



# Nightflyer 27

OXFORD UNIVERSITY ROLEPLAYING GAMES SOCIETY PRESENTS...

◦ EXCLUSIVE DAVE MORRIS INTERVIEW...

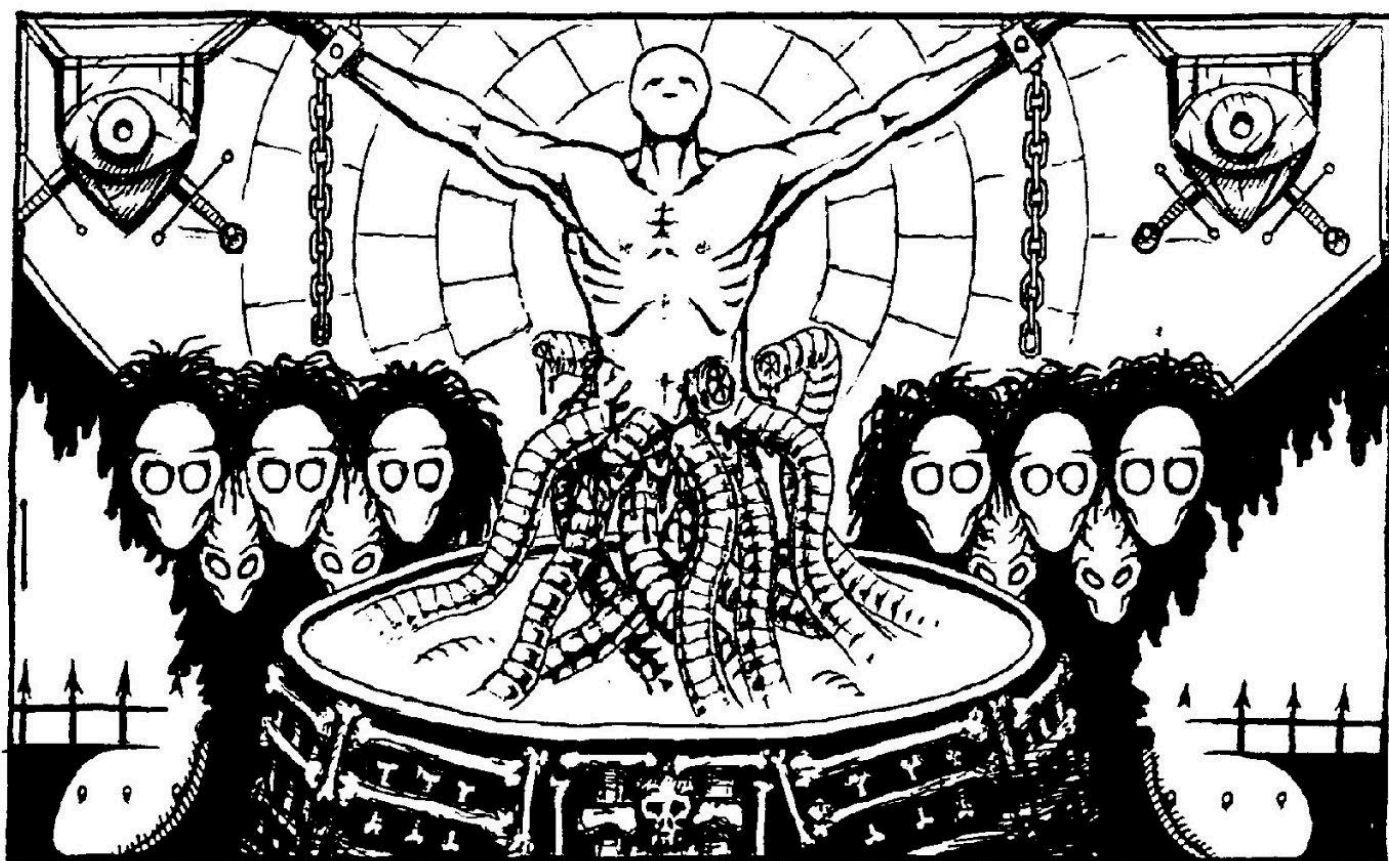
◦ 4<sup>TH</sup> GENERATION GAMES...

◦ SOCIETY GAME NOSTALGIA...

... AND MUCH MORE!

Andrew Lucas

Kelle



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# Editorial

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Another issue, another editorial - and this is the one that nearly didn't happen. After a year behind the editor's desk, I'm going to venture to suggest where we might go from here. OURPGSoc is home to over a hundred of the brightest and most active role-players in the country; it would be a shame if we had nothing concrete to show for it.

- Last year we went through hard times - we got two scrappy issues out to about 30 people. This year, we've had bigger issues than ever before, with the best material I've seen. Some of the articles have been a privilege to publish, and the artwork is as impressive as ever. Last issue I had the unique experience of cutting both articles and art because there simply wasn't space; I've been very lucky as editors go!

- *Nightflyer* is no longer a forum for tedious people to bash out unreadable articles on impossibly specific topics. It's a genuine magazine - an amateur one, to be sure, but we all have to start somewhere. *Vignettes* and our new *Comment* sections mean that more people can contribute on more varied issues - but editorial innovations mean nothing without high-quality contributions.

- *Nightflyer* is expensive. If it were a conscious choice by the membership to afford the luxury, then it would be one I'd agree with. I'm sure, though, that *Nightflyer* often continues by sheer inertia. We desperately need *Nightflyer* to be nearer to funding itself. Continued funding by advertisers is hard to elicit, but the effort must be worthwhile.

- This is a dirty job. Perhaps it isn't as much work as some other committee jobs, but it's concentrated and it's lonely - and frequently you don't get so much as a 'thank-you'. [Aaaah...] It's now bigger than ever before: some skill with computers is vital to produce a magazine that's worth looking at and it saleable to advertisers; it's also essential to solicit adverts and elicit review copies. I suggest that it's really a job for two - or for a first year who isn't going to have to edit in the run-up to finals. One could take responsibility for editing and typesetting, the other for administration, copying and advertising.

- Why don't we use *Nightflyer* as more of a link between members? We need more team effort contributions. Perhaps the magazine could publish a serialised role-playing system. A few people with that sort of inclination could not only write something creative and intelligent - they could produce something which could really sell. "Role-playing system of the Oxford University Role-Playing Society" - it might be more profitable than you think.

And on that note - salutations. I leave you with *Nightflyer 27 - The Final Typo*.

Tim

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Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily the opinions of the society, the committee, or the editor. I didn't do it, and if I did, I'm sorry. Please take that writ away.



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# The Presidential Address

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Dear people,

Well, I can't say I'm sorry that I won't be writing the next term's termcard. I am sorry that, soon, I won't be part of Oxford anymore (barring acts of God - pick a god, any god). So, I won't be taking part in the society anymore.

Long drawn out speeches are usually reserved for the banquet, after excessive amounts of alcohol. However, I would like to say something constructive (and coherent). The society has been my main social sphere for the time I have spent in Oxford. It sustains a large number of people because it is not just a Roleplaying society where people come to find games; it is a society where people come to meet like minded people. We are a strange breed (call us incestuous, certainly). RPGSoc is a niche for innovative people who are fond of a hobby which is otherwise looked down upon by the rest of society as "something that I did when I was young". Well, the world needs more strange people.

The society thrives on both new talent and encouragement from old members. Older members interested me in the society FLRP campaign for instance. It is the responsibility of older members to encourage new ones. It is equally the responsibility of new members to put forward their ideas. This is the foundation for Nightflyer, for the society Freeform games, and for FLRP. This is the best opportunity you have for telling other people your ideas, so make the most of it. This is your society (you paid the membership fee).

I could go on, but it has all been said before. So, I will just bid you all farewell... and perhaps end on a song...

<Cue Guns 'n' Roses>

Snogs

Ralph

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# THE BOY FROM THE DWARF

## An Interview with Dave Morris

*Dave Morris has been a leading figure in the gaming industry for over ten years. He was a contributing editor of White Dwarf before the fall, and author of the Dragon Warriors role-playing system. His name decorates a range of gamebooks and his credits range from 'Virtual Reality Books' to 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' stories. In 1991 he was the U.K.'s bestselling paperback author, and yet he still feels there's a gap in the role-playing market which he's fighting to fill. Tim Harford reports.*

I arrive a regulation ten minutes late for my interview with the creator of my campaign world. A note on my door directs me to my neighbour's room, and I find that a leading figure of the UK gaming industry, guiding star of my formative role-playing years, and bestselling author of 1991 has settled into a comfy armchair for a coffee and a chat with a friend of mine. It seems churlish to remove him to my room to ply him with questions - but that's not going to stop me.

Dave Morris is an unthreatening figure, of medium height, with brown hair only slightly tidier than that of an average OUSFG member. He's dressed in a casual shirt and jeans, and seems an easy man to talk to. A sore throat has taken my voice away and I sit nervously and listen as he rambles gently across the fields of gaming and games publishing. I croak in occasional agreement, and recognising the limits of my vocal powers he kindly takes the reigns of the conversation and lets me take a back seat. He settles back in his seat and talks easily, ranging over different subjects with enthusiasm.

What game does a game designer play? Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morris tends to use his own as-yet-unpublished system, *Tirikelu* - "a kind of advanced Dragon Warriors". *Tirikelu* is designed for use in Professor M.A.R. Barker's *Tekumel* world, which has never been satisfactorily linked to a workable system.

*Tirikelu* is serialised in Morris's *Tekumel* fanzine, *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder*. Why

does Morris need to edit an amateur magazine as a professional games writer?

"I like doing my own magazine. It's an opportunity to stick an idea in and see how it goes. Writing gamebooks is OK, but it's not the interesting stuff. Writing *Dragon Warriors* was the best thing I got to write, because it was the nearest to what I want to do."

We discuss the market for an independent role-playing magazine. In Morris's opinion, there's room now for a replacement for *White Dwarf*. "But it's just too much hard work," he shrugs. I nod in enthusiastic agreement - here's something I can understand.

In fact, most of the conversation is an exercise in easy empathy. Morris has a knack for expressing ideas which are subtle, perceptive - at times, brilliant - in a way which slaps you in the face. Morris professes to being "frankly not bothered" about business; but his analysis of the role-playing market and the gaps in it is far from unworldly.

For Morris, the publishing industry is a blind machine, unable to grasp the essentials of what's in a game and how they can use that. He enthusiastically sketches his latest project: the *Fabled Lands* books.

"*Fabled Lands* books are effectively plotless. They're really just a kind of programmed role-playing setting." The *Fabled Lands* books each cover a geographical area, and you can buy a few in any order and wonder from one to another and back again, interacting with the

world freely. It sounds very promising, and Morris wants to use the gamebooks as a basis for a role-playing game.

The publishers don't seem to follow his line of thought. Morris describes their wide-eyed ignorance with a mixture of genial amusement and mild frustration.

"You say, 'I'd like to do a role-playing game to go with this', and they say, 'Isn't this role-playing?'."

So the publishers still haven't got a clue?

"It's surprising, really. These books, being large format, have large covers with some very good commissioned artwork. We took them to Smiths, and Smiths said 'We'll take them,' - they wanted to do an exclusive deal - 'we'll take them, if you put *Fantasy Role-playing* on the cover'. Clearly they know this will sell, because *White Dwarf* still gets about 60,000 sales or something. They hadn't seen the interior of the thing - they only got the cover."

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**"Transworld sent all copies of Book One to the South, all copies of Book Two to the Midlands and all copies of Book Three to the north..."**

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Morris goes on to relate the problems he had with *Dragon Warriors*. *DW* was a first - a role-playing system in a small paperback format. It looked like a gamebook, but was a fully-fledged system. Book One had all the basic rules, and a scenario.



Book Two brought in rules for magic, and two more adventures. Book Three contained three more adventures. The idea was that the books meshed together, but you could buy Book One and never need another book. However, the publishers hadn't quite worked it out:

"The distribution people at Transworld sent all copies of Book One to the South, all copies of Book Two to the Midlands and all copies of Book Three to the north - so two thirds of the country couldn't do a thing with what they had."

*Dragon Warriors* was the system on which I cut my role-playing teeth, and I played nothing else for years. I'm trying not to let to Dave about that. But if *DW* was messed up by the publishers the first time around, why not re-release it?

