Night Flyer

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The current and previous editors would like to apologise for any delay you may experience in receiving this Nightflyer. This will have been due to incompetence prevarication apathy an industrial dispute concerning the colour of the carriages. We would like to request the patience of the entire membership of D&Dsoc in the unlikely event of such a delay.

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BUT IS IT ART ? ... by Dominic Camus
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* It is sunrise. The camera pans across ancient pillars, high archways
* and the lush tropical plants that have grown through the ruins. As the
* tracking shot reaches the temple courtyard it zooms in on the figure
* sitting thoughtfully in the middle of the stone table. Unfortunately
* even the spectacular sunrise and the clever back-lighting of the
* figure cannot disguise the fact it is a rather scruffy student.

Hi. Is roleplaying a true art form ? Well, too many people have
wondered that already in too many articles so I'm not even going to
express an opinion. What I want to know is where are all the art
critics ? You know, those annoying people with designer silk ties who
read so much allusion and subtle meta-reference into some splatty mess
the artist painted when he was stoned one evening. Not that I've ever
seen someone GM whilst stoned... but I digress ! There are no RPG
critics since the art is the the performance and not in the rules or
the written adventures. Or there weren't until now...

* Screen fades to black and then flicks to a brightly lit studio with
* a tinted glass table and metal tubing chairs. The narrator is sitting
* cross legged on one of the chairs sipping a glass of 'water'. He is
* now wearing a designer silk tie and a nasty puce coloured lounge suit.
* He looks so uncomfortable, however, that you can still tell quite
* easily that he is a student.

OK, apologies in advance but I'm not going to write all this in a
proper art critic accent. If you want that effect then read the article
out whilst holding your nose, make all long vowels last at least one
second and end every other sentence with 'as such'.

Most art forms have two main types of people involved. These are the
artists, who are the ones with the dungarees, tie dyed t-shirts,
silly haircuts, Doc Martens, berets and attitude. Then there is the
audience, who are the ones with either time or money (depending on the
skill of the artist). Roleplaying also has two types of people
involved, these being the GMs and the players. Here, though, both are
artists and generally neither have any money. I want to say a few things
about both.

* Screen is black and then a crack of light appears from a doorway which
* slowly swings open into a dimly lit room. The camera moves just above
* floor level into the room, advancing slowly and panning left to right.
* The floor of the room is almost totally obscured by discarded crisp
* packets and chocolate wrappers. Those parts of it which are not are
* covered by tatty sheets of paper with scrawled writing and diagrams.
* The camera zooms in on the black clad, long haired figures lurking on
* and around the furniture. A caption appears : "The Players"

In a good game the players are as important as the GM. Critics have to say things like that which are both obvious and somewhat wrong. But the fact remains that when people sit around and talk about good games and bad games they are really talking about good GMs and bad GMs. After all, in Hebrew the words are the same (think about it). You are probably just thinking by this point that I am just speaking from a GM point of view and having a whinge. Not at all, since my games are dead good I am just trying to give my players some credit, see ?

There are lots of stereotypes of players : Rules Lawyer, Actor, Wargamer and all the rest. I suppose a critic could be trendy about things and say it's all about acting. On the other hand this is not really true. Even the most thespian amongst us occasionally get interested in the plot of our games. The other tempting thing to say is some sort of cheesy line about everything in moderation, a bit of acting and a bit of plot cracking and a bit of combat etc. Admittedly a lot of good players are like this, but it doesn't explain how some can be far more specialised and yet contribute even more to games they are in.

Perhaps the answer is in the idea of art. That would be a good pretentious thing to say in an article. The players need to feel less like the customers for the GM's creations and be more aware that they themselves are playing a part in entertaining both the other players and the GM. This is the real reason why acting is becoming popular in games, it's enjoyable listening to the other players when they are convincingly in character. On the other hand if someone beautifully acts a character who is really useless or a total pain in the neck that is less likely to be appreciated. The valuable players are the ones who really add to what is going on. A good group is a kind of team too (visions of nasty stripey football kit) in the sense that if every player wants to be loud and outrageous an lead the group then it will all fall apart.

