like he might have a few lessons to share.

"Emry the White, at your service, lad." A gnarled hand extended, gripped Banek's tightly. "Welcome to the truest marvel aboard the Sea Maven."

The thief grinned. A man after his own heart, more at home in the heights than amid the salty spray washing over the deck. He was finding the Maven's crew more to his liking every day. Then he got a surprise.
"You and your friends chase the dead wizard Krallis, aye?" Banek turned his head to stare at the old sailor. They'd spoken in whispers with Captain Horl about their true purpose aboard the Maven, and the "pleasure" had cost them most of their coin. But how had…? Emry chuckled again. "Small ship, lad. Whispers get heard, and passed around quicker than a sailor's shanty."

The cabin boy, Banek realized. The boy had been nearly invisible during their dealings with the captain, filling and refilling their mugs without a word, but his ears obviously worked. His mouth, too.

"We chase the dog wizard, though he now rushes to his secret home somewhere in the seas." They'd already followed Krallis across the blistering deserts of Maar, through the burning forest of Kistane. Always two steps behind. But not any more. The wizard's ship was somewhere ahead of them, plowing through the waves. They'd catch him this trip, Banek was certain of it.

"All chase something, lad, be it gold, women, or simple stories. Best you find another pursuit if you wish to live awhile longer." Emry cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. A long pale scar ran down the side of his jaw, ending just on his throat. "I gave up a chase o' my own years ago. Nearly did me in afore I came to my senses."

"We're committed to Krallis' death." Banek lowered his gaze. The mage had stolen dear friends, had tortured and killed them, then raised them as shambling horrors and sent them back to their homes. Krallis *would* die. On the deck below, the nightwatch was changing shifts. Each sailor carried a candle lantern to light his way, ghostly floating globes in the spray of the sea.

Emry seemed to read the emotions flitting across Banek's face. "I've heard that particular wizard keeps his own court with death. What good will killin' him do?" The old sailor looked down on the crew below, then gave a deep sigh. "Here, lad, I wasn't meanin' to depress you on such a glorious night. Let me show you a little trick I've learned."

Banek turned to the old sailor, who gave a mischievous smile and drew a gobbet of spit into his mouth. A moment later, he let fly. A second of nothing, then one of the candle lanterns winked out below. Cursing rose into the night air.

"Good aim." Despite his dark thoughts, Banek had to chuckle. This old sailor obviously lived his own rules here in the high places on the ship. And he had quickly and easily diverted Banek's own thoughts from the dark path of memory he'd trodden so many times before.

Below, a sudden flare of fire as the deckhand re-lit his lantern. His face flashed white in the harsh glare before the tallow wick subsided. "I'll make it two, young pup, then maybe teach you the trick o' it." Emry made ready to spit again.

The lantern went out in a wild thrash of light that left a sigil imprint on their eyes.

Banek looked at the old sailor. He stood silent, unmoving, holding his aim.

A scream rose from below.

Banek began to move but Emry was ahead of him, already scuttling down the rigging, and the thief followed. As the pitch of the screams rose high into the night, the sea-worn rigging creaked beneath his hurried passage.

The beast standing on deck was longer than the Maven's bowsprit. Banek had seen sharks before, had watched their long fins trailing in fishermen's wakes. He knew the dangers of blood-churned waters when such monstrosities were sliding through the waves. He'd once watched helpless as one of the gray beasts leap skyward in an explosion of spray to snatch a friend, flying his prized carpet too close to the waves, and vanish back into the depths with its meal.

But Banek had never seen a shark climb out of the water and onto a ship, nor the tendrils that stretched forth from the creature's back to support it. Even as the thief dropped to the deck a tentacle whipped out to seize a cowering sailor and lift him high. It wrapped tightly about the man, squeezing him limp and lifeless, then dropped the corpse into the great white's rending jaws. Blood and gore spread thick across the deck, running in streams around the beast, and still its head whipped back and forth in search of prey. Those tendrils not supporting its bulk lashed out to snatch at sailors brought running by the commotion.

Emry stepped to the fore. "Surround it, lads. Force it back into the sea if you can, and kill it if you can't."

Hesitant sailors grabbed boathooks, clubs – even a mop someone found lying against the rail – and approached the thrashing shark. Soulless black eyes followed them. Tendrils rose in a dancing cloud.

"Now, lads!" Emry moved forward with the semi-circle of sailors, raising an oar he'd swiped from the rowboat sitting on deck. "Back into the sea with it!"

Sailors lunged, stabbing with the weapons they held. Hooks and clubs smashed into the shark's thick hide, but it didn't even flinch. Tentacles shot out to grab three sailors, hoisting them over the beast. Yet more tendrils wrapped around the struggling men's legs, pulling tight. Each man was slowly torn in half, their tortured shrieks cut mercifully short. Blood dripped down, onto the shark and the remaining sailors, running thick down the swaying tendrils.

The crew of the Sea Maven backed away now, unsure and fearful. A few broke and ran, looking for cover to cower away from the fell beast. They didn't get far. The beast gathered its tendrils beneath it and leapt away from the deck. It flew above the sailors still trying to encircle it, landing amid the fleeing

men. The great white's head erupted into a tearing frenzy, ripping back and forth, shredding men into lumps of bone and gristle and drenching the ship's deck in gore.

"By the gods …" Emry was as dumbfounded as the rest, and paid for it. The great beast jumped again, its massive tail slapping down on the old sailor. Mid-leap, the creature's body slammed into one of the great oak booms holding the sail, and it fell sideways to the deck. Its tendrils worked quickly to right the beast, digging into the wooden planks. Banek stared in horror. Was there no way to stop the thing?

"What demon befouls this ship?"

Durkolt strode from below-decks, his massive sword before him as he shouted his question. Banek swore the warrior slept with the weapon cradled beside him. Durkolt stood behind the great white, already sizing up the menace. Still, he'd not seen the creature fight, didn't know what awaited him. Banek had seen the warrior survive incredible odds, but this?
The cracked boom dropped a foot lower, splintering further from where the shark had struck it. Emry's words jumped unbidden into Banek's head.

Some of these timbers are nothing but splinters held fast by sailors' prayers.

"Durk! The boom above you! Strike!"

The warrior didn't even question the command. His heavy sword swung hard against the crack in the great oak boom. The beam splintered further, the sail tightening under the weight. Then, with a great *riiipppp!* of sail, the boom broke free and dropped hard to the deck.

Right across the rising shark.

The creature's back snapped loudly, an echoing shot that rang across the blood-swabbed deck. The beast immediately stopped moving, flopping onto its side once more. The tendrils dropped

from the air to slap heavily against the deck. The heavy beam lay atop it, further crushing the beast.

Banek was the first to reach Emry where he lay in a crushed heap beneath the tail. Blood ran from his mouth into his salt-and-pepper beard.

"Did we get it, lad?" One of his eyes refused to focus as he stared upward, and his breathing was labored.

"We did, old one. We did."

Emry gave a weak smile. "Good lad."

And life faded from the old sailor's eyes.

"What the hells …?" Durkolt was running his sword through the great white's coarse skin, stabbing at any internal organs to make sure it was indeed truly dead. A few sailors were reluctantly doing the same. "There's nothin' in this thing but sawdust and chalcedony!"

Banek stooped beside the great beast. Durkolt was right. Pouring from the creature's wounds were wood chips and mystical stones. No blood. No entrails.

The creature hadn't even been alive as it rampaged across the decks.

"Sorcery?" Durkolt spat, disgusted. He had been easy to convince so many months ago, to join the hunt for Krallis.

Somehow, Banek sensed the wizard's evil hand in this creature's existence. The gentle splashes of waves against the ship's hull seemed suddenly to mock him with the mage's laughter. He bowed his head. So much death already. So much destruction wrought by the wizard. Poor Emry. Another name to add to the growing list. Banek said a silent prayer for the old sailor's soul, and vowed that Krallis would pay for this – and every other death – when they caught up to him.

And their quest continued.

