



Divine Right

25TH Anniversary Edition

DESIGN NOTES

by Glenn Rahman

Divine Right was originally published in 1979 and went out of print after two editions, in 1982. The game had been very popular, but its designers, my brother Kenneth and myself, expected that DR would simply pass out of sight and out of mind like so many other games before it. To our surprise and gratification, it kept appearing at conventions as a tournament game long after it had become unavailable and every now and then we were contacted by persons asking if it was ever going to be reissued. Then, more recently, the word "classic" began being applied to Divine Right and the designers dared to hope that we had perhaps managed to create something enduring. Now, thanks to Excalibre games, we are able to return Divine Right to the world in a new edition, as has been our hope for a dozen years.

Kenneth and I were already avid game-experimenters using mostly the Parker Brother's Risk system when we encountered a copy of Avalon Hill's Tactics II in the early 'seventies. Unfortunately, while there were things to learn from Tactics II, it had to be rated very lowly in the excitement category.

But the appearance of Tactics II was our alert that some interesting things were happening in the gaming scene. In the fall of 1974 this writer encountered a large Avalon Hill selection in a Minneapolis department store and bought Third Reich on the spot and, the next year, subscribed to SPI's Strategy and Tactics. Those were salad days, when even games as wretchedly-conceived as Oil War and Revolt in the East got thorough and repeated playing.

Soon the designers were gaming regularly with friends. By 1977 we realized that we had learned enough to leave Risk behind and start designing in the state of the art. The first serious effort carried all the way to conclusion was a fantasy game which we called Your Excellency.

Divine Right players would promptly recognize Your Excellency as the prototype of DR. Some of the names, the CRT-less combat system, the diplomacy system, and the identity cards were all present. Believe it or not, as early as YE we had personality cards.

I had been a frequent short story writer for the semi-pros and understood the strength that good characterization gives to a story. One night while Ken and I were play-testing Your Excellency on the kitchen table, it suddenly occurred to me to ask: Why couldn't a board game have characterization, too? The Personality card idea fell easily into place and it worked even better than expected. From that moment on, we knew we had a good thing going.

But the differences between the prototype and the eventually published game by TSR, Inc. were huge. The map looked nothing the same, being rather aus-

tere in the manner of an SPI release. There was a Elven and a Trollish kingdom true, but we had provided no magic. None. Further, we had only six special mercenaries, namely Juulute, Schardenzar, the Black Knight, Urmoff, Ogsbogg, and Hamahara. The Barbarian element was represented by nothing more than a small kingdom.

The prototype was dispatched to Metagaming of Austin, Texas. During its long evaluation period, Kenneth and I continued to sample the new bounty of the gaming world. Kenneth experimented with a different map, but we never got around to actually using it in any play test.

In the interim, we discovered the Chaosium game of White Bear, Red Moon. This game was something new in our experience - a game of heroic fantasy. A few dull spaceship battle games existed already and Excalibre had pioneered imaginative fantasy with Atlantis, while SPI had the execrable Sorcerer and there was a fantasy-tactical game called Dungeon from TSR. For some reason we had not bothered to examine the rest of the field - such as Fact & Fantasy's Helm's Deep or TSR's Battle of the Five Armies. So, within our frame of reference, we addressed the innovations of WBRM with great interest.

There was much in it we liked, though there was much which we couldn't relate to. For instance, WBRM seemed to have no clear line demarcating the world of the gods and the world of men. As a reader of mythology I could understand this - sort of. The world order in Stafford's Glorantha resembled that of The Kalevala or numerous primitive mythologies, including the American Indians, where characters grade from hero to sorcerer to god with hardly any warning were one ended and the other began. But Kenneth was a J.R.R. Tolkien enthusiast and my own fantasy tastes leaned toward Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith. In all these authors' writings there was a difference between gods and men; fantastic things were possible, but an understandable barrier remained between the different states of reality.

Further, as far as the conventions of WBRM went, it was hard for us to identify with heroes who could, like the Irish champion Cuchulain, or the Indian hero Arjuna, take on whole armies single-handedly. To our mind, a Julius Caesar might make the deciding difference in a battle with the Gauls, but could J.C. have faced the host of Vercingetorix all by his lonesome? Never! A man is as man and an army is an army. Nonetheless, WBRM had something we needed to learn - the manner in which magic might be fitted into the world of military affairs.

The Metagaming copy of Your Excellency finally came back rejected in 1978. Like most creative people, we decided that the editors involved just didn't appreciate quality and innovation. Nonetheless, months had already passed and we had some new ideas which we wanted to include into the game. Kenneth set energetically to work redesigning the map and before long he confronted me with an entirely new map done in a jolly-looking antique style, one which would be recognizable as the rough draft of the published classic. It had a colorful and richly satiric quality that would inspire much of the subsequent design, as well as much of the writing for the yet-to-be created Minarian mythsos.