So, from art critic to football coach as it were, what should one do to be a good player ? Again missing out all the usual hot air about practise, versatility, experimentation etc. I would say 'take control'. A bad game session is not something to sleep through, it is something to try to rescue. If the pace of the game is flagging, make your character do something. If the atmosphere is failing, make a point of staying in character. If the plot is boring then throw in your own character goals. Yes, this sort of thing is hard work but if all the players and the GM are trying to make things good at once the effort will be spread and the game will work well.

* A view of the Earth from space expands into the screen. The picture
* zooms in through the cloud cover to Europe, then England, then Oxford
* and finally to a house. The roof fades away to give an aerial view of
* a roleplaying game in progress, which looks alarmingly like a load of
* chimps playing with polyhedral dice. After a short pause, the voiceover
* cuts in. "The real question is, what is responsible for this

* fascinating behaviour ?". A caption appears : "Player Motivations"

You are probably familiar with the situation where you tell someone you are a roleplayer and they pull a funny face. Equally odd is the way you can say the same thing to another roleplayer and they accept you like a long lost brother (particularly unsettling if you are a girl). But why do people roleplay ? If you answered either "Because it's fun" or you came out with a load of psychoanalysis then go and stand in the corner. I don't like people who come out with the correct answers in the middle of my article so keep quiet.

The question was particularly rhetorical. I think there are lots of different reasons but from an 'art critic' viewpoint we ought to think about them more. To give a concrete example, since there have been enough trite generalisations already, what about 'experience points' ? These have survived all the way from original D&D to the gothic slickness of the White Wolf games. Has this never struck anyone as strange ? Why should people become dramatically better over the course of a game ? The ultimate reason is because so many players really like it.

I won't attempt a list because I would miss out an obvious one and then someone would irritate me by pointing it out. I suggest, though, that a mark of both good play and good GMing is satisfying peoples desires. Sorry, I had a much better wording for that sentence but I could hardly resist stimulating your interest, however briefly. Sex in your games is not what I meant, actually !

Most people when they GM are at least vaguely aware of a need to cater for players' preferences. This is one reason why the Oxford FLRP (Fantasy Live RolePlaying) is so full of combat. But what about when you are a player ? I think in many respects that each one of the players should be aware of the style of the others and cater for it during play. If a particular player likes their characters to seem heroic then roleplay your own character's reaction as they would react to a hero, even if the person's actual playing of their hero is less than convincing. When the party needs to carry out some daring feat then suggest that they would have the best chance of success. Or consider a player who enjoys intense in character acting. When interacting with their PC take special care to always do so in character. If you see an opportunity to do so then provide them with interesting opportunities for dialogue, eg. "If we storm the keep now they may take the princess hostage but if we wait until tonight the baron may have fled..." might as well be said to them in character rather than having an out of character strategic discussion. Ignore the fact that a line that tacky would probably provoke laughter, you know what I meant !

Really, the GM and the players should all be equally aware of all the things required to make the game run well. The only thing marking the GM out is that they are in control of so much more.

* A series of quick sequences flick onto the screen each showing a roleplayer
* gesturing or rolling dice or talking frantically. Between each of these
* tiny clips is an equally short sequence of some character in a critical
* situation such as a swordfight or a car chase. After the sequence there
* are a few longer shots of arch baddies laughing evilly and then the camera
* pans up from below to a student in a baggy shirt and jeans, lit dramatically
* from below and laughing in a very similar way. He is holding a fistful of
* dice and a large hardback book. A caption appears : "The GM"

Oh good. Now I have cunningly tricked you into reading this I can get on
with writing "How to GM" ! No, actually I'm not going to. Art criticism of
GMing revolves much more around the different elements of GMing rather than
hints as to how to do each of them well. And besides, I'd get lynched, or
probably worse since RPGSoc are an imaginative lot...

Anyway, where was I ? I suppose I'll start with a big list of all the things
that I regard as important elements : plot, background, rules, description,
interaction, pace and impact. Since that was entirely uninformative I'll
now explain those one by one. Instead of definitions, though, I am more
trying to pick on those things I would look for to mark out an excellent
game from a mediocre one.