Tendril Shark
Huge Construct
Hit Dice: 10d10+40 (95 hp)
Initiative: –1
Speed: 20 ft. (4 squares), Swim 30 ft. (6 squares)
Armor Class: 15 (–2 size, –1 Dex, +8 natural), touch 7, flat-footed 15
Base Attack/Grapple: +7/+23
Attack: Tendril +13 melee (1d6+8)
Full Attack: 5 tendrils +13 melee (1d6+8) and bite +8 melee (2d6+4)
Space/Reach: 15 ft./10 ft. (20 ft. with tendrils)
Special Attacks: Constrict 1d6+8, improved grab
Special Qualities: Construct traits, darkvision 60 ft., leap, low-light vision
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +3
Abilities: Str 26, Dex 9, Con —, Int —, Wis 11, Cha 1

Skills: —
Feats: —
Environment: Any aquatic
Organization: Solitary or Shiver (2-5)
Challenge Rating: 9
Treasure: Normal
Alignment: Always Neutral
Advancement: 11-19 (Huge); 20-30 (Gargantuan)
Level Adjustment: —

This swimming nightmare has the body of a great white shark, along whose back the swarming tentacles of a giant squid are sewn. The tendrils support the beast as it "walks" onto land. Within its stomach the remains of many meals lie undigested, together with the victims' equipment.

Tendril sharks are created by grafting a giant squid's tentacles onto the body of a great white shark. The squid's tentacles are sewn around the shark's dorsal fin, creating a misshapen creature at home on land and water. The creature supports itself with its tendrils while "walking" ashore; the tendrils swirl about it in a deadly cloud when it glides through the water. The shark's tendrils are often tipped with a giant squid's hooked barbs, and can rend a sailor's flesh as easily as the shark's gnashing teeth.

Tendril sharks swim the oceans, often created as guardians to protect sea wizards' lairs. The beasts use their tendrils to clamber up the sides of ships to attack sailors or to fling the unfortunate men overboard for other tendril sharks to rip to pieces. Many dockworkers tell tales of tentacle-bedecked great whites leaping from the bloody waves to strike down sailors before vanishing again into the deep.

Some sailors say an eccentric puzzle designer crafted the first tendril shark, then had the secret stolen from him by a necromancer eager to create willing guardians for his island tower.

Combat
Tendril sharks attack with their ripping teeth and waving tendrils. Anyone caught by a tendril is likely squeezed until it can be fed into the beast's gnashing teeth.

Constrict (Ex): A tendril shark deals 1d6+8 points of damage with a successful grapple check.

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, a tendril shark must hit an opponent of any size with a tendril attack. It can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, it establishes a hold and can constrict.

Leap (Ex): A tendril shark can propel itself 20 ft. upward or forward from a standing position by flexing its tendrils. The creature can alternately whip the tendrils while in the water to shoot itself up to 20 ft. out of the waves and onto the decks of ships.

Beyond Alignment: Adding Moral Complexity to Your Game

by Stuart Broz

Many people play roleplaying games in order to escape from the moral ambiguity of real life. They want to sit down, roll some dice, kill some goblins, take their stuff, and feel good about it. Perhaps the only personal growth that they are interested in for their characters is measured in terms of levels and experience points.

I find this to be a perfectly valid – and often very fun – way to play roleplaying games. In this article, however, I am going to talk about focusing your gameplay on serious moral questions and complicated moral dilemmas. Think about the goblin children that will starve to death now that their parents, mentioned above, are dead. This is not a new idea. People have been engaged in morally-focused roleplaying for decades. They have, however, been doing so without any guidance.

Conventional roleplaying games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and White Wolf's various games, tend to address morality descriptively, if at all. They may have tags, like an alignment systems or virtue scores. These tags can provide a set of guidelines for roleplaying a person with a particular sort of moral outlook, but they do not in themselves regularly raise serious moral issues.

Recently, a number of small-press roleplaying games have come to print that focus strongly on some sort of moral question. *Dust Devils* is a game set in the American Old West that focuses upon the question of whether to shoot or to give up the gun. Another Western-themed game, *Dogs in the Vineyard,* casts the player characters as gun-toting religious lawmen who travel from town to town to set things right. *With Great Power...* is a super hero roleplaying game with the tag line, "You can save the world, but are you willing to pay the

price?" The granddaddy of the indie game scene, *Sorcerer*, asks the simple question of "What would you do for power?"

These games have mechanics that are specifically designed to bring the moral issues that they are concerned with into play. In *Sorcerer*, for instance, you summon and bind demons in order to make yourself more powerful. There is no conventional limit on how many demons you can summon and bind, either in play or during character creation. Each time you summon or bind a demon, however, you risk a bit of your humanity.

This article is not designed for players of these games. Instead, I want to focus on how to ask interesting moral questions during gameplay when the game was not designed specifically around such questions.

Before you implement any of the suggestions I put forth here, talk to your players. If you don't, following the advice in this article might destroy your game. I don't want that to happen. Do your players want to be tested with morally difficult dilemmas? Are they interested in a game that asks tough questions? Do they want to have to second-guess their actions, or would they be happier killing goblins and taking their stuff?

Creating Moral Dilemmas

When creating a moral dilemma for a game, I try and remain aware of (and avoid the pitfalls of) cliché and excessive frustration.

Of the two, clichés are easier to identify. Are the player characters in a position where they have to kill a pile of babies, puppies, and/or kittens in order to save the world? If so, you have a cliché. Using clichés may be an easy way to add moral dilemmas, but "easy" is not tantamount to compelling.

Frustration is trickier, insofar as it is necessary in moderation. Any challenge is a sort of frustration, and you want your players to be challenged. The frustration brought about by an intractable moral dilemma, however, can be particularly disheartening. When planning a morally-charged situation, think about the frustration level of the dilemma before you use it. How will the dilemma frustrate the players: will it challenge

them or will it simply aggravate them? The frustration level of a dilemma can be raised to unacceptable levels when a player realizes that she can't make a difference, that her choices are irrelevant, that she don't even have a choice, or that the game master forced her into the situation. If any of these are true, your players won't find your plans for the game to be fun, and you need new plans.

With those caveats in mind, creating moral dilemmas isn't difficult. My preferred method of dilemma-creation is to play on the assumptions of both players and characters. This is a simple thing to do, and it is something that many game masters do all the time, even if it is not usually done in a morally-charged context.

In many games, players will assume that a creature described to them as a monster is better off being killed. Similarly, they may assume that attractive and helpless people exist to be assisted and protected. When you spend time describing something in detail, players tend to assume that the thing you are describing is important and that at least some of the details you describe are relevant.

Every character comes with its own set of assumptions. A barbarian from the mountains might be intensely xenophobic, believing that those who were different from him are corrupt. A career soldier might assume that every situation can be solved through the application of straightforward rules. A businessman might assume that everything is for sale and negotiable. Similarly, both players and characters learn to trust certain non-player characters, social institutions, and their own abilities and methods.

The idea is not merely to trick the players into having their characters do morally questionable things. Doing so will only run the risk of alienating your players out of frustration. Instead, challenge the moral positions that the players and their characters hold.

How will the xenophobic barbarian react when, after being left for dead by those he trusted, he is nursed back to health and nurtured by someone from an alien culture? What will he do if, after returning to his homeland, he finds that his people are planning a genocidal war against this alien civilization?

How will the rules-bound soldier react when the rules tell her to destroy something she loves, defend something she hates, and defile something she has grown to respect? How will she change when she realizes that her life has been saved by deviating from her rules – or by dumb luck?

What will the mercenary businessman do when he finds that he has grown to care so much about something that he would never sell it? How will he react when his unwillingness to compromise hurts those he has grown to care for?

In addition to challenging a character's morally-charged assumptions, you can challenge their habits. Consider the habits characters have that generally work out well for them. The barbarian may be usually successful when he charges headlong

into battle. The soldier might function by deferring to those who claim authority over her. The businessman might quite effectively make extravagant and false claims when engaged in negotiations. It is often effective to notice these sorts of habits and nurture them. Give players a reason to rely upon them and have their characters develop the habits as worthwhile tools that they will depend upon. Challenges can then be easily constructed to test and refine these habits.

A far less effective, though very tempting, method of introducing moral issues is to introduce some sort of external moral authority and have this authority reprimand the characters for their choices. This forces the characters to either justify their behavior or atone for it. Quests for atonement can be a great deal of fun, but many players will become frustrated by them, particularly if they feel that they were railroaded into performing the act for which they are atoning and did not actually make a poor choice given the circumstances. The realization that you have done something wrong is more significant if you arrive at it yourself. Similarly, the drive to atone is significantly stronger and more meaningful if it is motivated internally.