"It's suggested from time to time. There still seems to be a lot of interest." *Dragon Warriors* did actually do very well, Morris explains. "It sold 30,000 copies, which is three times what would be considered a very successful system." And still sells well in France, I am told.

Morris explains that to really take off, *DW* needs to operate with six-sided dice, or else have the required polyhedrals packaged with it. Morris doesn't like using six-sided dice, preferring the statistical spreads he can get from two ten-sided dice, for example. His problem is explaining the need for these dice to the publishers. "I'd have to phrase it

in some clever way, 'Established role-players would look down on it if it only used six-sided dice', or something."

Morris is as comfortable talking about systems as anything else, and was one of the first to reject the AD&D mentality. "My ideal games system doesn't have any reference to tables while you're playing. We used to meet at college, say 'Let's have a game' and nobody wanted to get the books with the tables in."

So how did Morris get into game design? For the first time in our conversation, he seems taken aback, as though the question is a surprising one. He designed a game called *Mortal Combat* which was taken by *Games Workshop*. *Workshop* wanted someone to write their own RPG; Morris did that but it fell through. About this time, *Fighting Fantasy* was becoming extremely popular. All of the publishers wanted someone to write their own gamebook series, and Morris became "just one of the gamebook writers." He explains the whole story in about as many words as I have.

What does he think of *Workshop* now? His own experience is extensive.

"I used to write most of *White Dwarf* - both under my own name and under pseudonyms." Now *Games Workshop* have even abandoned their own system, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and have

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**"I used to write most of *White Dwarf* - both under my own name and under pseudonyms."**

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franchised it out to *Hogshead*, a company run by some of his (numerous) friends in the gaming industry. But *WFRP* won't even be sold in *Games Workshop* outlets. Morris is scornful of the *Workshop* reasoning.

"They reckon to make more money per square inch of shelf space out of figurines than

out of games. But that's illogical - people need a reason to buy these figurines. I think it's terribly short-sighted. People will go into *Games Workshop* in ten years time, look around, and say, 'Why would I want to buy these things?'."

What about *Hogshead's* prospects? "I think *Workshop* will give them terrible trouble - they have creative control but no vested interest apart from their percentage. A while back, I did some tie-ins with *Heroquest* - short novels with a gamey bit at the back." (*Heroquest* was produced by *Workshop* with Hasbro.) "I'd send them off to some guy at Hasbro Toys, who'd say, 'I don't like such-and-such a character's name' or something - really annoying little things."

We start to discuss current trends in the industry. Morris confesses to being "not very keen on nihilistic post-modern games". I ask him whether that's because they're nihilistic and post-modern, or because they're pretentious. "Yes, I suppose that's it. That hadn't really occurred to me," he admits good-naturedly.

"I'm sure 10 years ago I would have loved to play a game like *Vampire*, but now they're all much of a muchness," he continues. "Maybe in America people are a lot more inclined to accept talk about a 'spiritual journey'. All life's a 'spiritual journey', if you look at it in a certain way, but I don't like to make such big thing of it. I mean, that's just how people are - that's what being a person is. I don't think there's that much too it."

Ralph Lovegrove's idea of the "shrinking *World of Darkness*" strikes home here. "Once a desert is put on a map, you know its limits." He talks about a friend's theory of D&D's 'reductive taxonomy'. By describing and systematising each creature, D&D de-mystified it and made it less horrible, so they it needed something to replace it - which in turn was reduced to a set of statistics. "It's one of the things we tried to get away from in *Dragon Warriors*."





The idea, for example, that something as simple as a hobgoblin could cause so much trouble and be such a threatening figure."

If Mark Rein•Hagen isn't his hero, then who does he really admire in gaming?

"I think probably Steve Jackson." "U.K. or U.S.?" "Steve Jackson U.S." Morris adds hastily, chuckling at the confusion. "He's always had a really good grasp of what he's trying to do. I love the way, for example, his game mechanics reflect the society he's describing..."

Morris likes Greg Stafford's writing. "But he has a very maverick approach as to how it's all going to fall together. I suppose Greg is the shaman of games design, where Steve Jackson is more the scientist."

Morris is convinced that there is still plenty left to do in the role-playing market. While GURPS does very well from its series of specialised world packs - "nobody else does anything of that quality" - the rest of the industry is very compartmentalised and specialised. "The things which come out are so inaccessible - they're just *designed* to be cultish."

Morris believes the real gap is for an accessible role-playing system. "The kind of game which would work if you said to people who had never done it before, 'We're going to do some role-playing', is still not available. Like these *House Hampstead Murder* things - lots

**"They compare the referee to a director, the players to actors. If you read that, you'd say, 'Well, what the hell is all this?'."**

of people will play these but would refuse to role-play, without realising that it's effectively the same thing."

In his opinion, the stumbling block is the "investment in set-up time". He

complains, "You look at D&D and it would just make you think of some homework textbook.. It doesn't look complicated to us, but it needs to be formatted more accessibly, with sidebars and boxed text."

The man who used cartoon strips in *Dragon Warriors* to get his point across clearly feels strongly about this problem. The attempts at explanation in current games fail to impress him. He highlights the analogy often used, likening role-playing to making a film. "They compare the referee to a director, the players to actors. If you read that, you'd say, 'Well, what the hell is all this?'."

Phrased in this way, the challenge is a formidable one. "If you did a proper mainstream RPG it would be a first."

Computers will swamp the gamebook market, in Morris's



opinion, but role-playing will remain immune to computerisation. "Computerized gamebooks could really be exploited, but the publishers don't understand it. They say 'Well, we make paper things'. Gamebooks have already lost out massively. You used to be able to shift 200,000 copies of a book. Now you'll sell 20-30,000 if you're *really* lucky."

Role-playing could still benefit from computers. Morris describes his idea of an RPG on disk. Small companies could run off as many copies as they needed; it could even run on a hypercard system, organising your learning process and adding or removing optional rules as you wished.

A helping hand into the mainstream has come from an unexpected source - the National Curriculum. Unfortunately, role-playing is not yet a core subject - but it may soon be helping the nation's children in their quest for the 'empathy' so sought after in History. Morris takes up the challenge in one of his new projects: the *Life Stories* books.

"The publishers don't know it's anything to do with role-playing; but it's just a way of rolling up characters." *Life Stories* books will be in historical/cultural settings such as ancient Rome or feudal England. The reader rolls dice to discover his or her status and starts making choices based on that - a Roman Patrician might decide to join the army. He'd find he could join as an officer and his political career would get a kick-start. "You just end up with a fully detailed character," he explains simply.

"In the end you approach what David Millians is doing in the states." Millians is a teacher in America who uses role-playing to teach history. He's created a feudal world populated by characters played by his twelve-year-old students. Morris is animated as he explains the social and political structures coming alive in the minds of the children. Ultimately, though, the educational sphere is no more than a means to an end for Morris. "I wouldn't role-play for educational purposes. I would be with Greg Stafford - I enjoy role-playing in that it gives me chance to get inside a character. It's more interesting than writing novels, where you have to manipulate a whole set of characters. It's more interesting than acting, because there somebody else has already written the part... once I'm playing, I tend to be quite obsessive about it - I don't like to come out of character at all. For example, when I once played somebody's butler I sat apart from the other players and wouldn't eat when they were eating - it was a status thing."

Is he a 'method role-player', then? "When people start to analyse the character too



much, they start to do what they think the character will do, rather than just being the character. I drop a character immediately this starts to happen."

I press him to comment on our 'evil in role-playing' debate. Is there a problem in 'just being' an evil or psychologically disturbed character? Morris

refers to the confiscation of *GURPS Cyberpunk* by the U.S. secret service. "I was playing a secret policeman character at the time, and I found that I was able to see the secret service viewpoint." He leans back confidently in his chair and assumes the persona of a sharp-suited CIA man. "Mr Jackson," he draws, "You're probably right that this game is no threat to national security. I certainly can't say that it is for sure. But let's say that you're cleverer than I am - which is quite likely true - and you are able to mislead me..."

Morris' point is that through role-playing he was able to see even points of view which he could not accept. On another

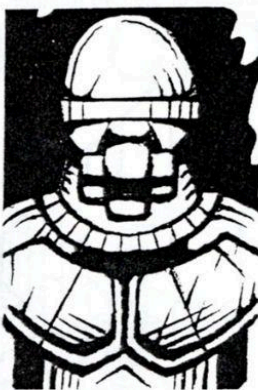
**"I'm not sure that this magical doorway isn't dangerous. Send a slave through to find out."**

occasion, he arranged for characters, who regularly used and misused slaves, to be sold into slavery themselves. He chuckles to himself as he recalls their reaction to one of their masters declaring, "I'm not sure that this magical doorway isn't dangerous. Send a slave through to find out."

He couldn't disagree more that it's a bad idea to play an evil personality. "It's interesting to see the level of repressed unpleasantness in people," he explains. "They're quite happy to slap other people down to consolidate their own position. I think it's a warning, really."

Morris shares role-playing stories freely - but there's always a point behind each anecdote: the importance of getting into character; how to

give a 'world-saving' campaign proper human interest; why it's great to keep magic to the level



where it might just be psychological trickery.

He relates the time he was one of a group let into a library vault. "When the sands in the hourglass ran out, they'd strike this gong three times - 'once for the ancestors, once for the clan, and once for the generations' - and then lock the door for another year. We *knew* we weren't going to get around the GM on this one.

"Anyway, my character couldn't read, so he's just looking at all these pictures. The GM is giving us all sorts of handouts to look at. Then he pulls out a box, and this box contains a book. But it's full of maggots - really. Because my character was the 'hard man', I had to reach into these maggots and pull out this book. That was *really* gross.

"Suddenly the gong starts ringing, and we haven't had time to look at this book. It was so atmospheric, because he knew the GM was serious - if we goofed, we wouldn't get another chance. It was *really* creepy - well, the maggots just made it gross, but *really* effective."

He still has plenty of projects still to keep him busy. "If I won the national lottery tomorrow and had that amount of money to play with, I'd love to make a film." He looks a trifle embarrassed and explains an idea for a script about Captain Bligh which he sent to William Shatner. "I wanted to approach it from a different angle. You need someone who can put into Bligh

the idea of being a trustworthy captain. So I thought: it's got to be William Shatner. I expect nothing will come of it..."

"More realistically, what I'd like to do is this proper mainstream role-playing game, published in one book, without making compromises."

We start to discuss the ideal system. It's a subject which excites us both, and I sit back as Morris ranges over different qualities the rules would have.

"I played a freeform Runequest at a convention. We had 60 people playing all over the convention, and every hour represented one day. Because there was this tendency to just improvise, people were really getting into the role-playing. I like that sort of thing - I'd really like to pare back the system to get people to focus on the role-playing."

I suggest that what is needed is a system where layers of complexity could be added or removed with ease. He immediately connects the idea to his computerised rulebook, with rules options being added in at the touch of a button. The technical challenge of building a consistent system which can operate at many levels of complexity is staggering. It has to be more than just layers and layers of optional rules.

The idea forms in my head that one might have a tree-branched skill system, with specialised skills being sub-categories of more general ones.

"What you might try is a tree-branched skill system," suggests Morris. I nod meekly. "It's the sort of thing I used in the *Virtual Reality* books." His train of thought is now gathering a head of steam. "Yes, you could get a group of people together and discuss just which rules they needed. I mean, take encumbrance, or fatigue..."

After running through a few possibilities, he returns to the serialisation of *Tirikelu*, and suggests that we do something similar with *Nightflyer*. A serialised role-playing game,



designed by the finest minds in the country? Morris is sure we could sell the idea to a publisher.

We talk a little about how times have changed in Oxford since he was at Magdalene almost twenty years ago.

"I popped into the market to take in a bit of nostalgia - they've replaced this really cheap greasy cafe I used to go to with some posh place - Beaton's Coffee Bar or something." I sympathise. "I mean this place used to be *really* cheap. It was great if you missed college breakfast."

Once an Oxford role-player, always an Oxford role-player. I realise I've not been making the coffee nearly fast enough, and boil the kettle to make the third or fourth cup. As I do, Morris describes his first encounter with our august society.