Plot : There ought to be things happening which are of interest to the PCs.
In my view the GM is failing in this respect if any PC finds there is
nothing in the game world which is of interest to him. The plot need not
be at all complex, but the players should feel motivated by it. Conversely
if your plot gets too complex it will end up like one of mine and your
players will spend the next two years after the end of the campaign asking
you what was really going on.

Background : The players need to feel they understand how their characters
see the world. Background does not need to be deep and rich, it just needs
to be enough (or rather 'enough'(tm)). For example if the PCs wake up
with no memories at all, naked and in an unknown place then virtually no
feeling of background is needed. That is *why* the 'no memory' approach
is so popular and effective, because it gives the PCs a superb understanding
of background.

Rules : The rules must not in any respect distort the game world or the
actions of the players. This does not have to be a property of the rules
system. A good GM can take a bad commercial system but add their own
rulings and end up with a good game. Systemless is not a miracle answer
either. As anyone who has played it a lot will tell you, true systemless
play adds many distortions. Here's a good criterion : if your game session
was translated literally into a film sequence, could an RPG knowledgeable
viewer work out what rules system was used ? If the answer is yes or maybe
then the game fails this test. Someone is now going to come up with all
kinds of daft examples like the ducks from Runequest or the unmistakeable
background of Paranoia. Well all good theories have exceptions...

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 drawls, "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 embarassed 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. "Its 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,

Pace : This is a matter of taste. My observation would be, though, that
the players can almost always handle a higher pace than the GM. This is
an indication, I suspect, of laziness and inadequate time spent preparing.
Some of the most fast flowing games I have played in have been run by
masters of improvisation and they were very, very good. In fact there's
a lesson from the art of storywriting which applies to GMing : it is
better to run one awesome game than two mediocre ones. So next time you
have a campaign idea, pack the whole thing into a one-off and keep the
pace going the whole time. Either it will be the best game you ever run
or the players will slow it up so much it won't finish until 4 in the
morning.

Impact : Hard to pin down and harder to achieve. We have all had that
feeling in the middle of a game where we suddenly realise that our
character's feelings have become our own. Strangely, players and GMs
tend to agree on when this has occurred. As a critic I would certainly
look for this factor. However, I told you this was not a "How to GM"
article... and indeed I have no idea how this effect is done despite
having managed it once or twice. If you think of it as a sort of
mystic art you might not be far wrong though. It's when you set out
to create one truly perfect session that impact is sometimes achieved.
I don't know if meditating on a mountaintop first would help, but it
might be worth a try.

* Screen fades out and credits roll. Thanks to all the GMs whose games
* I have been in since I started properly being a player two years ago.
* Thanks also to Dawn Camus, whose own views on both play and GMing have
* influenced a lot of this article. And lastly thanks to the countless
* players who have been in my many games, they kept the games alive as
* much as I did. Director - Dominic Camus. A NightFlyer Production.

AWW!! Has 'ums Got a Cold, Den??   by Georgia Ingram
(Or Illness and Injury in RPGs)

In real life (TM) it is very rare for anyone to say that they consider themselves to be, and to always have been totally healthy. Most people can recall (often in vomit-inducing detail) several incidents throughout their life where they have been ill or injured, yet it is comparatively rare to find a player-generated roleplaying character who is anything less than reasonably fit, and full of vitality.

Creating the background of a newly generated Player Character or NPC gives you a basis upon which to plant your roleplaying of that character's personality. The inclusion of a past injury (from which the character may or may not still be suffering) or a present illness (mental or physical) can add a further solidity to that character's concept, and can be incredibly fun to play (this may be seen most obviously by observing those who have a Malkavian character in a Vampire: The Masquerade game).

Illness in general, when utilised by a discerning GM, can also complicate what would otherwise be a fairly simple storyline or scenario. For example, if a party wish to travel from village A to village B, insert a dead/dying woman halfway along the road with two screaming toddlers tied to her wrist, and watch the players decide/argue what to do about it....