Also, forcing characters to act in a morally-repugnant fashion is more likely to cause players to become frustrated than it is to engage them. Forcing them into situations where they are faced with an interesting moral choice, however, can be a lot of fun. As a player, I hate mind-control and paralysis, as they rob me of my ability to play my character. However, if the game master in a campaign I was playing set-up a situation in which I was mind-controlled into attacking my companions, but the mind-control wore off just as I was about to land a fatal blow on a companion with whom I had an intense rivalry, I would think that was terrific. I would be faced with a great moral dilemma: do I turn aside the blow now that I am no longer under another's control or do I pretend that the control has lingered and slay my rival?

Setting out to trick your players into acting in a way that they will be sorry for later is only reliably effective when the players can look back and honestly say that their characters ought to have known better. For instance, when a band of intrepid adventurers happens along a fearful dryad who is seeking to escape a horrible monster, the adventurers might well hunt down the monster to slay it. When it turns out that the so-called monster is a civilized, anthropomorphic beaver, they should probably consider the tool belt it wears or the enormous dam, well-crafted out of polished wood, that it comes out of, and realize that the dryad might have been a bit biased in describing it in horrific terms. If they simply charge in and slay the beaverman, then that is their choice, and they will have to live with it.

Creating Morally Interesting Characters
The most morally interesting characters are often those with deep-seated but subtle moral flaws. To be effective, such flaws ought not to be simply false moral principles to which a character adheres. If they are, a player can replace them as soon as they come under scrutiny. Instead, these flaws should be deeply-ingrained habits of character. An effectively-prejudiced

barbarian character isn't one who merely holds the statement, "elves are flighty, worthless cowards" to be true. This could be easily shown to be false, given enough exposure to dedicated and brave elves. Instead, an effectively-prejudiced barbarian might be one who mocks others by calling them elves, spits whenever he sees an elf, is unable to take an elf's competence seriously, and would expect to die if his life depended on elves.

Our other two examples are also easy to put into terms of habits. The rules-following soldier doesn't necessarily think that every command from her superior is the right thing to do. Instead, she doesn't make decisions on her own well. If she doesn't have a rule that is applicable to the situation, she may flounder and hesitate out of uncertainty. Her rules-following might stem from a deep-seated insecurity about her own decision-making capabilities. She may also have a fear of taking responsibility for her own actions. If she follows rules she can blame any wrongdoings on the rules themselves, or whoever it was who gave her those instructions. Similarly, it isn't simply that the mercenary businessman believes that everything has a monetary value. He lives his life in such a way that, for him, everything does. Even if he doesn't do so consciously, he implicitly assigns monetary values to relationships, people, and tasks of all sorts. Perhaps he does this because he finds himself incapable of caring about things unless they are put into monetary terms. He might be unable to form deep emotional connections to others. To him, love might mean nothing more than that he wouldn't trade one he loved for a pile of treasure.

Developing moral flaws as habits embedded into a character's psyche works well for both player characters and many non-player characters. There is a particular type of non-player character that demands special mention, however. This is the moral authority. Most moral authorities are normal people. They may be priests, mentors, or monarchs. What makes them moral authorities is often that they speak with the voice of experience. These characters might be just as internally flawed as any of those detailed above. The difference is that they understand their flaws and attempt to compensate for them.

When portraying a moral authority it is important to remember not to take away the players' moral choices. Answering moral questions with a moral authority can shape the characters actions such that they are no longer acting based upon their own conscience, but are, rather, acting in accordance with what they have been told is good.

This is a particularly tricky thing to avoid when you are portraying moral authorities who are not mere mortals. It is possible to portray an angel or a similar character as something other than a one-dimensional caricature. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, the alignment system makes this particularly easy: there is no pure good. Celestial entities are either lawful good, neutral good, or chaotic good. These three moral outlooks can be distinguished by their flaws. The lawful good outlook might focus too much on justice, ignoring concern for relationships or individual liberty. The neutral good outlook might care deeply about individuals, but do so at the expense of both justice and freedom. The chaotic good outlook might focus upon protecting individual rights at the expense of other concerns.

These dichotomies can be generalized to hold true independent of the *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment system by realizing that instituting priorities into a moral agenda will create corresponding blind spots. In a game that encourages players to think hard about moral questions, even the angels should not be completely above reproach. In fact, providing the player characters with a reason to doubt the moral wisdom of someone who they have considered a moral authority could be a great opportunity for roleplaying moral growth.

Creating a Morally Complex Game

There aren't any secret tricks that you need to learn to put these tools into practice. Given interested players, morally-charged situations, and morally interesting characters, your gameplay will naturally begin to address these sorts of issues.

If you want to focus your game strongly on a particular moral question or issue, however, there is more to be said. In addition to designing morally-interesting characters, you may want to create large-scale social institutions that accentuate some of the themes you wish to address. You might also want to institute some rule modifications that bring the focus of gameplay onto the issues you want to be highlighted. It might be worthwhile to look toward some of the indie games that I mentioned earlier for guidance in this respect.

Author's Bio
Stuart Broz was given a strange red box filled with odd geometric devices and writing about magic twenty-five years ago. He has not been the same since. With degrees in law and philosophy, fencing medals, plans to turn doodling into an Olympic sport, and a pet chinchilla who is plotting his demise, he sounds far more interesting than he actually is.

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12 = Fair. *Some gamers would like this.*

10 = Average. *Most gamers would be indifferent.*

8 = Sub-par. *Flawed, but not without promise.*

6 = Bad. *Most gamers would dislike this.*

4 = Very Bad. *Among the Dirty Dozen.*

2 = Inferior. *Worst of the worst.*

Scoring Definitions for non-d20 products:

12 = Superior. *Best of the best.*

11 = Excellent. *Just a hair from perfect.*

10 = Very Good. *Part of a Baker's Dozen.*

9 = Good. *Most gamers would like this.*

8 = Fair. *Some gamers would like this.*

7 = Average. *Most gamers would be indifferent.*

6 = Sub-par. *Flawed, but not without promise.*

5 = Poor. *Some gamers would dislike this.*

4 = Bad. *Most gamers would dislike this.*

3 = Very Bad. *Among the Dirty Dozen.*

2 = Inferior. *Worst of the worst.*

Confrontation – Third Edition

Authors: Nicolas Raoult and Jérôme Rigal, Editor: Jean Bey
Publisher: Rackham Ltd.
URL: http://www.rackham.fr
Reviewed by: *Alisa Frisch*
Review Date: *April 27, 2006*

Reviewer Bias: I have been interested in Confrontation *since a friend first showed me the intricately painted models of the game several years ago. This game has grown immensely in popularity in the world of skirmish gaming, and I feel it is time to delve into this French creation.*

Confrontation: Third Edition is the first full-sized rulebook for the fantasy skirmish game created by Rackham Ltd. of France. Its predecessor rulebooks were clumsy, palm-sized copies subject to easy page tears and damage. The primary booklet, also titled *Confrontation*, had four supplements. One supplement was titled *Incantation*, which discussed the magicians and their abilities, while another was *Divination*, detailing the army members with "faithful" powers. These "spells and miracles" booklets were rounded out by *Fortification*, which highlighted the use of war machines in the battles, and finally *Incarnation*, which allowed you to take your Character figures on quests that would help them gain stronger traits and abilities, much like a role-playing game.

This 204-page hardback takes all the essentials of the original booklets and combines them into an easy-to-transport edition that features all the details you need to learn the game. Every army's background is explained and the rules are laid out with full-color illustrations, explaining the steps in every scenario situation, from movement and firing to hand-to-hand combat and spell-casting. The book retails for approximately $30.00.

From the Back Cover

The fantasy skirmish game for 28mm miniatures.

At the dawn of the last age, every confrontation counts!

Confrontation Third Edition includes:

•Revised and improved *Confrontation* rules with loads of graphic examples.
•The rules of the *Incantation, Divination*, and *Fortification* supplements.
•A full list of all abilities.
•A review of the game effects of the previous editions.
•New spells, miracles and artifacts.
•The official tournament rules of the "Conf'fédération du Dragon Rouge."

Confrontation Third Edition, requires *Confrontation* or *Rag'Narok* miniatures, as well as a metric measuring tape and several six-sided dice.

Presentation

The main background of the book cover is all black, with thin white lines creating borders for both the text and the illustrations. The front cover displays *Confrontation: Third Edition* in bold white lettering. Smaller letters beneath it state "the fantasy skirmish game for 28mm miniatures." Centered on the cover is an airbrushed illustration of a werewolf-like member of the Wolfen of Yllia army clad in fighting attire and bearing a large axe, surrounded by members of the Cynwäll Elf army as a battle rages on. The back cover has the same title lettering as the front and also three photographs of the actual painted miniatures in action during a game scenario. The Rackham symbol, which is a red dragon in flight, marks the spine and the bottom of both the front and back covers.