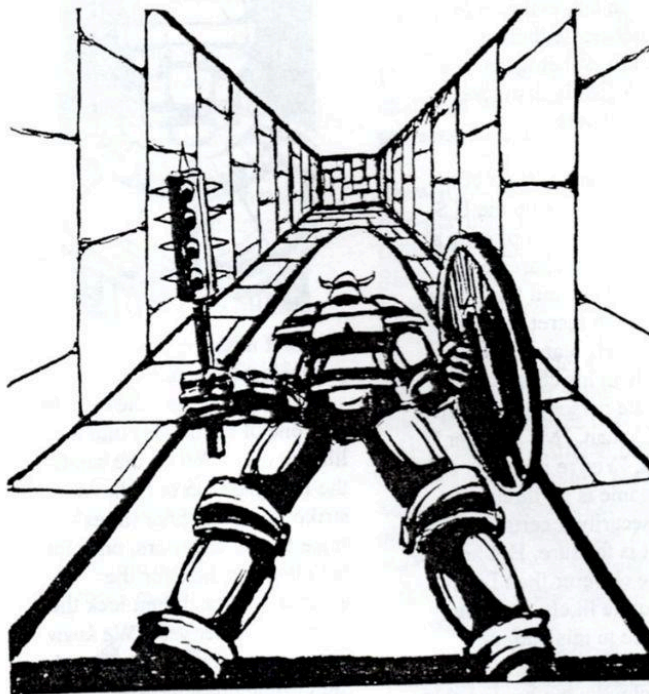
"It was in my third year. D&DSoc had had some sort of recruitment drive at fresher's fair, and 30-35 people turned up in Jesus in these huge room. They

**"I told them they couldn't possibly run a game with thirty-five people... they used to collect money off you and buy 'society copies' of White Dwarf which we never got to see..."**

were going to run just a single introductory game. I told them they couldn't possibly run a game with thirty-five people - you just can't do that - they won't get any understanding of what's going on. Anyway, everyone formed into this dungeon expedition party, this huge long line in marching order." With a few *Tekumel* companions he slaughtered six innocents, and suggested that now they were dead they might as well come and play a game with him. "They became the core of the group that I still play in today." He pauses. "Another thing I didn't like - they used to collect money off you and buy

'society copies' of White Dwarf which we never got to see. I think the whole thing was run for the convenience of the two founder members."

with animal skulls on. "I turned to my then-girlfriend and said, 'students, eh!'. Then one of them turned and shouted, 'Dave!'. I realised it was a *Tekumel* society



I describe our own society and he seems pleased at the change, asking which games are played and expressing an interest in joining in "next time I'm in Oxford". His latest gaming idea - *Ars Magica* with colleges of magicians in 14th century Oxford - seems tailor-made for our next society game. I explain how the society game operates, and he replies with an enthusiastic account of a full-time freeform game of "Vampire/Killer" he used to play. "Anyone who was vampirised had to have a shoebox full of earth which they had to visit once a day. You'd try to find out by visiting their rooms and rooting around when they went to get milk for your coffee. If you were vampirised, you had to put a red ink mark on your neck. Of course, you could wear a scarf, but then people would say, 'why are you wearing that scarf?'..."

He recalls a visit to Oxford at which he was passed by a group of people in silver masks, black robes and staves

of priests in full costume..." After a meal at the Water-Margin, they went in search of drinks. "I was staying at the Randolph - I used to be richer then - and this was the only place which was serving drinks that late. So I turned up with all these guys with skulls on staves. The Randolph were *really* unhappy."

I relate the story of *Thieves' Guild meets the Roebuck*. "Yes, I got thrown out of the Savoy and the Dorchester just for being me," he says resignedly.

A lifetime in the Savoy and Dorchester was almost his for the taking. As author of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* books Dave Morris beat Frederick Forsyth to the head of the 1991 bestseller list, with over 3 million copies sold. He seems embarrassed rather than proud of the fact. "I didn't make as much money as he did," he explains without a hint of regret, "Because I wasn't receiving any royalties - just a flat rate." It doesn't seem to bother him. Very little does.



# IT'S A KIND OF MAGIC - II

*Matthew Nesbit brings us the second installment of his survey of magic in society. Last issue, he discussed three campaign styles - where magic is secret, is an innate ability of a lucky few, or where the learning of magic is monopolised by an elite. This issue, he brings us magic and religion, and magic as technology. Comment this term is by Tim Harford and Martin Lloyd*

*All I said was, "That bit of fish was good enough for Jehovah!"*

Having magic as a component of a religion, or else as the tool of an authoritarian society, renders my earlier methods for assessing possible societies useless. It is not possible in these settings to consider what manner of individual would seek out magical knowledge. Quite simply, the political and emotive power associated with it makes it greatly sought after by all. Everyone would wish to be a member of the magic using classes, simply to have the power and freedoms available to this group. The real question in these societies is what group would actually succeed in this struggle, and what self-propagating features would this impart upon the social order.

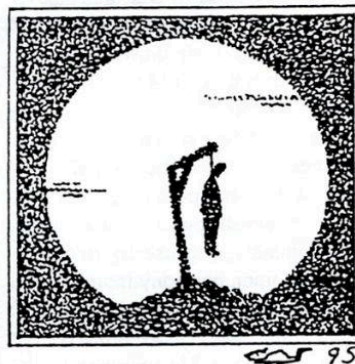
Unfortunately I do not believe we can use the majority of settings based upon parallels with western religions. (Which is, alas, the state of affairs in every roleplaying game I can bring to mind.) The reason is simply that 'Divine Magic' as it stands in most games is totally unlike western religion at the most fundamental level. 'Divine Magic' in roleplaying games makes the Gods accessible to the mundane world, and virtually turns them into spell factories. This sully of the divine with materialistic matters totally destroys the point of real world Gods. Real world Gods have always been a purely spiritual force, a source of hope and wisdom. Their inaccessibility is in fact essential to this, for they must always be pure and untainted by the real world, and a

believer seeks to become ever closer to their deity, usually uniting only in death.

Therefore, I believe it is necessary to get away from the classical picture of divine magic in roleplaying games. To explore this further, I will choose to discuss religious magics under three categories. First, worlds in which the Gods are essentially powerful beings, who are to be dealt with much as one would deal with benevolent demons. Second, worlds in which the 'Gods' are just powerful forces of nature, which have been ritualised and named as a part of their taming. In other words the 'Gods' are really just handles for an institutionalised form of sorcery. Thirdly, I will try my best to consider ways in which rather more real world religions might be enabled to co-exist with genuinely magical effects.

When the Gods are simply powerful beings, dealing with the game consequences is relatively easy. Instead of the rather thorny issue of player 'faith', in which players declare that despite all their actions to the contrary they are true followers of their cult. The issue changes to a matter of allegiance. Thus players will be trying to best carry out the aims of their deity, so that their loyalty cannot be doubted, and the magic which they seek can be theirs. These tests of loyalty can even be made rather directly, because the God probably isn't that hard to communicate with directly. In a society where everyone is acting like this, the religious magic is going to be terribly political, because social power would mean a lot to the deity in terms of followers and achieving its aims.

The social system is thus going to be one of classic autocracy, probably run by a priest elite, and with socially enforced worship of the masses at the official temples. The leaders are also likely to be inwardly cynical about the religious aspects of their world, knowing the magic for what it is (ie a trade exchange). There may also be a considerable amount of in fighting amongst the Priests, as they try to climb up the hierarchy and increase their personal standing with God.



The questions which must then be posed are likely to be of the form: *How obvious, devious, or obscure are the deity's motivations? How genteel, or bluntly machiavellian is the God (and presumably therefore its followers)? How does the God reward loyal followers? With mundanely useful spells, or with temptations, pleasures and promises? What rival deities are looking for followers out there?* The consequences of these questions are probably rather obvious, and will determine essentially how authoritarian/paranoid the theocracy is. As well as helping decide whether the theocracy is a highly organised body, a small

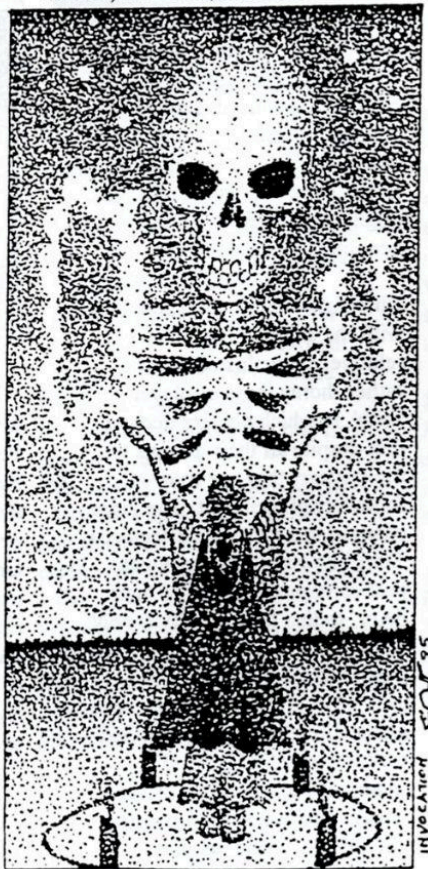


group of fanatics, or simply maintained by a form of social conditioning/tradition. One limiting factor which should operate upon the more violent/evil/devious Gods is that their power will wane as rapidly as it can take hold. This is simply a consequence of the natural tendency for individuals to pay only the necessary lip service to people/forces which terrify them. Also this is true if the God pays its worshippers by doping them up on pleasure/power spells, as the susceptible individuals will tend to be too irresponsible to make an effective ruling class. It thus seems likely that the longest standing and most major deities in these worlds will tend towards rather boring, pragmatic and benevolent natures, despite the constant threat of upstart minority Gods.

If the magic is nothing more than a facet of natural forces and processes, then there is no real intelligence behind the magical power. However, this has never stopped mankind from anthropomorphizing these forces, naming them as Gods and worshipping them. In fact the kind of magic which operates by altering the 'natural magical field' is ripe for this kind of ritualisation. Predominantly, because an emphasis upon harmony is essential if dangerous (and superficially angry!) side effects are to be avoided. Under such constraints, long and convoluted rituals will be enshrined as part of a polytheistic, nature spirit religion. The main limitation will of course be the casting of the spell, but if this is a world in which the casting of magic is terribly easy, then a minimum amount of spell can easily be shrouded in several hours of ritual. Society of this kind is likely to be suffocatingly stagnant, and obsessed with small details. There will be no rapid progress, because magical development will have been bogged down in politically induced frills, that none would dare to drop. Possibly there would be a handful of heretic priests, but these will be

regarded as disrupting natural balance and order (possibly quite genuinely!).

Basically this is a world of small towns (or perhaps of hunter/gatherer tribes) at a relatively genteel tech level. The effective ruling class (ie not necessarily the official headsman) will be a powerful group of elderly priests/witch doctors who represent the source of law, order, historical continuity, health care and protection. Meanwhile the young will always find this unbearable, particularly if education exists at all, or if visitors from more distant places pass through with outlandish ideas. The consequence is likely to be small amount of kids prank magic which will last until it either goes wrong, or is discovered by the priests. (Perhaps the few uncensored survivors could become the entertainer mages described under easy/esoteric/safe magic detailed above!) However, there are



probably a lot of malign monsters/people that a GM could use to organise this into

something far nastier and dramatic.

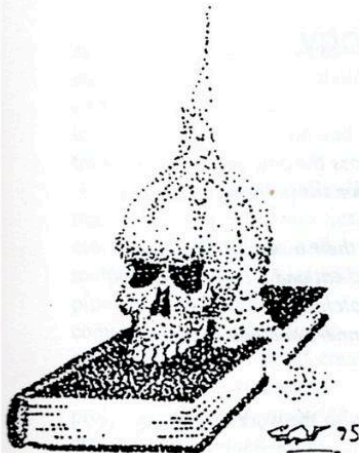
The final category, of truly religious magic is a challenge for me. Simply, because I know too little about religious philosophies and mysticism. However, I think the obvious way to do this in a realistic manner is to have the campaign centred around the birth of a religion and the mystic at its heart. This instantly converts the magic from spells into miracles! It is also quite likely to take all the magic out of the players hands, for the logic of this kind of deity is based upon true faith, not upon desire. At no time will the party be able to command, or bargain with God, for God is above such petty things. Indeed it seems likely that an essential part of the divine plan is for every individual to have absolute freedom in the path they choose to lead. In fact it seems likely that the only purpose of magic is when the normal order of things is

disturbed, most importantly when individuals are no longer aware of their right to believe in God. Then magic can be used, but it must still be possible to remain sceptical, and a physical explanation should always be available. Thus, the miracle is a true miracle to the faithful, a doorway to open the path towards truer faith and the mind of God! Yet, this same miracle must not compel the cynic. The power of miracle is therefore in odd conjunctions, bizarre flukes and coincidences and most importantly that the true believer is gifted with luck. (Although this luck should never obstruct their learning of personal wisdom through mistakes and pain.)