Kenneth had added most of the place names written in by the time I first saw the map, and it was only left for me to help with the details and the polishing. "The Crater of the Punishing Star" was mine, as was the "Altars of Greystaff." I also contributed the names of Zorn, Pon, Minaria, and the Invisible School of Thaumaturgy. Zorn came out of a phone book, and Pon was the name of a mountain kingdom created in a story cycle of mine, only two episodes of which ever saw light of day in amateur publication. "Minaria" had been the name of a kingdom I used in an earlier bit of fictional juvenalia. I think, unconsciously, that I was echoing "Mnar," an arcane land mentioned by Lovecraft, or maybe even Minnesota, my home state.

Kenneth and I already had a sound movement-combat-diplomacy system in the original Your Excellency. What the new version required from us was magic, chrome, and detail. The gadgety devices of the Eaters of Wisdom were worked out quickly, and we took inspiration from the corpse-loving mages of Clark Ashton Smith's short stories to create the Black Hand.

Working out the new Your Excellency was amazingly easy. The new game world seemed to leap spontaneously into life. Juulute, the Black Knight, Schardenzar, Urmoff, Hamahara, and Ogsbogg were preserved, but their abilities and powers were expanded and fleshed out. Bilge Rat and several special mercenary combat units were added also. Just before we were really to finalize the rules, we came up with the Wandering People, based, of course, on Hollywood's take on



the Gypsies.

We sent the finished prototype to TSR, Inc. of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Within a reasonably short time, TSR's new products chief informed us that his staff liked Your Excellency and he was authorized to make us an offer of publication.

Once the development staff began to work on Your Excellency in earnest, Kenneth and I received word that the title would be changed to Divine Right. We were fond of Your Excellency, but soon grew fonder still of DR. Further, we had originally called all the monarchs kings and now were asked to come up with a wider variety of titles (aided by a kindly developer who had enclosed a long list of possibilities). We also were asked to provide some background material for the world - such as short descriptions of the kingdoms and the scenic hexes. As the seasoned fictioneer on the team, it fell to me to define Minaria.

Although the game world was created without a real background story, the outline of Minarian society came easily enough. As a fan of the theories of Immanuel Velikovsky, and the parallel idea of Robert E. Howard's Hyboria, I divided Minarian history into periods before and after the "great Cataclysm." Before the Cataclysm, the Minarian continent had enjoyed a kind of Pax Romanum, ruled by a proud, overbearing, but basically benign species of high elf which I called the Lloroi. The Cataclysm that followed took much of Minaria back to the Stone Age, but enough culture survived to allow a fairly rapid restoration of civilization. By about 500 A.C. (after the Cataclysm) Minaria had achieved about the same level of culture as Europe had possessed in 500 A.D. (though Europe had fallen to a nadir at that time, while Minaria had fallen much lower and had managed to climb back).

The developing the nonhuman races which fantasy fans know so well from Tolkien called for a special measure of care. Rather than treat the Goblins and Trolls as evil creatures befitting their origin in the mythology of the Underworld, I addressed them as alien races, different from men, of course, and rivals, but not metaphysically evil. The Elves and Dwarves came in for a little satire, to set them apart from the stereotypes already abroad in the gaming culture. I used hillbillies and gold miners to inspire the Dwarves, and a combination of Imperial China and the Third Reich to flesh out the Elves.

The background material seemed to fit the bill as far as TSR was concerned and it was published with the game in 1979, as an appendix to the rule book.

I had every reason believe that this was all that I would ever be allowed to tell about Minaria. To my delight, shortly after the release of the game, I received a request from the editor of Dragon proposing a magazine series in support of Divine Right. His idea was to publish a full-length article for each kingdom and each hero of Minaria. I estimated that it was a job which would run the length of a fair-sized novel. As a struggling fictioneer with too little demand for my work, I accepted the task gladly. Over the course of about two years I wrote approximately ten pages per month. These became a regular feature called The Minarian Legends. The editor at the Dragon soon left his job, but his successor was equally supportive of The Minarian Legends and the series continued to its logical conclusion, comprising twenty installments in all. By the time I had finished, I had some 60,000 words of a detailed history of the Minarian continent, from the Cataclysm to about the year 1350 A.C. Lately, these old pages became the basis of a full length novel, The Ship of Huisinga, the first book of a projected trilogy I which I sometimes call The Matter of Mivior, now in search of a publisher.

In any case, writing the first novel and planning others has enriched this writer's awareness of things Minarian. These include the development of the cult of Huisinga under the heroine Sankari - the most unlikely of missionaries - as well as the origin of the Tail People, the strange legacy of the heroine Trouble, and many another detail which has done much to flesh out Minaria as a real-life place.

From its release in 1979, Divine Right proved as popular as its designers could have hoped. Encouraged by a strong fan response, Kenneth and I worked up a sequel called The Revolt of the Scarlet Empire. It consisted of a map which fit contiguously to the Minaria we already knew, one which displayed the kingdoms and empires of a southern subcontinent which I called Girion. To make it strikingly different from Divine Right, we developed "the Scarlet Witch King," an entity previously mentioned in the original rules, and later again in the Minarian Legends.