Content

Gamers who are initially impressed by the book's exterior design may be possibly overwhelmed by the interior pages. There are 13 chapters covering all the rich details of the game. Each page is given a cream-colored background with a faded white edge, or a faint mass of swirls and lines highlighting a corner. The black text throughout the book is accented with terms of particular importance, highlighted in bold black, blue, or brown. Almost every page contains a photograph, illustration, or sketch of some of the game's miniature fighters. The finished pieces are incredibly detailed, with Rackham's artists blending dark shades and metallic sheens with brighter colors and flesh tones, leaving some pieces to look either exceptionally exotic or disturbing. There are also colored charts and symbols to outline damages, wounds, spells, or other items that you would need to reference quickly during a skirmish.

The introduction pages discuss the three paths that the 17 available armies come from. One is the Ways of Light, for the more noble fighters. The armies that walk a path to evil follow the Meanders of Darkness, while the remaining armies have more neutral goals and follow the Paths of Destiny.

Chapter 1 displays the basic supplies needed to get ready for a game. The reference cards for army members and their special Characters are visually explained, along with cards that may come with certain figures or can be purchased separately, such as additional spells and miracles. The small cardboard counters needed to represent attack situations, wounds, or dispersion effects from a spell or weapon are also examined and explained.

Chapter 2 goes into the vital details of explaining the general game rules and also what the symbols and numbers shown on every fighter's reference card means. The size and ranks that the fighters are given affects how they perform in combat, as well as if a fighter has a ranged weapon or also what happens when hand-to-hand combat occurs. Finally, this chapter details the use of six-sided dice for the game and how they are used for a figure to attack and defend himself during the game.

Confrontation goes through a series of action sequences and rolls as the game progresses, and chapters 3 through 6 follow all of those sequences step-by-step. The strategic phase prepares players to deploy their armies in certain locations on a game board and then go through the activation phase to bring their army pieces to "life" for the battle. Different types of movement can affect a fighter and his attempted target, such as charging, running, or assault. Chapter 4 discusses the rules for firing weapons in more detail, as well as how obstacles on the game

board can affect the battle. The hand-to-hand combat rules, which can easily cut down a player's army if strategy is not carefully planned, are given attention in Chapter 5, which illustrates how the dice can be placed for a fighter to attack or defend himself from an enemy. Chapter 6 concludes the sequences by showing what happens at the end of a game round. This is where magicians can replenish their mana reserves, the number of cardboard counters they have that represent universal magic or elements such as earth, air, fire, or water, which they need to cast certain spells.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss two influential factors in *Confrontation*: Fear and Leadership. Certain army fighters can have exceptional backgrounds or origins that force their opponents to make Courage or Fear tests when they confront them, so as to see if they will stay in combat or flee. The chapters also discuss what happens in the "worst case scenarios" where a player finds his figures routing and then trying to rally to rejoin the game.

The non-physical weapons are brought to life in Chapters 9 and 10, which highlight Incantation and Divination, or the spells and miracles of *Confrontation* and the magical beings that can control them. These sections give extensive lists of the many powers, what they can do to whom, and what is required to use them. Chapter 10 also shows how certain "faithful" fighters can greatly influence the other members of their army with the auras surrounding them.

Chapter 11 brings to life the war machines and their abilities on the battlefield. It describes how the machines are "activated," how they move, the crews and ranks they require to function, and how they take damage. The game is then given a final outline in Chapter 12 with "How is a Game Played?" This brief section crunches down all the details from the previous chapters for a quick reference, and even offers sample scenarios for the different battles you can conduct.

Chapter 13 is strictly an appendix, offering 74 pages of Abilities for both fighters and war machines, a listing of special equipment available for use, the rules for artifacts and incarnated Characters, spells for all the armies and special Characters, and a description of revisions from the previous rulebooks. For more experienced players, there is a page discussing the rules for playing a *Confrontation* tournament.

Conclusion

In my experiences with my gaming group, the *Confrontation: Third Edition* core book has been well-received and is a welcome relief from its smaller predecessors. The artwork makes it exceptionally pleasant to look through, and the rules are given the visual attention that they need. This attention did not work well with the smaller rulebooks, since the vast amounts of text put a strain on readers, most likely leading to many headaches and eye strain. The book's success is proven further with the release of its first expansion book, called *Dogs of War*.

Archetype: Core Book
Body 11 (Game Mechanics): There are more steps to consider than your typical skirmish game but they are explained well.

Mind 11 (Organization): Remarkably well organized. A lot of detail is crammed into a surprisingly small hardback.
Spirit 12 (Look and Feel): The fantasy visuals that have made Rackham very popular make this book a great conversation piece for both new and veteran gamers.
Attack 10 (Value of Content): $30 for 204 pages – Rackham games and supplies can be high priced, but the value is worth it.
Defense 9 (Originality of Content): New players to the game will be impressed by the originality of each army, although veteran players familiar with the original rulebooks will not see many changes, except for several new figures and their descriptions.
Health 9 (Physical Quality): This hardback will be subjected to a gradually weakening spine and a few frayed edges over time; although the smaller amount of pages may help the book last longer than most large volumes of core books.
Magic 9 (Options and Adaptability): The *Confrontation* game line has created many new figures and accessories since this review was published, so there are now more possibilities available than what is in this book.

Mage: The Awakening

Authors: Kraig Blackwelder, Bill Bridges, Brian Campbelll, Stephen Michael Dipesa, Samuel Inabinet, Steve Kenson, and Malcolm Sheppard.
Publisher: White Wolf Publishing
URL: http://www.white-wolf.com
Reviewed by: *Adam Stuart*
Review Date: *May 30 th, 2006*

Reviewer Bias: The reviewer has loved the World of Darkness and specifically Mage: The Ascension *ever since he learned of them. However, it should be known that the reviewer is very easily bribed.*

This setting for the new World of Darkness comes in a hardbound 394 page book that's sturdy and flexible enough to survive a few good whacks. The inside art is provided by Micheal William Kaluta with the cover Richard Thomas and Katie McCaskill.

From the Back Cover

It has been said "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite." That is what you see now.

The eye of your soul – the ajna, the third eye – has opened. You see by the light of the Watchtower that stands on the infinitely far shore beyond the abyss. You have awakened and the mysteries are unveiled before you.

Your imagination is as real as your fist, and your will is unfettered.

This is power.
This is Magic.
With it you will remake the world.
-Arethusa, ordo Scala Argentum

Presentation

The cover displays a shattered stone tablet surrounded by either water or magical energy-probably both. Scattered among the illustrations is a gold print which adds a nice effect, but can make some of it hard to see in very bright light. The illustrations are done fairly well, providing the reader with some of the harder-to-imagine sequences in the text.

Content

First off, this is a setting book for the new World of Darkness, so you're going to want the core WOD book before you start messing about with cosmic power. Also, if you are going to want to enjoy *Mage the Awakening*, let me make one thing clear: forget everything you've read about the old *Mage: the Ascension* now. Otherwise you're going to have a rough time. Have you forgotten yet? Good, me neither. Now we can get on with the rest of the review.

The Introduction and Chapter One describe new incarnation of *Mage*. Sadly, the bad guys have already won. The Technocracy-ish folks, known now as the Seers of the Throne, are the terrestrial guardians of reality who have remained since their bosses invaded and killed pretty much everyone in supernal realms, and took over. I say "pretty much" because a group of six mages were able to keep magic on life support via the Watchtowers.

Mages on earth use their magic solely by the grace of the everlasting watchtowers. While the fact that magic can now never die is a comforting thought, it does eliminate the tension of the earlier Mage series, where you were fighting to keep magic alive as it gasped its last breath. Whether this is a good or bad thing is wholly dependant upon the Storyteller.

The Mages are classified in two ways, as is the style in most of the new WOD settings. The first way is which watchtower you are affiliated with. Different watchtowers reflect the strength of each of the ten magical arcana within the mage. Each watchtower is stronger in two of the ten spheres, while handicapped in one. The other classification is political. How a person feels that mages should act and see the world defines his magical order.