The easiest way to implement this type of thing is to decide that the particular society that the players are in, has not only grown too decadent for its own survival, but has also forgotten about God, or developed a



mistaken idea about the nature of God. Then God might take one of the few remaining faithful and 'guide' them in the rather stumbling path of spreading the 'word of God'. Of course the party could easily be roped into helping this task, but only after their cynicism and materialism have been eliminated. The campaign would therefore be a careful exploration of the characters' relationship with the 'Chosen Prophet', and of repercussions caused by the bizarrely lucky and influential life of the 'Prophet'. This kind of thing could even be integrated into the campaign as a set of background events, with a relatively trivial NPC following this exponential path in a series of cameo scenes during the game.



The only other alternative I can imagine is to take a world with a much higher ambient magic level than ours, in which sporadic magical events are normal. In such a setting there might well be a great need for sages, who have developed their magical powers, and become powerful mystics. Such individuals, whose minds have 'touched the mind of God', would probably be half mad due to the illogic inherent in magical worlds (this is the same setting as the non-paranoid/unlearnable magics described above). However, they could well be very necessary in such a shifting and dangerously variable reality. The society would then be one that venerated these rare and valuable

individuals, and constantly sought to find meaning in their confusing stream of thought. This setting would classify as truly religious in my mind, because such mystics would not dilute the essentially spiritual nature of God, even though their magic might be incredibly blatant at times.

*"Personally I only buy Thaumatron products! George was never quite the same after we had 'trouble' with the last ACME Bag of Holding..."*

The idea of a high magic society in which magic devices have entirely replaced the selection of technological gadgets which give us our standard of living is a very tempting one. However, actually creating such a society without being terribly superficial is quite a challenge. Apart from the problems of a yawning chasm of infinite possibilities to pick from. There are all sorts of practical problems, for instance how the hell do you power all these multifarious gadgets? In most systems even if the populace were all trained wizards they could at most use 5 devices in a day. So unless it's a culture which really values its sleep, then magic must be powered in a similar way to electrical devices ie via some impersonal power source. For instance Tim Harford's campaign uses a daily sacrifice of human slaves/criminals to fuel these devices off of a projected energy field. Plenty of other power sources can be imagined, but the

### **Cause and effect might be blurred to some degree, as devices peer into the future to predict their users' desires**

essential element is that these devices can be used by people with only a minimum of magical knowledge. At the same time, unless this is a society in decline, there must be educated people capable of building these devices

in large numbers. This requires an operating educational system, and mass production techniques. There will also need to be shops and distributors for these gadgets, so a middle class and a variety of financial services will have to exist also.

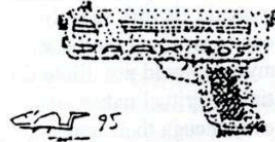
All of this implies quite considerable convergence with our own technological society, or at least with a tech level not too distant from it (ie Steampunk to Starship). It is therefore necessary not only to explain how magic could be used so ubiquitously, but also to provide interesting differences. Some of the differences I can imagine include: First, that many of the constancies we take for granted with technology need not apply to magic devices. There need not be any constancy of size or shape objects take as they operate. Thus things might be more fluid and cartoon like than our own rigidly shaped devices. Objects/people might teleport quite regularly. Even cause and effect might be blurred to some degree, as devices peer into the future to predict their users' desires. Devices with bound spirits may also be fairly simple to make, so intelligent devices could be very common. Second, magic screws around with reality so the side effects may be truly horrific and environmental damage may be on a scale hard to imagine. Third, the existence of magical fields associated with all life may lead to a rather low view of the value of individual human lives. After all if you can be healed, or even resurrected by taking life force from somewhere else, then what value is the vessel of the soul? Of course the actual individual involved will be very keen to preserve their life, but magical societies may very easily lean towards decadence and inequity, with regular gladiatorial games, human sacrifices, etc. as entertainment! Fourth, whilst the common man may use these devices, this will not stop the fact that the designers of them are fully trained sorcerers. (That is unless they are using only a small bastardised version of an earlier and more powerful, but difficult



magic!) These fully competent individuals could easily monopolise their position, especially as they would probably learn to extend their own lifespans. It therefore seems likely that the ruling classes would end up with all the advantages of this technology.

In summary this type of high magic society could tend towards our own egalitarian ideals, but it seems far more likely to develop a considerable degree of decadence. The ruling group of mages (or even Vampires) could become very very powerful and ancient, whilst the masses are kept amused with

cheap tricks and blood sports. Of course such a place will eventually collapse into



barbarism and civil war, but it might take a very very long time to do so. One alternative high magic game that I have seen run successfully, gave the tech-magic to a xenophobic hive race. This alien race, with its lack of individualism was ideally suited to coping with the holistic features of magic. In contrast the humans had developed

technology to a point where they could make effective superhumans. The game was then set around the humans trying to defend the solar system from the hive race, with the players as a special operations team of superhumans. The aliens being made all that more alien, by the incomprehensibility of their magically derived devices, and their seeming lack of regard for their own kind as ghastly components in these devices. The players also had the difficult task of trying to learn enough about the hive races magic themselves, so that they could defend earth against it.

## REQUIEM FOR A CITY

### An Exploration of a Magical Technology

By Tim Harford

*0th Hour: Above Tamor the sky is the colour of concrete. Black snow smears itself across the city, smothering the pre-dawn hum. At The Camp, the eyes of Vynticator XLXIV scans the line of sub-humans in front of it. Such creatures are grist to the mill of progress and constancy.*

*1st Hour: Wisps of marijuana smoke fondle a street vendor, followed in short order by their owner. Belladonna wraps herself around the hapless barrow boy, teeth flashing in the dark. A quick bite to eat and a coffee, and Bel slips into his coat, dips into his wallet, and wriggles back into the city. The Eagle is watching.*

*2nd Hour: Belladonna is halted and dispersed by Vynticator XXVI, aided by two Skyrunners and one of the Adeptus Sancti.*

Tamor in 493 AI (Anno Imperii) is not a world of traditional magic. It is not *Shadowrun*: 'famous new thinking in gaming: bolt on the fireballs and the elves, and this is originality?'. It is not *Vampire*: magic on the fringe of a vibrant cliché. It is not a world where folks settle down to crystal ball T.V. The screens are *liquid* crystal - and in any case, there's never anything worth watching...

Tamor grew from an idea in *GURPS Cyberpunk* of adding the punk ethos to an essentially fantasy setting, rather than the other way around. It was applied to a fantasy-medieval-roman society in Dave Morris' *Legend*. The concept of magic being integrated in societies is central to Matthew's piece, so I felt this would be an appropriate forum to discuss Tamor.

#### *On Skiens Magica*

'Skiens Magica' is the science of magic. In Tamor, magic has been simplified and the processes which govern magical spells and rituals are increasingly well understood. This is not to say that a magician in Tamor is more powerful than a traditionalist mage - far from it. The traditionalist mage reaches great heights by standing upon the shoulders of giants. The modern magical researcher devotes his time to systematising what is known already. Sound theory demands that each new discovery be founded firmly on the last. This means that progress tends to be along the same lines for some time, until a new breakthrough generates an explosion of research along that line.

We could perhaps contrast the art and science of

magic with the work of a great artist such as Raphael, and the business of painting by numbers. Raphael conjured the most incredible works of beauty and meaning; and even he didn't understand the process whereby he came to do it - but using a painting by numbers book, millions can ape his work. That's 'Skiens Magica' - simplistic but pragmatic.

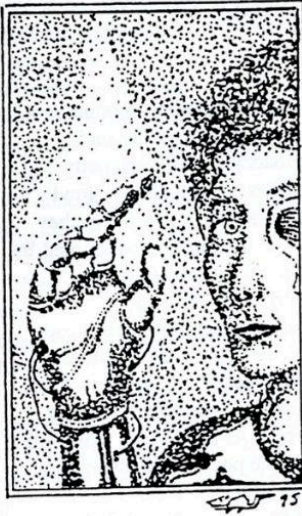
'Skiens' is powerful simply because it is so simple. It can be taught to battalions of soldiers without tremendous difficulty, and even a weak spell is potent if used by thousands on the battlefield.

#### *Technology*

The proliferation of mages in Tamor means that there's a great deal of power sloshing around with which to do great works - of which the most



useful is to become a factory mage. Factory mages (sometimes inaccurately called 'technomancers') enchant factory-produced gear with simple spells.



Most of the known spells fall into two broad groups: energy generation, manipulation and transmission; and information manipulation and transfer.

The energy spells allow magical analogues to batteries, electrical transmission, and motors. Powered vehicles and piped heat and light are commonplace. Energy fields similar to magnetic fields create the means to use automatic projectile weapons - an automatic crossbow is the most common. The use of high-energy techniques in production means that advanced metals and other materials can be used.

Other energy spells are used to create 'bionics'. Cybernetic enhancements in

### **Dolphins are kept in tanks and appropriate magical frameworks use their brains for storage, processing and retrieval**

Tamor are simple if you have the cash - you can replace your arm with a carved wooden prosthetic and have a power source implanted which will animate it. 'Robots' are golems - sometimes remote-controlled, sometimes

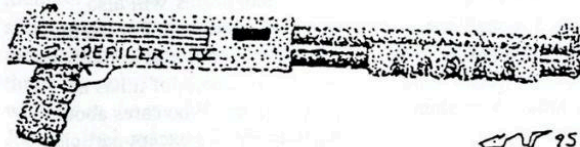
cyborg golems with human brains.

Information processing is linked heavily into biocomputers - that is to say, animal brains. Dolphins are kept in tanks and appropriate magical frameworks use their brains for storage, processing and retrieval. There is no silicon technology - portable computers are impossible. However, a miniature terminal, connected via communication spells to your local dolphin is quite within the bounds of possibility

### *Powering the magic*

An individual mage cannot possibly supply the energy for these power-hungry innovations. Like our society today, Tamor consumes power at a wasteful and unsustainable rate; and like our society today, the social environmental consequences are serious.

Tamor has already drained the 'mana' plane - the natural source of magical energies - of all potency. As Matthew mentioned in his article, the replacement raw power source for society's magic is a sinister one. Criminals and slaves



are kept in death camps more reminiscent of the Nazi regime than anything else. Their suffering is intense but brief, as they are 'processed' or 'dispersed' in a perverse and unknown manner. Their life energy provides the power required to keep the city's inhabitants in the manner to which they have become accustomed.

### *The Nature of the Net*

Power, information and even people are transmitted on the 'net', part Internet, part power-transmission system, part public transport network. The net is an artificial construction on the 'abstract' plane; it's closely monitored by several government agencies.

### *Further Ideas*

Tamor was built on the ruins of a Roman-style Empire. The city, as the 'Second Imperium', keeps some of the traditions of its ancestor. Slaves are legal but rare, and the city is ruled by an Emperor with considerable power. He sits at the head of a police state, where government ministries battle with each other for want of an external opponent.

Corporations have become extremely powerful, but they are still inferior to the government. The upper and middle classes work either in government or in business - no alternative is worth contemplating. There are few manual or semi-skilled positions left, and the unemployed have become an underclass.

The dying of any meaningful form of democracy, and the rise of technology-ownership as a means of making wealth conspicuous, have led to the fading of the patron-client system. Many are supported now by neither the state, nor wealthy citizens, nor corporations, and band together in gangs for protection.

### *I have seen the future of magic...*

Take any social problem of modern America, and make it worse. Superimpose the multimillionaire political classes of the Roman Empire, and crush the underclasses with a fascist - in a very real sense - police state. Let multinationals roam free with their own technology and obscene wealth.

Now let magic exist, but let it be a force not for creativity, spontaneity and individual empowerment, but rather for censorship, oppression, uniformity and state-organised mass-murder. Who says things will get better when magic moves out of the dark ages? Welcome to Tamor.