We wanted to avoid the criticism that the new game was just a second Divine

Right on a new map. We offered more - much more. The Basic Game plays much like a good clean game of DR. Since fans had liked DR's naval action, we incorporated more sea and more sea power onto the new map and counter mix. An "Advanced Game" presented several scenarios in which the Scarlet Witch King (the bane of the ancient Lloroi Empire) had returned to subjugate the free kingdoms Girion under a "Scarlet Empire." Many new special mercenaries came on board, and so did many more magical devices. We created the option to "Curse" and the Scarlet Witch King was provided with enough heavy-duty sorcery to make the Eaters of Wisdom look like paupers, magic-wise.

Scarlet Empire offered a "revolt" scenario wherein the subjugated kingdoms rose against an imperial tyranny; there was a "conquest" scenario simulating the Witch King's original blitzkrieg that had swept the subcontinent; and we even had a "crusader" scenario linking the two games, featuring the armies of the north coming south to help free the Scarlet Witch King's oppressed vassals. The Witch King repayed the compliment with an "invasion" scenario, in which a secure Scarlet Empire boldly invades Minaria from the south edge of the DR map. And there was the option of a two-map super game.

TSR's new products department expressed interest in the proposed sequel and the prototype was sent out in the summer of 1980. Alas, despite our best hopes and expectations, even while SE was undergoing playtest, the decision came down at TSR to take the original Divine Right off the company's back list. That event precluded any further consideration of SE. Well, who ever said that TSR never made any mistakes. If it had done everything right it would be a thriving concern today, and not a dead company whose very name is but a thing of wargaming history.

Which brings us back to the present. As we have said, Divine Right has been called a classic. This is something every designer wants to hear, but what goes into making a classic? At the outset, Kenneth and I were simply looking to achieve a lively, playable fantasy-military system. By the indefinable chemistry of such things, we had worked out a straightforward military-political-diplomatic engine able to support both a subtlety of strategy and lots of rapid action. The system also turned out to have a remarkable flexibility that allowed a large array of special options to be introduced as add-ons. These options, such as the special mercenaries and the magical devices, convey much of the colorful and mad-cap spirit of things Minarian.

Over these years, the designers have had time to reflect upon those elements which have led to DR's enduring popularity. It seems to this writer that the most successful fantasy board games are those which skillfully distill the ideas presented by an imaginative novelist. SPI's War of the Ring and Chaosium's Elric (which merited a second edition by Avalon Hill) are two such games. Worlds created specifically for board games, by and large, have been famously disappointing. Avalon Hill's Dark Emperor and White Dwarf's Demon Lord, to name but two, offered many heroes and much magic, but they failed to engage the imagination. SPI's Swords and Sorcery, full of bad jokes and patronizing apologies for the fantasy genre, proved how little SPI, a mostly-modern-armor company stultifying us with dreary games of the West vs the East, really understood mythic heroism. Such games as theirs came, went, and were soon forgotten. The publishers tended to blame the genre itself, instead of their poor presentation of it.

White Bear, Red Moon (retitled Dragon Pass and re-released by Avalon Hill) is a notable exception to the board-game-without-a-novel. It in fact became the inspiration for a successful role-playing release, Runequest (also picked up by Avalon Hill). That Chaosium president Greg Stafford was an editor/writer in the semi-pros may not be irrelevant. A memorable fantasy board game has to be built like a good story, utilizing both character, atmosphere, and situation.

As if May, 1994 Divine Right seemed to have a chance at rebirth with a new game company in Canada, Excalibre. Its president called me up saying that he'd been hearing for years how gamers wanted the return of Divine Right. Therefore in inquired whether I was interested in a DR reprint. I was very much interested, in fact, and went on to say that I had a lot more material roughed out over the years which I'd willing work into a new edition if he wasn't determined to do it as an unchanged classic. Revision and expansion sounded fine to Excalibre and I was encouraged to let my imagination run free. Thereafter, I worked off and on (mostly "on") for four years coming up with an extensive expansion of DR and also of Scarlet Empire.

By late 1997, alas, it became clear that the Excalibre project was not going to go ahead. Originally intended to come out in 1996, for whatever reason, the



publication of DR was set back time and time again, until in late 1997 I received the dismaying notice from Excalibre that its place in the queue would be "bumped" by other games. Not satisfied to have the project relegated to some vague future date, I insisted that it was in fact high time to start active production, and in fact if the game were not released by Christmas of 1998 I would have no choice but to terminate our agreement unilaterally. Despite hopes of a successful negotiation, I never heard from Excalibre again on this or any other point and saw no choice except to terminate the contract as of late 1998.

While disappointed at the turn of events, the time-consuming revision of DR which had ensued was not exactly wasted. The mythos of Minaria became much richer, with the introduction of many more plot elements and characters. The work was worth doing and it's better to have a produce now ready to go. It is, in fact, hard to see how four years could have been better spent.