Chapter Two runs you through the character creation process. Here, the WOD core book is essential. However, it does give you a good example of how to create your very own mage, and even provides a handy summary of important mage-specific information to prevent hours of flipping through to find one obscure rule for character creation.

Chapter Three details the magic system. The system is very efficient in regards to keeping arguments among players to a minimum. The system rigidly defines some bits and eliminates hours worth of arguments from the game. Squabbles over whether an effect was vulgar and rote cost are now explained in detail. The only problem is that the system may be a bit too rigid, especially in its description of paradox effects. Fans of the old series will scratch their heads and think of myriad ways several spells could be passed off a coincidence, but will be frustrated that the effect is automatically vulgar. A nice presentation effect that deserves mention is the art at the top of each page, symbolizing which of the watchtowers rules the arcana depicted on the page.

Chapter Four covers the Storyteller's side and what enemies you'll be throwing at the hapless players. The chapter does a good job of defining how magic society works, (or how it doesn't in some situations) and how to set the mood for the players and some ideas for stories. The downside is the antagonist portion. While the Seers of the Throne are active, they seem more preoccupied with infighting than fighting mages. In truth, your most dangerous opponents are insane half-mages bent on purging the world of mages. Since their ability to use magic is crippled by their refusal to accept a different world view, they aren't terribly horrifying opponents. The Storyteller is going to be hard-pressed to come up with someone the characters will love to hate.

Appendix One lists an interesting addition to the mage series: Legacies. Inheriting a legacy means that the cute lil' mage is finally growing up in magic society. He now has the opportunity to begin shaping his very soul into something greater. Admission to a legacy is on a watchtower and order basis, so your choice is somewhat limited. However being part of a legacy means that new powers can be used by the mage. Well, that's not true. The mage uses previous powers, but at little or no cost to the mage. Not even paradox. While this may seem a twink's dream come true, roleplaying is required in order to continue to use the powers, so it's actually something that more serious role-players can enjoy as well.

Appendix Two provides a ready-made setting for your mages to start off in. The city of Boston is one with a rich history for a game of *Mage*, considering the whole Salem debacle took place in the area centuries ago. It also provides an interesting political story and some NPCs for your use and abuse.

Conclusion

Mage the Awakening is a good story and a solid efficient system of magic. The only problem is that if you're a fan of the old series you'll have to get past the fact that it's not *Mage the Ascenion*.

Archetype: Core Setting Book

Body 10 *(Game Mechanics)*:Nice, sleek and sexy, if a bit rigid in some areas.

Mind 8 *(Organization)*: Everything's where is should be, although the index isn't as comprehensive as it should be.

Spirit 6 *(Look & Feel)*: The stories are there, but there's very little meta-plot driving them.

Attack 9 *(Value of Content)*: At almost ten cents a page, I'd say it's good buy.

Defense 7 *(Originality of Content)*: A lot of bits from the old Mage have found their way in. Considering that this is at it's best when distanced from the original, this is not a good thing.

Health 10 *(Physical Quality)*: Stood up to the "Smack it with Something Heavy" test with flying colors.

Magic 10 *(Options & Adaptability)*: Unlike the old World of Darkness, the new version is fully adaptable between games.

Exalted Second Edition

Authors: Alan Alexander, Rebecca Borgstrom, Carl Bowen, Zach Bush, Joseph Carricker, John Chambers, Genevieve Cogman, Dawn Elliot, Michael Goodwin, Conrad Hubbard, Peter Schaefer, John Snead, Andrew Watt, & William Wulf

Reviewer Bias: I have been a huge fan of Exalted *for many years. I am happy to see it cleaned up for a second run. This title was received for review purposes though I plan to eventually use it for play as well.*

Exalted Second Edition revisits the core book and rules for *Exalted* without making many sweeping changes. This 400+ page beast of a hardback contains wonderful artwork from a great number of individuals – sadly, far too many to list! Needless to say, all of the work fits as perfectly as it has in past *Exalted* titles.

From the Back Cover

Do not believe what the scientists tell you. The Natural history as we know it is a lie, a falsehood sold to us by wicked old men who would make the world a dull gray prison and protect us from the dangers inherent to freedom. They would have you believe our planet to be a lonely starship, hurtling through the void of space, barren of magic and in need of a stern hand upon the rudder.

Close your mind to their deception. The time before our time was not a time of senseless natural struggle and reptilian rage, but a time of myth and sorcery. It was a time of legend, when heroes walked Creation and wielded the very power of the gods. It was a time before the world was bent, a time before the magic of Creation lessened, a time before the souls of men became the stunted, withed things they are today.

This is the story of that time.

This is the story of the Exalted.

Presentation

The cover features five individuals in a fairly typical 'hero' pose. In the rear is a dark skinned, very muscular man with a punch dagger on the back of his hand. He is so buff that he needs no shirt (who in their right mind would tell him 'no shirt, no shoes, no service'?). The rest of the individuals are in front of him. On the left is a light skinned, white haired woman who is holding a book and what appears to be a dagger. She is wearing a beautiful dress that is a number of shades of purple. Next is a light skinned, dark haired young man in a martial arts-type stance. His clothing really looks like a stereotypical rogue-like outfit but in blue and gold with a brown cloak. Next is a character that most exalted fans will quickly recognize-a dark skinned woman with long, dark, braded hair. She is wielding a bow and is dressed in scant-fitting, dark colored armor. Finally, on the right we see a bald, light skinned man wearing green and silver armor and holding a large golden sword.

Behind these individuals is a large red section of cover with its own image-a battle scene. Even beyond that is a collage of characters. This composite image wraps around to the back cover.

All of the cover art is from Imaginary Friends Studio featuring Kendrick Lim with cover design by Matt Milberger.

The internal artwork is all color, thankfully. This lets all of the detail of the manga/anime style show through very clearly. The color of the interior goes well beyond the artwork, however. The text boxes and flow charts really 'pop' thanks to the choices of color, but are not overly distracting (as they could easily have been).

Content

All of the base rules and story needed to play can be found within this massive tome. The history and current setting story, character creation, rules, equipment, powers, etc. are also all found within.

There is a ton of background on the setting from the past to the present (well, in-game present). There is a lot that is covered but it is so well written that it does not drag on. In fact, I was pulled further into the setting thanks to this reading (and I have read it before with the first edition!). I refuse to spoil any of the background for any of you (and there is just way too much to

write about anyway) but I will tell you that much of it is original and all of it is entertaining and vast.

The kinds of characters are also covered in good detail. There are five different castes or 'classes' that the base game uses of play. These are the five castes of the **Solar Exalts.** Those of the **Dawn** Caste are grand warriors. **Zenith** Caste members are natural leaders. Members of the **Twilight** Caste are scholars and sorcerers. Individuals belonging to the Caste of **Night** excel in stealth and cunning. Finally, the members of the **Eclipse** Caste are the greatest socialites.

Of course, characters are far more than classifications. These people, the Solar Exalted, are powerful. They are so powerful that at one point they had all but taken things over. That was than and this is now, however. It has been a long time sine that point. They were hunted and destroyed. Only recently have these beings returned to bring balance (no, not like the Jedi kind) to things. Once, the scales were tipped in their direction. Now, they are tipped in another. The Solar Exalts are still hated (thanks to being feared), sadly, so life is not easy – even with their great powers (roughly described below).

The basic Attributes and Abilities are much like those in any other d10 White Wolf product so I will not go into their detail. I will say, for those unfamiliar with the d10 system, though, that it is a very clean and fluid system. In fact, it is one of my favorites.

The most special things about Exalts are their **Charms**, their special abilities. There are all sorts of charms – those that that assist directly in combat by aiding in attack (such as Accuracy Without Distance) or allowing one to practice a potent martial arts style, those that will influence individuals to make life easier for yourself or harder for your enemies (like Excellent Emissary's Technique or Venomous Whispers Technique), and even those that grant access to powerful areas of sorcery. All in all, there are over two hundred charms, martial arts strikes, and rings of sorcery presented here.

Of course, the world is only filled with normal people and Solar Exalts? No, there are a couple of other kinds of exalts and plenty of other kinds of nasty creatures lurking around for any adventurer worth his salt to find plenty to do with his time.

An adventurer need not rely upon his wits (and cool powers) alone. There is also plenty of well-illustrated and described equipment available – magical and mundane. Once again, there is so much that I am not getting into it all. I will leave it for you all to discover when you read the book.