**In Context**  
**Magic in a generic fantasy setting**  
By Martin Lloyd

This reply will concentrate on magic in those terms most directly relevant to the majority of role-players. Religion and its associated problems and implications for fantasy society will be passed over.

The terms of reference for the article will therefore be as follows. Magic will be taken as latent in all members of society, but only accessible through much study, diligence and hard work. This has the immediate effect of restricting magic use to the following groups:

- Those who have both the time and the financial resources to undertake prolonged study.
- Those who are prepared to forgo more immediate advantages to learn magic.

The second point can be explained in terms of modern education. Do you leave school at sixteen hoping for employment and immediate freedom or continue education to eighteen, twenty-one or even longer to improve potential earnings? Very few choose the latter even when the option is open.

[Editor's note: This comment reflects Martin's optimism about the universal magical aptitude of the human race. Vary his assumption and we might see a Y.T.S. theory of magic evolve - young people with no chance of ever achieving anything in magic being shepherd into schemes whereby they shovel horse manure endlessly for their wizardly patrons.]

The result of this depends on the state of society. In a full-blown medieval or feudal world, magic will be restricted to the nobility and those they consider trustworthy, for instance, household retainers. In this way it could parallel literacy in our own world. Later Renaissance or Early Modern

settings could be sufficiently economically developed to support guild systems or 'colleges' although they may well find themselves in conflict with the existing magic wielding-authorities. In time, some form of industrial revolution may lead to a 'steampunk' society with magic still firmly in the grip of the dominant classes although the identity of this class may well be changing.

The concentration of magic in the hands of the ruling classes even if it is not practised by them directly will have effects dependent on its usefulness.

Esoteric magic will be largely irrelevant to the day-to-day running of society, but will still have important effects.

Bad harvests may be blamed on wizards. Similarly, high taxes needed to finance the purchase of exotic components or the construction of Stonehenge-style 'laboratories' will also provoke discontent. For the most part, however, magic is likely to be largely ignored if it has no practical use. Who cares about particle physics except particle physicists?

Most role-players like their magic practical (or even pyrotechnic) which will lead to very different results. If magic is not powerful enough - and united enough - to support an oppressive regime a paternalistic society is most likely. Thus in return for protection, government, and the occasional blessing or healing spell the populace will hand over loyalty and taxes. Jealousy may be present but for the most part a "magic isn't for the likes of you and me, dearie" approach will prevail.

To this essentially stable society can be added the complications that make role-playing so much fun. Eccentric wizards may remove themselves from society and go adventuring

or indiscriminately apprentice a few peasants. Gypsies and troubadours may learn petty cantrips, glowing lights, loud bangs; if magic is esoteric they will be tolerated or persecuted by the populace depending on superstition. Alternatively, if magic is pragmatic such rogues may well take a part similar to that of Ronin in Japanese society or bandits in sixteenth century Europe. As revels they may well have the population's sympathy, especially if they avoid antagonising them, while being repressed by the authorities as a threat to the status quo. If magic-based cults are to appear then these outcasts will be founder members.

The possibility of the village 'wise woman' or witch should not be overlooked either. Such individuals will rely on the local populace to provide for them and so again some sort of reciprocal relationship. In return for not cursing people or look after the sick a village will maintain a magic user and allow him or her to continue their study. Reaction to individuals like these will largely be determined by their attitude. If the local witch is giving and generous, always liberal with love potions, then he or she will be popular. If on the other hand the witch is temperamental, cantankerous, vindictive or just mad, fear and superstition will result. In terms of power such witches will probably not be up to much, deprived as they are of the books, grimoires and other material advantages available to upper-class wizards. If soul-selling or similar bargains are available these will be the people who go in for it, deprived of good advice and denied conventional routes of increasing their power. It is this type of behaviour that will gain the hedge wizard, witch

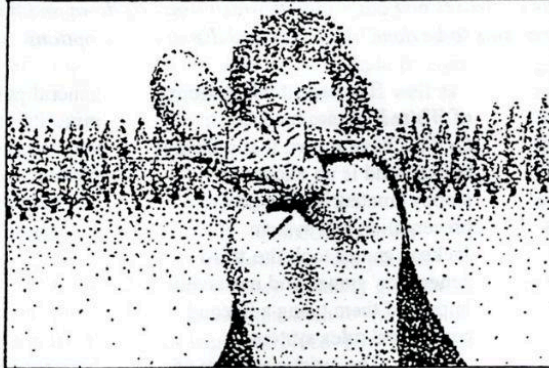


or warlock a bad reputation in society.

Magic, whether paternalistic and governing or communal will have an important role in fantasy society. If ghosts, goblins, ghouls and demons are about, wizards are the ones who will have to deal with them. When a dragon turns up someone will need to provide a magic sword and in time of war, the curses and enchantments of the other side will have to be dealt with.

The conclusion to draw from all this is that magic will fit in to society quite nicely thank you very much. Wizards will take their place in the ruling class and become just as respected or disliked as their more mundane counterparts. Meanwhile the peasantry will have their own magic, probably bound up with folklore and ritual, mostly practical crop-growing stuff with the odd curse or love potion thrown in. Wandering magic-users may acquire reputations as folk heroes or monsters depending on what they do while eccentric reclusive wizards will provoke fear or ridicule. To see all this throng in practical terms there now follows a description of the carnival fair in the fantasy town of Hypothesis.

The most famous personage at the fair is the local Lord, George Percival. George himself knows a smattering of magic as befits a noble. Most of his time is however taken up with



hunting, legal business and attending court. Major magical power is represented by George's secretary and advisor Sir Garibaldi. Garibaldi is himself only minor nobility and a younger son. This convinced him to study magic as a road to power, as George's secretary he wields enormous power over taxes and the law. The local populace see him as a social climber, and blame him for recent tax rises.

The other authority present is that of the trade guilds. The sorcery guild includes many members of other trades who study magic as a hobby or to give them the business edge. Indeed there are only two full time wizards in the guild: Master Joseph, its head; and Jeremius, his apprentice. These two spend

their time searching for magic lore as they have exhausted Joseph's collection of spellbooks. Today Joseph hopes to persuade Garibaldi to let him examine his spellbooks but suspects he will be refused just as he has been for the last five years.

Also present, although incognito, is Jack McGrew and five of his bandit comrades. Six days ago Jack used an *invisibility* spell to rescue one of his men from the gallows and has

sworn to take revenge on the authorities today. His intention is to steal the chest containing the five percent tax levied on all sales at the market. Jack and his men are disguised as troubadours and a *resist fire* spell is allowing him to impress the crowd with his fire-eating abilities.

Other magic users present at the fair are 'Old Nelly', a witch from nearby Trolldale village, and Razan Hassim, a merchant. Nelly is exploiting her reputation as a wise and mysterious woman by charging for fortune-telling and herbal potions. Razan is concealing his powers; magic-using merchants are notoriously untrustworthy...

## VIGNETTES

My thoughts turn in this time of wintry weather to the deleterious effects of the environment. Anyone who's tried to camp out, on a prepared campsite, in summer, with modern materials, will spare a tear for those hardy adventurers who try their luck in the worst conditions with primitive equipment - seemingly night after night...

Reading through a military survival guide (there are plenty around - people buy them to match the Rotweiler and rusty white van) will give you a few pointers, and suggest the sort of thing that will happen to the characters if they aren't similarly clued up. I'm not suggesting that you should be petty

about this - but merely make it clear to the players the problems they face in extreme conditions. A winter's night in the mountains, with seriously wounded party members, can be as dangerous as any foe.

Other ideas include forcing the characters to go potholing - and I don't mean 'dungeon exploring', I mean real crawlways - and pit them against monsters, or still worse, rising water or gas pockets. Mountaineering, ocean navigation, desert treks, polar treks - the possibilities are as endless as the world around us.

Tim Harford



# Generations...

*Role-playing is saturated with new releases and old products which won't lie down and die. Is there room for another new game? If so, what remains to be done? Tim Harford discusses the options.*

Back in the mists of time, Gideon Nisbet discussed what he elements he believed as ideal role-playing system would have [What's in a game? *Nightflyer 21*]. Looking over his comments, and drawing ideas from my conversation with games designer Dave Morris (see the interview elsewhere in this issue), I want to lay out my own ideas for the next step in role-playing systems.

I believe it was Kevin Simbieda of Palladium (although it may not have been) who recently categorised role-playing games into first, second and third generation systems. He put the dinosaurs such as AD&D and T&T into the first category, and the more sophisticated systems

**The production values which games such as GURPS, AD&D 2nd Edition and others had raised so high were dragged back into the 1970s**

such as *Runequest* and *GURPS* into the second. The latest step, he suggested, was systems such as *Vampire* and *Rifts* which took role-playing into new territory as far as intensive and imaginative backgrounds were concerned.

This isn't a helpful categorisation. The 'new wave' of third generation games have been for the most part produced with first generation rules tacked onto innovative backgrounds. There are clever ideas, but nothing quite as radical as those involved seem to think. Meanwhile, the production values which games such as *GURPS*, *AD&D 2nd Edition* and others had raised so high were dragged back into the 1970s.

The recent adaptations of *White Wolf* products by *GURPS* have shown that a flashy background is no excuse for sloppy amateurishness in presentation and system. Steve Jackson games took the 'third generation' games and massively improved them using a 'second generation' rules system.

The artistic process of creating new backgrounds, new worlds, is at the core of a good gaming experience, and may it long continue. But Steve Jackson Games were not the first to make explicit the fact that systems and backgrounds are separable.

In many ways, the industry has been taking retrograde steps recently in terms of systems. The 1990s have brought us *AD&D 2nd Edition*, which is a bold attempt to make the incomprehensible comprehensible. In this TSR have succeeded, but have just covered up the fact that *AD&D* is very much a 'first generation' system. High production values cannot ultimately cover up the archaic mechanics upon which *AD&D* is based.

The 1990s have brought us very little else. *White Wolf* and *Palladium* are not system people, and Steve Jackson has taken *GURPS* almost to its logical conclusion in 1987 - any improvement on *GURPS* would have to be from the ground up, and nobody has yet taken up the challenge. Each game is designed to fit a niche market, a specialised system which is an afterthought to a background. Is there room in the market for another giant, wide-interest game to take on *GURPS*, *AD&D* and *Runequest*?

Dave Morris thinks there is. Despite the efforts of TSR, he still sees no mainstream role-playing game. There's nothing which appeals to the

general public, or even a sizeable minority of it. There's no system which a non-roleplayer could pick up and look at without being instantly put off - no 'fourth generation' system.

Our conversation also threw up a second challenge to a 'fourth generation' system. *GURPS* is infinitely flexible 'horizontally' - in that it will cover any background, any culture, any time-period, with a minimum of fuss and tinkering with the rules. It's no more flexible than any other system 'vertically' - by which I mean flexible in terms of complexity, adjusting to be a very sophisticated system, or a very rules-light one.

This article will attempt to expand these two areas, with due thanks to Dave Morris, who explained the first problem and pointed me in the direction of the second, and also threw out many of the possible solutions.

## Mainstream Appeal

To have mainstream appeal, a game has to have a mainstream subject - something which will interest the target group. This is as important as any system consideration. However, a 'fourth generation' system should be generic, like *GURPS*, and able to process any reasonable background. This would enable the publishers to use the same system with different backgrounds and thus lead people into role-playing from different angles.

What are the 'target groups'? Connections from 'real-life' to role-playing seem hard to track down. They do exist, however. Think of the popularity of simulation games such as *SimCity* or *Yes, Prime Minister*. Consider also the use of 'role-playing' in business training. A third major connection is to films and books, and a fourth, to



gamebooks. Finally, there's increasing scope for educational use of role-playing.

The target audience would seem to be twofold, in general. Firstly, the 'chattering classes' who might meet for a dinner party or a game of bridge and could replace that with a role-playing game. Secondly, the teenage gamebook/computer game fans, who might naturally follow an interest in that sort of gaming into the richer but less accessible field of role-playing games.

### Book and Film Tie-Ins

An obvious route into role-playing is by connecting the game with a popular book or film. Film merchandise of even the most appalling quality does notoriously well - but to last, a game has to appeal to a fan who's picked it up just because it's connected with the film, and doesn't know anything about role-playing as such.