Conclusion

At $40, *Exalted Second Edition* gives every penny's worth. This can really be seen even before reading the title if comparing the cost to the page count – 400 pages for only $40! This is a solid roleplaying game. Period. The fiction, the art, the system – it all fits perfectly! This is White Wolf's number two all-time best-selling line for a reason. It deserves to be! The fiction pulls the reader into the world. The art makes it feel over the top but real. The system does not hinder the game or the story

If you don't already have *Exalted*, what are you waiting for? Go out and do your self a favor, buy it. This book covers so many must-haves that it almost seems unfair! Heavy anime combat action, fantasy setting, pre-World of Darkness. Looking for an amazing game? This is it! End of Story.

If you do have *Exalted*, this is still not a bad purchase. Sure, you are already familiar with most of it, but this is cleaner, prettier, and heftier than the first edition core book.

Archetype: Core Book
Body 10 *(Game Mechanics)*: I love the flow of the system.
Mind 11 *(Organization)*: It makes prefect sense to me.
**Spirit 10** *(Look & Feel)*: The illustrations that are contained with are quite nice (and fitting to the feel of the game) and are in great number. I don't see it getting any better
Attack 11 *(Value of Content)*: Great value for the page count and the quality! It can only get better if they gave it away!
Defense 7 *(Originality of Content)*: Some new detail but much has been rehashed from the 1st edition.
Health 10 *(Physical Quality)*: Strong binding, durable cover (even the image resists scratches).
Magic 11 *(Options & Adaptability)*: The number of different types of stories that can be told in this setting are amazing!
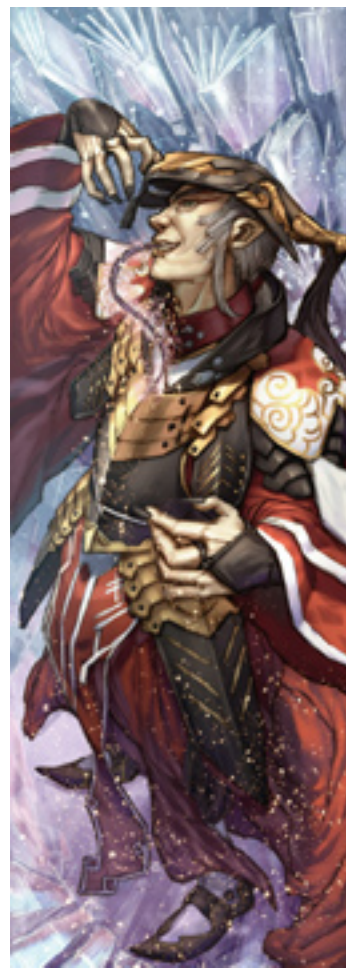
Exalted 2nd Edition: Storyteller's Companion

Authors: Alan Alexander, Zach Bush, Joseph Carriker and Peter Schaefer.
Publisher: White Wolf Publishing
URL: http://www.white-wolf.com
Reviewed by: *Adam Stuart*
Review Date: *June 4 2006*

Reviewer Bias: I have never had a chance to play Exalted*, but have heard good things about it from pretty much everyone. However, it should be known that this reviewer is very easily bribed. Also, I was given a text-only copy PDF, and therefore was unable to review several facets of the product, such as hitting it with something heavy to see if it breaks.*

From the Publisher

Creation is a dangerous place, and there are no more powerful magnets for danger than the returned Solar Exalted. With a list of enemies dating back to the First Age, the Lawgivers will be hardpressed to survive long enough to set the world aright. Of course, the only thing the Solars are better at than making enemies is forging alliances. If the Solars can succeed in making more friends than enemies in this Time of Tumult, perhaps a new golden age may be built after all.

This book includes:

• An exhaustive breakdown of the five Exalted types, their powers, their motivations and the military forces they may bring to bear

• The Mandate of Heaven rules, which allow players to play out the fate of nations

• More than 30 Exalt templates, complete with Charm packages, from which Storytellers may quickly construct antagonists for any *Exalted* series

Presentation

Not applicable. As I said, I was given a text-only copy, so I was unable to see the presentation of the printed product.

Content

First off, you'll want the *Exalted 2nd Edition* core book before purchasing this. The primary focus of this book is help in the creation of antagonists for your stories, and each of the book's chapters helps you in the creation of a different type of exalted

to hold up as the villain. In each chapter, different charms, combos, and templates are included for the varying factions of *Exalted*.

Chapter One gives the storyteller important information on the Dragon-blooded, including their methodology, what difficulties they face in the wyld hunt, their upbringing and their general outlook on everyone else. (Or, to be more specific, exactly how and why they hate everyone else.) Also good are Dragon-blooded charms, combos et al. This chapter is a must if you're ever planning on having one of these guys show up uninvited.

Chapter Two covers the Lunar exalted in all their savage glory. It details how they fight a guerilla war against the Terrestrial Exalted, and provides more information on their savage curse, and their shapeshifting abilities. Information about creating a Lunar NPC is presented, including how to play in different aspects of their condition, such as the "shapeshifter's tell." All in all, a very enlightening read.

An oddly short Chapter Three is about the Sidreal Exalted. The primary function of the Sidreals, the maintenance of the loom of fate, is covered, as well as their organizational structure, and internal struggles between the Gold and Bronze Sidreals are covered in more detail.

Chapter Four details the Abyssal Exalted (a.k.a. the really, really bad guys). It shows their origins as normal Solar exalted, tortured into submission by the Neverborn, and gives rules as to how this can happen to some your less unfortunate Solar PCs. The powers of the Deathlords are outlined, as are the Deathlords themselves and their individual motives.

Chapter Five is, oddly enough, about running other Solar Exalted as your antagonists. There is very little new information

in the chapter, as most of the information on the Solar Exalted is contained in other books.

The appendix Mandate of Heaven is probably one of the most interesting parts of the book. As both a minigame for the Exalted campaign, or a full-fledged game of geopolitics, it excels. The minigame has rules for fusing it with the rest of your Exalted campaign, with players taking command of nations vying for power, and how the actions of each country affects the Exalted campaign, and vice versa. (Useful in situations where major population centers have been destroyed by your characters.)

Conclusions

Not a bad read, but it comes off as more of a "Big Book of Enemies" than a true storyteller's guide. Other than the Mandate of Heaven appendix, no real plot revelation, no coverage of the gods in creation, and no guide to creating non-Exalted NPCs are given, which one would imagine would be important stuff for a storyteller to know.

Archetype: Storyteller's Companion
Body 9 *(Game Mechanics)*: Lots of new charms of all types for everyone. Get 'em while they're hot.
Mind 9 *(Organization)*: The organization is very straightforward and easy to understand
Spirit N/A *(Look & Feel)*: Not applicable, sadly.
Attack 8 *(Value of Content)*: It brushes around eleven cents per page, so it's a good value.
Defense 7 *(Originality of Content)*: I'm not terribly familiar with the rest of *Exalted*, but from what I've read it seems pretty good.
Health N/A *(Physical Quality)*: A shame really. I guess I'll have to hit something else with a heavy object now.
Magic 7 *(Options & Adaptability)*: As it only describes how to create enemies, it's somewhat limited in it's application, but at least it's something that you will be needing.

Shadows of Shinobi

Development Team: Giltônio Santos, Rafael Rocha, Tiago Marinho with additional design from Rafael Barbi & Richard Garrell
Publisher: Secular Games
Reviewed by: *Kyle Thompson*
Review Date: *May 14, 2006*

Reviewer Bias: This title was given to me for review purposes and eventual play use.

Shadows of Shinobi is a d20 supplement that details the mysterious assassins of the shadows that many know only as the ninja. *Shadows of Shinobi* is 36 pages long (including the one page OGL) and contains everything one would need to know to introduce ninja to their campaign. The publication can be bought for $5.00 at edge. rpgnow.com.

From the Publisher

Warriors from the shadows shall arise to wreak havoc in your campaign!

This book is a new release by Secular Games, focused on different aspects of the well-known Ninja myth, taking it to new ways and views that will improve your experience and surprise your gaming group. We offer new variants

and interesting concepts that will take the Shinobi to a whole different world, and yet, keep their original concept of mysterious, fearsome and stealthy warriors and assassins!

Shadows of Shinobi is a 36-page PDF that will optimize the choices of players and DMs alike whenever the Ninja are taken into account. Inside, you will find:

- An explanation of the Ninja myth and its aspects;
- 5 new prestige classes, each exploring a different facet of the Shinobi;
- New feats to improve the Ninja abilities;
- New spells and magic items for warriors who can only be seen when they so wish.