### Educational Interest

Geography and history and full of 'empathy' exercises - i.e. role-playing. By producing a professionally designed system and sourcebooks with an eye on the national curriculum, a gaming

publisher can take the effort to make subjects accessible and make it far more fun and of lasting value. Hopefully we will no longer have a system whose main merit is to encourage a facility in mental arithmetic, but other uses might include foreign-language role-plays and well as the more obvious historical games.

### Gamebooks

Gamebooks are a natural path into role-playing games - they probably give the clearest indication to the initiate of what's involved. However, we shouldn't forget how much is still far from obvious. Dave Morris's *Fabled Lands* books - which are far more open-ended and freeform than the usual plot-heavy traditional offerings - indicate one of the angles to pursue in future. Another important element is a role-playing system which can be played at a very simple level for use in gamebooks, but is compatible with a more detailed fully-fledged role-playing system.

### Variable-Complexity Rules Systems

The discussion so far indicates several ways in which a

simple role-playing system can be tied into mainstream interests. If this simple system can be compatible with a full set of rules, the possibilities are obvious.

The only role-playing game with an accompanying series of gamebooks was *Tunnels and Trolls*, and although *T&T* is a fairly basic system, the essential elements of what we would regard as a role-playing system were well in place - a way of differentiating between characters (character classes) and an advancement system (experience levels). These are the elements which *Fighting Fantasy* lacked for a long time, and without which it is much harder to approach the real fun of role-playing.

What we need is a system which can be played at, say, the level of *Fighting Fantasy* (although it need not be so combat-oriented) and which can also serve at higher levels of sophistication.

### Levels of Complexity

The following is an attempt to give an idea of the range of detail which role-playing systems can accomplish:

'Level'	Elements	Examples
Level 0:	Freeform/rule-less systems	
Level 1:	Success rolls, abilities	<i>Fighting Fantasy</i> , <i>Lone Wolf</i>
Level 2:	Progression, classes	<i>D&amp;D</i> , <i>AD&amp;D</i> , <i>Blood Sword</i> , <i>Dragon Warriors</i>
Level 3:	Skills systems	<i>Runequest</i> , <i>Stormbringer</i>
Level 4:	Sub-skills, manoeuvres, advanced spells	<i>GURPS</i> , <i>Rolemaster</i>
Level 5:	Various additional complexities	<i>GURPS</i> & <i>Rolemaster</i> , with supplements

The complexity of a system is far more than just the number of rules options which it offers. *AD&D*, for example, does not really offer anything terribly more sophisticated than say, *Dragon Warriors*, despite its vastly more complicated set of rules. Complexity and complication are different creatures. Adding in rules for encumbrance, or vast numbers of spells, do not actually increase the strength of the underlying system.

When designers present 'advanced' versions of their games, they generally tend to mean the 'basic' game with a bunch of optional rules. The fourth generation role-playing system will be compatible with all these levels of complexity - which involves a very carefully worked-out progression, rather than *Fighting Fantasy* with a gaggle of 'options' about reaction rolls or fatigue.

### The Challenge

The challenge is this: to create a system with the generic flexibility of, say, *GURPS*, which can be played at all levels from that of the *Rolemaster Companion* series, to *D&D* or even *Fighting Fantasy*. These levels have to be compatible and it should be easy to move between one and another, even within game. A bar-brawl, for example, could be fought at a very simple level of rules sophistication, whereas the epic duel between two rival lovers



could be fought out with all the subtlety and detail of *GURPS Martial Arts*.

Characters would have to be so expressed that such a switch could make sense. If, as a GM, I hastily create bandits with very simple statistics, those statistics should have meaning in a richly detailed combat system as much as in a simple one. I could spend hours or days creating a character of the highest complexity - and it should still be possible for me to use the character in a compatible gamebook at a basic level.

### Meeting the Challenge

How would we go about creating a system with these properties?

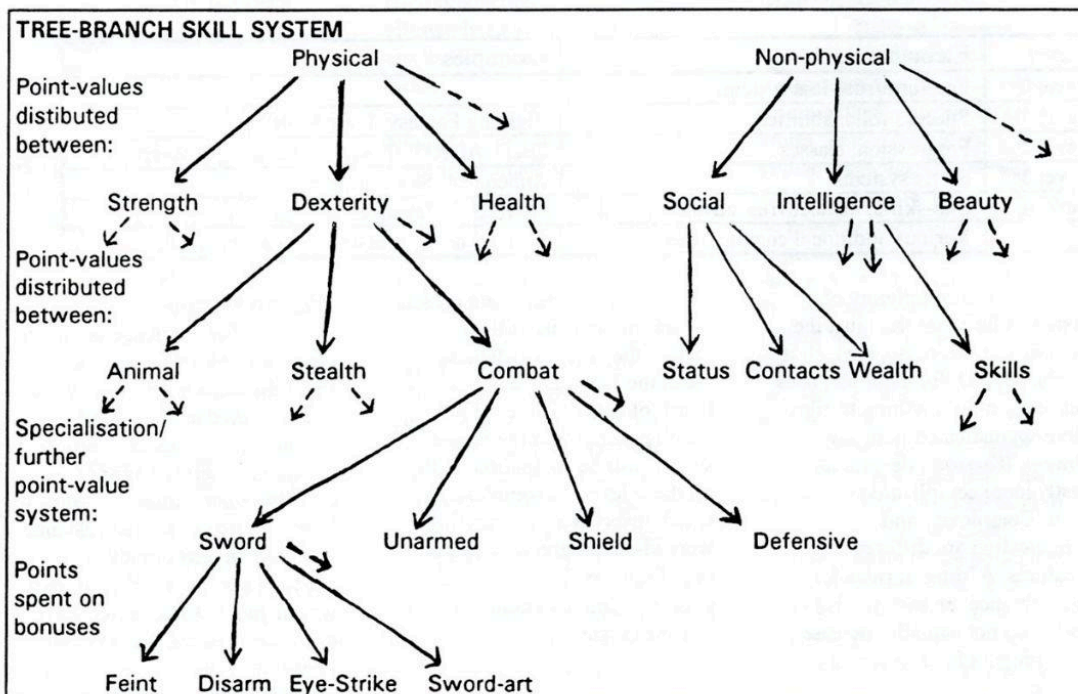
The obvious starting point is a sub-divided skill system. Let at the basic level, each character have a simple division of abilities, say: Physical/Nonphysical. At a higher level of complexity, these subdivide into attributes, which in turn subdivide, or form the basis for, skill categories such as melee combat, stealth, or magic. These skill categories can in turn provide the framework for more detailed skills, and within those skills, specialisations ('hacking

into *Tashika-Tech* systems') or manoeuvres ('feint and knife-hand strike to liver').

This process has to allow a two-way derivation of statistics. I should be able to take a low-complexity character, and work out from her "non-physical" statistic the resources at her disposal for intelligence, social connections, etc. From her intelligence I should be able to work out how many skills and at what level she could have. On the other side of the coin, I should be able to establish, from a fully-fledged character with attributes, skills and specialisations, what her "nonphysical" statistic would be in a basic game.

A points-based system is the obvious way to do this. Perhaps a "physical" stat of 9 gives me a certain number of points (say, 1400) to spend on attributes, which each give me points to invest in skill categories, which can be specialised according to certain rules. On the other hand, if I have a total of 1400 points invested in physical specialisations, then my "physical" stat must be 9. Care has to be taken to allow a suitable degree of specialisation. Presumably a high "physical" stat gives me good abilities across the

board - because I can check against it in so many situations. If the resources implicit in that were put into a very narrow speciality - for instance, a combination feint and twin-weapon strike to the eyes - then that speciality might easily reach abusive levels. It might be the case that it's a very specific manoeuvre, but on the other hand it's one the character will often choose to exercise. One solution, since specialisation can be so profitable, is to make it expensive. Once characters start to specialise, their more general skills fall away at an increasing rate. It's worthwhile concentrating your resources to a certain extent, but after a while the massive loss of general competence outweighs the narrow gains of speciality. The point is that there should be a *real choice* between raising the basic attributes and concentrating on specialities. Another solution is to put ceilings and floors on skills - to say that specialisation cannot lift a skill to more than +4 over the parent skill category, for example.





Procedures also have to be capable of increasing complexity. For example, when characters are in some kind of conflict - the simplest example is a combat situation - their skills bear against each other. At a low level of complexity, some simple contest of skills - such as seeing who passes a skill-check by the greatest amount - should suffice. At higher levels, the idea of manoeuvres and counter-manouvres, feint and parry, should come into play - and this further level of complexity should be fairly seamless: to completely change the system of success rolls, for example, when we moved to a higher complexity system, would defeat the object.

In an ideal world, our fourth-generation system would use six-sided dice, the better to reach the masses. The problem is that six-sided dice create probability distributions which we might prefer not to have. The traditional three six-sided dice roll is very heavily biased towards the median values. Four dice is worse, and inelegant. Two dice gives a better distribution, but is rather coarse. Ten- and twenty-sided dice, or percentile dice, have much nicer statistical properties, but a mass-market game would have to package them along with the rulebook, which is expensive and off-putting. My own preference is to try to solve the technical problems of using six-sided dice than the production problems of using ten sides.

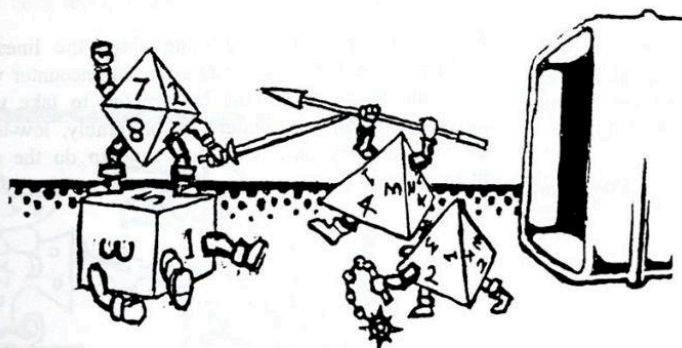
#### DICING WITH DEATH - A SKETCH OF A SKILL SYSTEM ON 2D6

- One interesting idea is a success roll, open-ended on two dice, with skill as a bonus: 3 is a critical failure, doubles add and re-roll. This gives an interesting statistical curve, but still with some unpleasant properties - for example, being more likely to throw odds than evens. The chance of throwing 6 or less is only a third, while the chance of throwing 7 or less is over 50%. The system has some intuitive appeal, though - the elation of throwing doubles, to keep your hopes alive no matter what the odds, is a satisfying property of the system.
- A further trick allows the '2 dice, doubles add and re-roll' approach to deliver some statistically rich results. So far, we have an open-ended roll, plus skill, plus or minus bonuses for circumstance. We are trying to hit some target total. Add in *additional* targets. Let, say, 15+ be 'success', 18+ be 'clear success', 22+ be 'special success' and 25+ be a critical (the precise numbers, the number of classes of success, and the effect of a 'clear success', need playtesting as a matter of course).
- The probability of any sort of superior success at low skill is very low. As skill rises, the chance of being successful jumps in fairly large steps - the problem with using so few dice. At the same time, however, the chances of clear or special success are improving very subtly. Soon 'success' becomes a foregone conclusion - a problem of many skill-based systems. There's still a lot of interest in the roll, though - the issue now is whether a clear success can be achieved. Again, the probability of a clear success starts to improve rapidly, and again, there are subtle changes in the chance now of a special success.
- Result: despite a coarse system using only 2 dice, and despite using a simple 'success roll' rather than consulting tables, we have a skill roll with a great deal of inbuilt excitement, and a real meaning to the roll whether the chance of a 'success' is tiny or it is a foregone conclusion.

#### Looking forward

I've done my best to try to summarise my perception of the technical and the marketing challenges of producing a 'fourth generation system', and to tentatively push forward solutions. This is an ideal project for a bunch of intellectual dilettantes like ourselves.

Perhaps, as Dave Morris suggests, *Nightflyer* could be a vehicle for discussion or even publication of OURPGSoc's new role-playing system? If we can write systems for live and free-form games, then surely we can take a step further and really start being rules-lawyers. Comments would be welcomed.





## VIGNETTES

### *Squeezy Bottle Combat*

Having made a spaceship out of an old squeezy bottle you'll probably want a combat system to go with it. After all what else is there to do with a spaceship except shoot things? What follows is a stupidly simple combat system for use in just about any roleplaying game where the rulebook doesn't cover the situation. It 'works' with other combats too, almost anything except swordfights!

The basic idea of the system is that all the spaceships/boats/war elephants/whatever involved sling copious amounts of shit at each other and suffer horrific damage. They each have a grand total of four stats. For maximum generality these are called Coolness, Shootiness, Hardness and Balefulness.

For each point of Coolness a ship has it rolls %dice, adds its Shootiness, subtracts the target's Balefulness and refers to the table below.

09 or less

Total rubbish, the shot is a complete miss.

10 - 39

Weedy glancing blow, 1 damage caused.

40 - 59

Decent hit, 2 damage caused.

60 - 74

Impressive hit, 3 damage caused.

75 - 89

Awesome hit, 4 damage caused.

90- 100

Devastating hit, 5 damage caused.

each +10

+1 damage (preposterous hit etc.)

Subtract this from the target's Hardness and if this reaches 0 the target is f\*cked.

Factors like range, cover, weapons, crew, maneuvers etc. are all figured into the stats, which vary each round. Typical values might be C:4, S:10, H:20, B:10.

*Dom Camus*

## IMPROVISE!

*Any open-ended game is going to venture where the referee does not expect; these times can provide the most enjoyable episodes for both players and referee alike. The ability to improvise is one of the most important tools in any referee's repertoire - and the lazier the referee, the more important it becomes. Tim Harford offers some hints garnered through long cultivation of a 'light-touch' when it comes to preparation...*

**Immerse yourself in the background.** Read around the cultures involved in your campaign world. Mull over the motivations and interactions of the NPCs. Get to know how your game-world works on every level - and more importantly, get to *feel* how it works. A natural feeling for how things fit together is a sound platform for inventing scenes, personalities and settings out of thin air.

**Have a store of generic NPCs traits.** The 'textbook' solution is to have a box file full of NPCs, many of whom are of a generic nature - 'town guard' or 'simple farmer' - and to pluck one out when in need of material. To be honest, I've actually never seen anybody make the 'textbook' system work. The amount of brain-numbing effort involved in writing up card after card of 'generic NPCs' is what any fly-by-night improviser is trying to avoid in the first place. Nevertheless, it's easy enough to store in your head a motley collection of half-formed characterisations, accents, pocket descriptions, caricatured responses and other tricks. When an NPC turns up, think of three things: a manner of speaking, an obvious physical characteristic, and 'something else interesting'. It could be anything - a quirk, personality trait, or some little sub-plot. Three things is all you need to paint a quick picture of a character the players will recall, and does nicely for cameo NPC roles.

**Use mental pictures.** A moment's pause is enough to conjure a scene in your mind. Keep that picture, whether of an NPC or a setting, in mind and describe what you see. Saying what you see creates the detail which improvised descriptions so often lack.

**Keep play low-key.** It's very tempting to lean on high-power opponents or high-powered plot hooks when you've had no time to prepare something subtle. Avoid the temptation, because the more spectacular NPCs or plots really deserve preparation to integrate them and prevent imbalance or silliness. If everything is kept at a low level, then mistakes can be shrugged off.

**Play to complicate.** Continuing along the lines above - if the characters are driving towards a crucial encounter which you haven't had time to prepare, don't be tempted to take up the challenge. Introduce random encounters, or preferably, low-level sub-plots, to keep them away until you have time to do the climactic episode justice.



**Use old favourites.** Well-established NPCs or organisations, whether friends, foes, or furniture, can add spice at minimum effort. An established *modus operandi* and a history of interaction with the characters should give plenty of material to work with. Even if the NPC does almost nothing, just her appearance lends the whole campaign an illusion of depth and richness - er, I mean, it reveals the campaign's true brilliance.

**Build on what you know.** Not just favourites from the campaign, as suggested above, but what you know in any sphere of life. Steal plots from films and books, base maps around places you know well, model NPCs on people you know, focus the action about areas of specialist knowledge in any subject.

**Don't play to set-pieces.** If you have a particular set-piece encounter in mind, you shouldn't be improvising towards it - you'll just find yourself manipulating the players. A set-piece should have a well-thought-out reason why the characters will end up there. In contrast, improvisation should be unfettered and not directed towards any particular goal.

**Accept the unexpected.** When characters do what you don't expect, be willing to work with that rather than force them back onto your preset path. Ask yourself - is there any reason why this might not be just as much fun? Typically the answer will be no. You can even increase the unpredictability of the game by thoughtful use of random encounters.

**Style over substance.** Improvisation, when you are spinning the tale without the benefit of time to think, is a great way to practise smooth and well-presented refereeing. Focus on evocative descriptions, dramatic characterisation and fast-paced action.

**Let the players do your work for you.** If you pose moral problems and difficult tactical decisions for the characters, the players will spend time discussing them - time which you can spend working on your next idea. You can also rely on personality traits, social contacts or personal enemies of characters to provide you with fuel for plots and encounters.

**Adopt a balanced approach.** A good adventure is balanced between action and contemplation, between intensive role-playing and tactical challenges, between tragedy and comedy, fear and confidence, mystery and informed decision-making. It is also balanced in that it offers every player and every character a range of challenges. When improvising, this can provide you with ideas rather than being another thing to worry about. Think about what's happened so far, and so what sort of episode is needed to provide a contrast. Consider also whether any of the players have been left out, and what sort of event may be needed to draw them in.



## VIGNETTES

### Hooray for Hollywood

Trying to come up with the latest thing in designer plots is really tricky. It's not so hard to create a convoluted storyline full of mysteries, memorable NPCs, twists and turns and more cliff-hangers than you can comfortably swing in a bathroom. What is far more difficult is creating the *simple* plot; the plot that players can *understand*.

Fortunately, there exists on the west coast of the United States of America a town. In that town, is an industry. The sole purpose of the industry is to churn out brain-bendingly simple plots for couch-potatoes. And that means your players...

#### Terminator

Create an all-powerful automaton or robot - call it a Terminator, an Iron Golem, a Black Reaver, or whatever. Then let the characters slowly realise that nothing will stop it, and it's after them. The best instance of this was a nemesis which followed the characters around the world by walking along the sea bed...

#### Enter the Dragon

In this film, the most graceful and dynamic man who ever lived beats up bearded villains with husky voices. Freeing the prisoners, fighting in a martial tournament, sneaking and spying and having your Nunchakas edited out for UK release; what more can you want? An *Enter the Dragon* style plot would work very well for a single player, or a group of combat fans...

#### Mad Max

Taking a leaf out of this maverick Australian film's book would add new spice to any Cyberpunk campaign. It's also a fine lesson in gothic horror in a new setting. The foul murder of Max's innocent wife and child is quite horrible and you can feel it coming from a long way off. Very unsettling, and a great tip for the GM...

**Stargate**  
Yeah, right.

Tim Harford



# Blatant Backstab!

*'The Society Game' has been the most mysterious and all-pervasive innovation in the RPGSoc for some time. So great is its potency that at times wizards, psychics and thieves have been gripped with the strange idea that they are in fact students in post-industrial Oxford. This might be accounted a success, but as Dom Camus explains, it's been a slow learning process...*

## A Long Time Ago...

Way back in my first year at Oxford RPGsoc. was crap. No, I mean it, really shit. I spend a lot of time playing games, some folks might say too much (and the rest would say way too much) but I just couldn't be bothered with the society. I went off and ran quiet little games in the corner for a year.

In my second year the RPGsoc. treasurer paid me a visit. This is rather like being visited by the king in one of those fairy tales, except the king in this case wears jeans and is only a bit more clean shaven than I am (not very). The inimitable Mr. Mike Oswald (for it was he) then revealed that the purpose of his visit was nothing more gripping than to persuade me to book a room for that bane of all treasurers: The Christmas Party. Before leaving he expressed his disappointment at my views on the society and asked if I had any suggestions for improvements. Much to Mike's credit he succeeded in leaving my room



not much more than an hour later having insisted very tactfully that these sorts of things ought to be in writing because the committee had a short attention span (they still do). The committee did indeed suffer the dubious fate of being presented with all my scribbles and I even got a reply... the president himself had been thinking along similar lines and had come up with a plan. It was a plan so cunning you could <insert favourite cunning thing>. It was so cunning I decided to return to the society and see if it would work. It did.

## Grand Conclave

Grand Conclave was one of those things. It was the standard by which later games were to be judged. As the creation of the then-president Chris Tomkins it received a lot of publicity in the society. Chris often runs slightly experimental games and more often than not they turn out to be excellent and everyone wishes they had played in them to start with. Conclave (as it became known) was supposed to be small but it became very big very quickly.

Conclave was based on a simple concept. The setting was the World of Greyhawk (yes, that AD&D thing, I know what you're thinking). The PCs were a bunch of mages; to be specific the most important ones in the world. They had been drawn together to form the Grand Conclave. Then the plot happened. The game rules themselves were in three parts. First, once a week all the players would meet in a room and hold the mages' once a year meeting (the conclave) as a freeform game (no dice etc.). Secondly, players would hand in turnsheets rather like a play-by-

mail game to describe their activities during the rest of the year. Lastly there was the duelling system, a boardgame which represented the ritual challenges in which mages threw fireballs at (anything except) each other.

Conclave was something really new and was excellent fun. However, rather than go into how great it was in excessive detail I will move on to later events. Suffice to say there was one thing about Conclave that is seldom recognised: everyone was too busy enjoying it to spot the emerging problems which would plague its successor.

## Psigen

The new committee post of Campaign Organiser was created and duly occupied by Chris' co-GM from Conclave, Leon Sucharov (being the only person with the faintest idea how to run the game). Conclave ended, it's successor Psigen began, then the shit hit the fan.

Psigen was set in a post-apocalypse future Britain. The PCs were psionics, hunted and hated by society. Well, to be more precise they were psigens. A psigen is, as the name implies, a generator of psychic power. Other individuals, called latents, can actually use this power to do awesome stuff. Oh yes, a huge plague was sweeping the world (or rather, had swept it). Psigens were immune (and hence evolutionarily selected for). They were also believed to be carriers. Four great cities stood in the desolate land: London, Edinburgh, Bristol and DRoYL. This last stands for 'Democratic Republic of Yorkshire and Lancashire'. Outside these cities



the place was a tip full of nomads and gangs and small warring communities. Confused? The players were! The game's background, for those who understood it, was very subtle and evocative. In fact Chris had invented it before leaving the game in the capable hands of the (now 4-strong) GMing team. He explained all the ideas to Leon, who then explained them to the other three (of whom I was one). It was sort of like 'Chinese whispers'. As a result the game background never quite came together. For those of you who remember Psigen and still don't have a good feel for it, read 'Intervention' by Julian May. I was very freaked out when I read it, then realised it must have been source material in the first place and sort of wished Chris had mentioned it. In fact I think Julian May's other work was a bigger influence but I'm not sure exactly what.

There were some innovations in Psigen which worked well. One of them was shortening the turn length. As players became used to the Conclave format they wrote longer and longer turnsheets. Now if you can imagine an entire year's worth of the activities of a hyperactive PC I'm sure you'll see the problem. Compare this with the 10 page turnsheets occasionally managed in a game week these days! The other good move was the removal of the Conclave 'prestige' system. This was a device whereby each mage was respected by the others according to a 'prestige score'. The trouble with this was that in a freeform game if someone stands up and speaks impressively then nobody gives a \*\*\*\* what their prestige is. Conversely if someone is shy and quiet and the point they're making is flimsy they'll get ignored no matter how much prestige they have. It just didn't

work and it was a relief to get rid of it.



One of the big problems with Psigen was the GMing team. All four of us were experienced GMs in our own right... but you know what they say about too many cooks. The game's plot became at once childishly simple and stupidly complex. There was loads of it but none of it caught the interest of the players, except for the Ministry. These were the bad guys, an arm of the government who were determined to crush all psionics. The players sat up and took notice. They poked the ministry a bit and the Ministry didn't even wobble. Then they got very scared and crawled into their shell and didn't come out. In Conclave, nobody had ever really threatened the PCs as a group. They were a bunch of wusses. The GMing team were far too disorganised to even spot this problem and when the players subtly pointed it out to us with gentle words like "You've made the Ministry much much too hard you bastards", we were completely unable to do anything about it. Fate intervened, however, in the shape of Leon's finals. He had to all but drop Psigen. Sonia Bird, another of the team, suffered all kinds of work related tortures and also had to

drop out. This was a pity since Sonia was the only one who bothered to keep track of all our records and files (oops). But Ralph Lovegrove (who was by that time almost presidential) stayed to assist me and in the last few weeks we nearly put Psigen back on the rails, two GMs was ironically more manageable than four.