Shadows of Shinobi is presented in two formats (one landscape full-color and one B&W vertical printer-friendly), with cover and interior illustrations from the best artists brought to you by Secular Games.

Presentation

After their first publication, *Advanced Character Guide: Arcane Archer*, one should expect fantastic and beautiful art from Secular Games' publications. They do not disappoint in *Shadows of Shinobi*. The cover portrays a ninja who is crouching on the roof of a building and drawing his sword. In fact this is a part of a larger picture seen later in the book. The interior artwork depicts various ninja and ninja weapons. Artists for the publication include Ig Barros & Paulo Henrique (the cover artists) and more.

The Content

Shadows of Shinobi is very informational and contains a lot of good material. First, there is no ninja core class in the whole publication. This is understandable because many ninja core classes can be found all over the internet and in many other publications. Also, the many different schools that taught ninjutsu (the ninja style of combat and stealth) in Japan taught many different versions of ninjutsu.

To account for the many different styles of ninjutsu, the book includes five prestige classes and information on the schools and clans behind them. *Shadows of Shinobi* contains four new feats, a slew of ninja weaponry, four other ninja items, a new spell and three new magic items all based on the ninja tradition.

The Shinobi Traditions

The book opens with detailed descriptions of five ninja (shinobi) traditions. It details the Igasaki, the Inpo, the Sakruazuki, the Shattered Lotus, and the Hidden Temple of Bishamon. Each of the traditions has its own section that opens with a short story about the members of the tradition, and then continues with the history of the style.

The short stories are all very well written, each giving a good idea on how the school works and the tactics of their assassinations.

The histories of all of the schools are helpful in determining how to roleplay a character from each school. Both the short story

and the history aid in determining the style of combat and play that characters from the school should undertake. They also aid in determining personality for the character as well.

The Prestige Classes

This section of *Shadows of Shinobi* contains five 10-level prestige classes, each one based on one of the schools given in the previous part of the book. The five prestige classes are the Igasaki Disciple, the Inpo Agent, the Lotus Warrior, the Shadow Saint and the Worm Doctor.

Each of the presented classes appears to be well balanced and none of the classes is simply a repeat of another one of the other classes in disguise. The Lotus Warrior prestige class is one that sticks out in my mind that may be implemented as an antagonist for an Eberron campaign, or any noir campaign for that matter. My personal favorite is the Shadow Saint, a class that represents almost the opposite of what most feel a ninja is like. The Shadow Saint is actually a benevolent ninja that works to foil other ninja in their assassination attempts.

The Feats

The four feats that are presented in *Shadows of Shinobi* are exceptionally useful to any aspiring shinobi. The feats are all well balanced in mechanics terms and each follows the shinobi flavor well.

The Tools

This section presents several weapons and other items that prove useful to all shinobi and some may prove useful to rogues and other classes as well. Many of the weapons are very interesting, especially the multitude of shuriken presented here. Each type does something different.

The section, as stated previously, also presents four different items that are very interesting. The nagedeppo is one of the most interesting of the tools presented. It is basically a mundane example of alchemist's fire.

The Magic

The final section of *Shadows of Shinobi* presents one new spell and three new magic items. The spell, *turn back strike*, is very useful, though perhaps a little high in the spell level.

The magic items, however, are wonderful and imaginative. A particularly good example is Kogiro's disguise kit. The item is very useful to ninja and other classes that infiltrate and disguise themselves. The kit allows the owner to create six different masks, each with a different power.

Conclusion

While not all DMs will find this book useful to their campaigns, *Shadows of Shinobi* contains material that could be adapted to most campaigns, whether it is the items and feats or the prestige classes or all of it. Most of the ninja classes and equipment could find their place in most forms of society with little to no modification.

Shadows of Shinobi does have one fault, being many typos in the book. These do not make the publication incoherent, but take

away from the overall presentation of the book. However, none of them are exceptionally major or any worse than some you see from other publishers.

Class: d20 Supplement
Str N/A *(Physical):* PDF.
Dex 16 *(Organization):* Everything is relatively easy to find and in good, sensible order.
Con 16 *(Value of Content):* Wonderful. Everything you need is right here and it all works cohesively together.
Int 16 *(Quality of Content):* The content is well balanced and entertaining. It all works together to create the full shinobi experience: prestige classes, feats, weapons, magic and items.
Wis 14 *(Options & Adaptability):* A little more restricted towards Asian style campaigns, though an imaginative DM could adapt it to any campaign that needs specialist assassins.
Cha 14 *(Look & Feel):* The art is high quality and fun to look at. It fits with the overall scheme of the book and keeps it fun. My only qualm here is the minor typos sprinkled throughout the book.

Monte Cook Presents: Iron Heroes

Published By: Malhavoc Press, 2005
Author: Mike Mearls
Reviewed by: *Reuben Ternes*
Review Date: *May 10, 2006*

Reviewer's Bias: I received a review copy of this product.

From the Back Cover
It is not the sword, but the arm the wields it…

This exciting new game of heroic combat action is for skilled heroes who have no need for magic swords or arcane trinkets. Armed with their cunning, talent, and unmatched bravery, they

Here is a short description of all the classes to be found in *Iron Heroes*.

Archer: Pretty self explanatory, she uses a bow to put holes in her foes.

Berserker: Your basic barbarian. He smashes and then smashes some more.

Armiger: This heavily armored warrior likes to take damage, then use that damage a source of inspiration to punish his foes.

Executioner: A sneak-attacking, precision-based fighter/rogue. She uses sense motive to gain special combat advantages.

Harrier: A speed and agility based fighter. Very similar to the scout class in the *Complete Adventurer*, she uses blinding speed to confuse and maim her opponents.

Hunter: A tactical warrior who uses intelligence and wisdom to gain advantages in combat. He is similar to the executioner, but instead of focusing on the combatant's weaknesses, a hunter uses the environment (terrain) to gain the upper hand. It doesn't resemble the ranger as much as you'd think it would.

Man-at-arms: An uber-generalist, the Man-at-arms is the most customizable warrior in I*ron Heroes*, with access to a variety of feats and skills. He's pretty good at everything, but not specialized at any one thing. He's very similar to your basic fighter.

Thief: Your basic d20 rogue, with a few extra abilities to bring him up to par with the rest of the classes.

Weapon Master: A weapon master picks a weapon, and sticks with it. Think weapon specialization if it drank a 24-pack of Mountain Dew in less than 30 minutes.

Arcanist: The only magic user in the whole group. There isn't divine magic so arcane is the only way to go. The magic system has its ups and downs, but ultimately this class is weak at best. See below for a full critique of the magic system.

wade sword first into a savage world of high-octane adventure. *Iron Heroes*, a variant player's handbook in the tradition of *Monte Cook's Arcana Evolved*, provides 10 new core classes, expanded feat and skill systems, new combat options like stunts and challenges, character traits, the innovative token system, a new magic paradigm, and much more. Use this exciting book to supplement an existing fantasy roleplaying game or as a complete rules system unto itself.

Introduction
If you're looking for intense role-playing techniques, brand-new catchy plot hooks, and uber-powerful magical items, then

find a different book. If, however, you are looking for a gritty, realistic variant *Player's Handbook*, *Iron Heroes* is your book. *Iron Heroes* is a book designed for advanced DMs and players only, as its rules system is complex and in-depth. At its core, *Iron Heroes* is meant to give you more tools to smash things. *Iron Heroes* provides so many details on how to run a more combat-oriented campaign that it makes the *Players Handbook* look like an instruction booklet for *Lego: Star Wars*. While there are some flaws with the book, many DMs and players will find the system very rewarding, although if you plan on using more than a small amount of magic in your campaign, you'll need to do some tweaking. While *Iron Heroes* is designed to be compatible with most existing d20 systems, the book is not designed to mix and match character classes from *Iron Heroes* and the PHB. The book weighs in at 250 pages with a list price of $37.99.

Presentation
Iron Heroes is beautifully presented. I particularly enjoy the color of the cover, despite not being enthralled with the cover art. The interior artwork, done by Kev Crossley, conveys a very gritty, realistic feel, and in my opinion, is simply wonderful. Everything after the first 20 or so pages is in black and white, although this doesn't take away from the quality of the art at all. Indeed, somehow the black and white sketches seem to add credibility to the real-world appearance of the characters in the book, and in general, the artwork is well integrated into the text, giving a very natural flow to the book.

Races
Surprise! There aren't any races in Iron Heroes. Or, rather, everyone is assumed to be human. Instead of races, there are traits, which are simply feat-like modifiers that one can take that represent racial abilities. These traits represent an interesting way to mix background and racial modifiers right into the character themselves.

Classes
Essentially this book is all about combat. Of the new classes that are available, seven are warriors, two are roguish, and one is a magic user. The base classes seem to be designed so that they don't need prestige classes, at least in terms of power. While the book is all about fighting, I must admit that I was a little disappointed with the lack of variety in the character classes. There isn't even a monk. Despite this, a number of nifty classes are included that could be a lot of fun to play.

Tokens and Feats
The most unique thing about *Iron Heroes* is the way that the class abilities work. First off, characters get tons and tons of feats, and there are a multitude of feats to choose from. Special abilities are not as integrated into character classes as much as in the PHB, with feats taking the place of several special abilities. This grants your characters an incredible amount of customizability. Of course, certain classes have more or better access to feat 'trees' than others. For example, the hunter class is the only class with access to advanced tactic feats, while the armiger gets full access to the armor feats. While there are several special abilities unique to specific classes, the feat selection process distinguished classes and characters much more than your standard d20 system does.

Of course, there is one additional twist:

Almost every character class has a 'token' pool specific to that class. Throughout combat your character gains tokens. Some classes start the battle with tokens (such as the hunter), other classes earn them by taking certain actions (like the weapon master), and some classes get tokens whenever bad things happen to them (like when the berserker gets hit). Characters can spend these tokens for various in-game effects during combat, such as when a weapon master spends tokens to do additional damage, or when an archer uses several tokens to rain down fiery-archer death upon several foes at once. The tokens are a neat idea; however, keeping track of them can be a pain in the butt, especially for people who are new to the system. Each class has different actions that gather tokens, and there is about a 4-6 different ways to get tokens, depending on your class. This could present problems for some DMs.

Skills
A much higher emphasis is placed on skills in *Iron Heroes*. First off, the craft skill got a much-needed upgrade; secondly, skills are now grouped into skill groups (such as athletics, social, and academia groups). There aren't cross class skills anymore, but if your character has access to a skill group, you can spend one skill point to increase the rank of every skill within that skill group. Instead of paying to increase jump and climb separately, if you have access to the athletics skill group, you can increase your athletics group by one rank, and that increases Jump, Climb, and Swim by one rank. If you don't have access to the athletics skill group, then you can still pay one skill point to increase each skill separately. Additionally, there are skill challenges and 'stunts' that allow you to gain benefits if you take a skill penalty, such as completing skills faster, doing two skills in the same round, or performing an exceptionally heroic deed. *Iron Heroes* presumes that you will do these sorts of activities, otherwise the skill system is a little over the top.

Combat
Unfortunately, the book doesn't have many new combat rules or new equipment, but it does have a few new tricks. Now you can perform combat challenges and stunts that are designed to enhance combat enjoyment. For example, you could take a penalty to attack, but if you hit, you can knock your opponent backwards 5 feet, or you could attack at your opponent's thigh, and attempt to hamper her movement by taking an attack penalty. And apparently, if you have a high enough Tumble check, you can flank an opponent all by yourself. I was a little disappointed with this aspect of the book. I expected more given the heavy focus on combat the book has.

Since there isn't any divine magic, and therefore no healing spells, every character now has a reserve pool of hit points (similar to what is found in *Unearthed Arcana*). This pool allows you to heal yourself after battle, but is relatively useless during combat unless you have some feats or class abilities. The reserve pool system makes a lot of since to me, and a smart DM would consider using it in a variety of d20 campaigns (like d20 Modern, for instance). Thumbs up on the reserve pool mechanic.

The Magic System

The way the magic system was designed made it sound like it had a lot of potential, and I still think it does. Unfortunately, the magic system here is terribly flawed, and in my opinion, terribly written. Any hope of finding a system that actually balanced fighters and magic-users was crushed when I read the section on evocation magic. Let me start by first explaining the basic system. An arcanist has a pool of spell points that you use to cast spells. You can cast basically any spell, but are limited to how many spell points you can use on that spell by your level. In addition, you pick a primary school, secondary school, tertiary school, and then finally at 5th level you get access to all schools of magic. However, your channeling bonus is also based on your proficiency, so its hard to cast good magic with anything other than your primary school unless you are high level.

Arcanists don't memorize spells; in fact, they can cast any spell imaginable (that the DM will allow). In order to cast a spell, you must make a channeling check. If you botch your channeling check, your spell goes crazy and has nasty side effects. Just like a skill, the DM can assign a DC to the spell effect, and the arcanist simply needs to make the channeling check to perform the spell. There are a number of guidelines in *Iron Heroes*, but ultimately they're really complex and often convoluted. The system is cool in theory, but it makes effective casting nearly impossible, mostly because the channeling checks are very difficult. You should expect an arcanist to be very weak in combat relative to all the other characters.

Iron Heroes does not have divine magic. All magic comes from the same source, mana, which is simply described as a mystical pool of energy. Perhaps because there is no divine magic, the school of necromancy has access to some healing magic. In general, it's about twice as easy to heal hit points as it is to take them away. For example, if you wanted to heal 4d8 points of damage, the channeling DC is only a 9. It is rather counterintuitive, but an arcanist who focuses on healing spells can heal much more damage than an arcanist who focuses on evocation can actually deal.

In my opinion, the magic system in *Iron Heroes* has tremendous potential, but it needs a lot of tweaking and probably several playtests. However, a good DM could get very close to actually balancing magic with the other core classes from this system. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem as if multi-classing as an arcanist is a good idea, as your channeling level and mana pool will suffer a lot. This is unfortunate because I really like mutli-class spellcasters. A couple of clever household feats might help that though. The only other flaw in the magic system is that calculating the mana requirements and DCs for each spell is a pain in the butt. The charts are hard to read and it would have been extremely helpful for more examples of calculated DCs. You will need to reference the book every time you cast a spell (I would suggest pre-making several tables for your commonly used schools).

The Quick and Dirty Conclusion

Iron Heroes offers a gritty, combat intensive alternative to d20 gaming. Its focus is realistically heroic, and has many great qualities. A few of the classes are really interesting, token pools are extremely cool, and there's enough feats/character customizability to blow most people's minds. If you have a tactical mind, this book will turn your gaming table into a table-top Final Fantasy: Tactics. If you are looking for a combat intensive system, this one will certainly provide you with hours if not years of enjoyment.

Iron Heroes isn't without its flaws, though. Some of the classes aren't really that interesting, and they're all essentially warrior variants. There is no real divine class, or any connection with deities at all. Where is my divine warrior? Nothing even resembles a battle cleric in this game. There also isn't a monk, and while it is possible to build a monk through some of the other character concepts, it just isn't the same.

While the magic system has enormous potential, it is hopelessly flawed as written (and even includes some typos). Multi-classing as an arcanist would be painfully difficult, and as focused as the system is on combat, the arcanist just doesn't hold up when compared to the other characters.
However, the biggest complaint that I have against the system is that it is not simple. While customizability may necessitate complexity, *Iron Heroes* will increase the length of your battles two-fold or more. If you thought high-level combat took a long time before Iron Heroes, well then, I suggest sticking with the system you've already got. DMing Iron Heroes presents an amazing challenge, too. Trying to keep track of tokens for one character is daunting enough, but try it with three NPCs, all with different classes. No thanks.

If you're a big fan of combat, and don't mind putting forth a little more effort to get a lot more enjoyment out of combat, then consider purchasing this book. It's definitely a solid buy, but don't expect perfection. On the other hand, if you like your combats short and sweet, and aren't very good, or don't enjoy lots of number crunching and calculations, then you should probably pass on this book.

Str 14 (*Physical*) Cover looks solid to me. It's nice and thick.
Dex 12 (*Organization*) The magic section is difficult to read; other than that it is fine.
Con 14 (*Quantity of the Content*). There's a good chunk of stuff here, but some of it is standard fare.
Int 13 (*Quality of Content*). Again, the magic system provides problems. Everything else is good, though.
Wis 16 (*Options & Adaptability*). If there were any more options, I'd be complaining about there being too many options.
Cha 15 (*Look & Feel*). I'm really pleased with the artwork and the general layout of the book.

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