The other big problem with Psigen was guns. It was a future setting and people had guns. Simply put, the PCs shot each other. It really was that simple. The controversy and chaos that caused really wouldn't fit in this paragraph so I'll discuss it later.

The popularity of the society game faded, but not quite to nothing. Many thanks are due to the very few players who got the hang of this game completely and made it worth the effort. Reuben Wright's gang leader Max was the only spark of sanity in a surreal world and Mark Charsley's 'Moreau' and Kate Harding's 'Red' are characters I will remember long after the Conclave mages have faded from my mind. Psigen was very intense. Despite all the mistakes it was an unmissable experience in some ways, just a very dark one.

### *Thieves Guild 1*

Not surprisingly I became Campaign Organiser. Ralph, after all, was too busy being presidential. But I was faced with a decision that was new to the society game: what would the new game be? This question was answered for me later.

I also had to select a GMing team. The complexity of the RPGsoc. internal politics which resulted in my eventual choice simply does not bear describing. Suffice to say that the team consisted of myself, Kate Harding and Nina Karp. Any inappropriate thoughts that



people may have had regarding my team selection criteria were quickly dispelled by their unprecedented effectiveness. Don't ask me why but this time we were a team, not just three separate individuals. Having said that the rumours about squirty cream were completely true.

One of my initial choices for the GMing team had been the talented and mysterious Matt Marcus. This was a very good thing since he contributed a

bunch of die hard Conclave fans still muttered things about the good old days but nobody was any longer in doubt that the society game would live on.

### *Thieves Guild 2*

The week before TG2 started I spent a happy morning on the RPGsoc. freshers' fair stall telling freshers what Thieves Guild was (and indeed, what a roleplaying game was, which had

said that the other rumour about squirty cream is also true.

TG2 was set in the same 'world' as TG1. This background itself had in fact been pinched from a rather long running fantasy campaign of mine (GMs become attached to their work like that). However, whilst TG1 had been set in a city called Lankhmar (using the map from the AD&D <spit> sourcepack but none of Fritz Leiber's excellent contents), TG2



great many ideas which survived to the final version of the game, not least of which was the idea for the game itself: a thieves' guild in a large fantasy city.

Because of the nature of a university society RPGsoc. relies heavily on the quality of its 1st year intake each year. Psigen had caused a fair bit of damage there since it had meant that freshers joining the game had found it very off-putting. I decided to run a 1 term game for Trinity 94 and then, if it worked, to restart a game running under the same system for Michaelmas 94 - Hilary 95. This meant that a fair bit of experiment was possible without much to lose. Thieves Guild turned out to be easy to run but the plot was slightly less involved than I would have preferred since I had finals to deal with (sigh).

At the start of the game only a brave few turned up. After all there was an element of once bitten, twice shy after Psigen. However, the game took off very smoothly and reached an impressive level of popularity by the end eight weeks later. A

to be accomplished without saying the 'D' words). By the time I came to explain it at the introductory meeting the society had recruited an impressively large number of freshers. It wasn't until the first meeting until the consequences of this became apparent.

In response to Kate's question I replied that there were 32 of them so sharing the character generation rules one between two was not going to be possible. We both silently wondered if running such a huge game was going to be possible.

Sadly, Nina had returned to the States at the end of the previous year. This left us one GM short. We decided to replace her with Jonathan Walgate who, whilst not female, was considered cute by enough members to be allowed onto the team. He also had the advantage of being an experienced PBM player and for the kind of complicated reasons that only happen in Oxford, I already knew him very well. It wasn't Jonathan's fault but it has to be

was set in a cluster of six cities taken from my original game world. This expansion of horizons worked well but required a lot of work. It became apparent that game world size was a critical issue which we had finally got right (essentially by chance).

The plot this time was nice and twisty. This, it has to be said, put some players off. The numbers dropped back down to a (much more manageable) 20 or so. However, the players who stayed seemed to have much more enthusiasm for the game and the plotting became extremely involved. At one point the total volume of turnsheet material became so large it was barely possible to process them all in the Thursday afternoon slot the GMs used for this purpose (the fact that two of them had lectures during the afternoon was seldom a distraction, even when they remembered). For the first time since Conclave the players were generating their own plot in a big way. It wasn't the same as it had been though, the considerable skill of some players



began to show in the deviousness of these plans. Even more clever were the methods the players used to catch each other in the act and prevent themselves from being outwitted.

### *Game Evolution*

As with any new type of game it took the players a while to develop the tricks of the trade in the society game. Of course, you don't 'win' a roleplaying game but nonetheless many players have similar aims and all kinds of interesting conflicts develop in their pursuit of them. In what follows my apologies if my memory of any details are inaccurate, especially if I fail to credit your character for something they did first.

At the start of Conclave the first development occurred almost instantly. Factions sprang up amongst the mages to an extent that would have destroyed most conventional RPGs. Brian Wright's Bezique made history by being the first PC to be unpopular. Not long afterwards the first turnsheet action came in which one mage acted secretly against another, the extremely rich Count of Ulek (Pete Clark) was nibbled! Still, he could afford it. Now about halfway into the first term Sorengrim (me) intercepted a secret message directed at another mage concerning a magical tome, raced them to it and replaced it with a blank tome. Then came a very significant event: the Count of Ulek backstabbed king Archbold of Nyron (Jez Trace) and because of the actions of his troops the war became a disaster for Nyron. Then, another major event, the Count died in a duel which was the first ever PC death. It was thought to be suicide since any mage can escape instantly during a duel by using the 'evade' spell.

Now things had changed, a precedent was set for PCs worst enemies being other PCs. King Archbold died not long after and Jez returned as Vasheek. The next new move

was made by Rich Oates' character Morningstar who (being a bit demonic) ate the wife and child of Karg of Fax (Matt Nesbit). This is a key event because doing so conferred no advantage at all on Morningstar in game terms. Next came Sorengrim's gross abuse of executive power in which he was elected Inquisitor of the assembly, then convicted Bezique whom he didn't like and had him thrown in jail. The year after



(turn after) he was elected as Castellan (and therefore responsible for the cells) at which point he killed Bezique in his cell, making it look like suicide.

In the later stages of the game things became strange with deadly enemies meeting at the assembly and trying to maintain peace for the couple of hours it lasted. The next notable event was when Vasheek and Morningstar were convicted by the assembly and decided not to accept their punishment and simply ran away. This situation damaged the credibility of the meetings even further (worth noting since it was Psigen that became known for this). The last session of the game consisted of Vasheek, Morningstar and Nystagnus (Darren Leonard) attacking the Conclave itself backed up by the most preposterous army ever. I won't

tell you what happened 'cos I'm too modest (ho ho).

Then on to Psigen. A major change was provided by Impunity (Frances Hardinge) who was an assassin by profession and just killed people she didn't like. Many of the psigens were extremely violent and this led to a situation where if two people quarrelled it was a good bet one of them wouldn't survive the turn. Psigen wasn't noted for its player innovation apart from that.

TG1 produced (at last) a bit of upbeat inventiveness. Chris Fox's Varian Sulakis was the master of cunning plans in a way unheard of in Conclave. He and Nikolai (Jonathan) designed a plan which enabled them to walk off with half a shipload of gold ore in broad daylight right under the noses of half the guards in the city. These characters were just ordinary people, can you imagine what mages might achieve with that level of cunning? Also, players became much more willing to take cunning risks. Ralph's PC, Gwaed (whose full name I cannot spell) secretly met up with many of the supposedly 'bad' NPCs and gained a lot of useful information not to mention potential allies without compromising his own principles (do thieves have principles?).

When TG2 arrived the players managed to produce a level of play barely comparable to what had been seen before. As well as vying with each other in combat and also over money (of course), politically, over a love affair or two and even (on one occasion) the theft of a horse, the thieves also managed to pursue the GM generated plot very effectively. Vernacht Eisendorf (Rob White) and Hester (Dawn Hornsey) in particular both had a tendency to submit turnsheets of stunning complexity in pursuit of elusive plot elements.

After that burst of nostalgia the following point should be clear: the society can never go back to a system like



Conclave. The 'golden age' of Conclave which many players remember so fondly was really the period before the death of king Archbold (approximately). When you consider what has happened since even without magic and huge armies and hordes of followers it's scary to imagine what the players now could do if they went back then. A couple of characters had just begun to perceive what was possible by the end of Conclave (Lilith, played by Frances, was so sly I never suspected even slightly) but none (neither?) of them really directed their efforts at other players. The society game is a changed beast. What I still want to discuss is, will it change even further and also how much is possible in the scope of the game.

### *Bang You're Dead*

I think on balance there's only one development in playing style I really feel is necessary and that is an improvement in the plausibility of PC behaviour. The PC who tried to dress up as Elvis made society game history when I banned it, but at least they were joking. The big problem is with one player damaging the enjoyment of another by needlessly messing their character around.

Psigen is of course the classic example, nobody liked having their character killed. It happened a lot and a lot of players were quite pissed off. Importantly, I don't believe this was the fault of any of the players, it was a part of the way the game was set up. As a result TGI incorporated a rule that the GMs would forbid any PC from killing another without a very good reason. However, a character can be ruined for the player without it dying. Severe injury is an obvious example but really anything which makes to PC ineffective or doomed in such a way that they're no longer fun to play falls into this category. Where do we draw the line?

Really, I don't think this problem has a good answer. In TG2 the rule was that there had

to be some good justification for any dubious action. Sadly, this isn't as good as it sounds. There's always an excuse there if you're prepared to set it up. I believe the only solution is for the players to moderate the behaviour of their own characters too. I also believe it will happen, one it is generally perceived that to 'win' by gratuitously doing down everyone else's PC is not impressive but just superficial and irritating.

Note I'm not saying anything against PC vs. PC squabbles but I think that the target of any action has to 'have it coming'. Either they should deserve it or at least have reason to expect it. Of course this will mean that truly apathetic characters may be slightly untouchable but that's OK since if they're that apathetic then nobody cares about 'defeating' them anyway.

A consequence of this is that it will give players a chance to try much more subtle characters and bring in more different styles of roleplaying if they don't feel the combat characters are about to stab them.

### *What are the Limits ?*

Well, Jonathan will be running the society game starting from Trinity 95 and I'll be returning to the anonymous ranks of the players. Since he has already decided most of the details of the new game I think it's safe to discuss what I think the limits are to the society game's structure.

- It must be made at least fairly difficult for PCs to kill each other quickly or easily in a meeting. Otherwise there will always be players who will buy a bit of cheap glory by bumping off a player far more important than themselves.
- The game world must be such that the PCs can easily locate each other between meetings. This is of course before anti-espionage, spying etc. are taken into consideration. The point is that if this is not the case then the relatively inactive players are never involved in anything.

- Any freedom of design that the players are allowed (either in character generation or later) must fit a strict framework that is well understood by the GMs.

This is because otherwise someone will design something that outwits the GMs and they won't realise its importance until it is too late (I spent many long hours preventing this from happening with the Psigen 'foci' and I suspect if the players played that system again they would probably slip one past me).

- Power levels must be structured so that the PCs cannot between them control the whole game world. This is a much more subjective point but I think if it didn't hold then a coalition might well form to do just that. Such a PC controlled world might make for a very boring game (since effectively no GM plot could happen easily).

### *Credits and Things*

By way of an almost-conclusion I think that the nostalgia crew really ought to think about what they're saying more carefully. Conclave was really incredible but you can't go back to that just by reverting to the old game style. There are a lot of things in life which are never as much fun as the first time (and which I will make no attempt to list). Also, I don't think anyone need worry about the problems of Psigen recurring, it isn't going to happen since it was just a form of growing pains. I sincerely hope that some society GM of the future will run an SF game, with guns and prove that it can work.

My thanks to all the players whose character exploits are recorded here, particularly those players who have contributed a great deal to the society game whom I haven't mentioned.

I'll see you in the next game. Prepare yourself !