To return to the point of this article, which is to extoll the joys of including illness or injury in PC generation and roleplaying....There are two main forms of illness to be found in the real and roleplaying worlds, physical illness or disease, and the so-called mental ilnesses. Both can be used to modify a character, although obviously the sorts of diseases encountered will vary greatly according to the gameworld scenario used. Maybe your PC has a limp? In a 1930s Cthulu game the character could have had polio as a child, but in a Runequest game they may have been "possessed by demons, who then departed, but left one leg weakened". A transient but reccurent illness such as epilepsy (interpretated by the other players as is relevent to the gameworld in question) can provide a periodic lack of control of the PC (which a GM may be keen to exploit) and will affect the way that other PCs relate to the character. Perhaps the character in a 15th century AD&D game could have suffered from smallpox but recovered; the resulting pocks upon their face would leave them physically ugly and result in emotional scarring too. Alternatively the character could carry some sort of infectious disease such as influenza, tuberculosis, hepatitis, AIDS or syphyllis, and if the other PCs were not aware of this, they could become infected. I have not mentioned the very obvious and more imminently fatal things such as plague, rabies and leprosy, as these are more suitable for a GM to supply as a threat to the PCs than for an individual to attempt to play as a PC who will usually be a member of a party of players.

The creation of a PC with a mental illness can be disruptive to gameplay if overdone, but disorders such as phobias, schizophrenia, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder (eg the PC feels that he MUST wash his hands after touching anything as it's "unclean") can offer great

oppurtunities for lots of character interaction, which is often one of the most important factors making a campaign enjoyable. Making the portrayal of having an illness convincing does entail the player having a rough idea of what the disease in question involves, but the extra "homework" that this may cause shouldn't take too long, and will in most cases be well rewarded.

Injuries or accidents affecting PCs can be used to give a fullness to the character's background, even if it's something as simple as an old broken leg that aches if the party is walking all day. If the scenario is suitable, an old physical or psychological battle wound may affect the character. They may have unusual or prominent scars, or suffer from blinding headaches. They may have a fear of knives after giving thamselves a bad cut, or be missing a finger or (more extremely) a limb. Old injuries or illnesses may well have an effect upon the characters stats under some circumstances, and (as always) it's up to the GM in question to decide how to deal with the problem.

The main thing that the presence of illness and injury provides in roleplaying games is a sense of greater realism; it reminds the players that no-one is invincible (give that mighty 12th level warrior with a large sword and larger ego a good dose of food-poisoning to see what I mean!) and can be used both by the GM and the players to add a personal touch to the roleplaying of what may be a fairly basic storyline. The best way to see if you agree with me is to try creating such a PC; I think you'll find that it can be fun to play a character who's more like you or I than a super-fit, ultra-healthy Mr or Ms Perfection 1996 !


Ten things I would do if I had a very large amount of money
Steve Pugh

10) Put together a rescue package for Leading Edge Games. (On second thoughts, why bother?*Q: How many Phoenix Command players does it take to change a light bulb? A: You mean there's more than one?*)

9) Put together a rescue package for Games Designers Workshop. (*Q: How many GDW games designers does it take to change a lightbulb? A: That's not funny.*)

8) Invent a time machine, travel back to the late seventies and tell Gary Gygax to get himself a good lawyer.

7) Finance MPhil's, DPhil's, fellowships and a professorship in role-playing at Oxford University. (*Q: How many RPGSoc members does it take to change a lightbulb? A: None, they like it in the dark.*)

6) Take out a court order banning game titles with a colon in the middle. (Well that's White Wolf f**ked...)

5) Develop a *Terminator* LARP, where LARP stands for Live *Ammo* Role Playing.

4) Buy a copy of Dragon #1. (Nah, would never have enough money to do that.)

3) Conduct extensive research to determine the accuracy of the critical hit tables in *Rolemaster*.

2) Buy a majority share holding in Games Workshop and turn the clock back ten years.

1) Buy up *all* the *Magic: The Gathering* cards and pulp them. (*Q: How many Magic players does it take to change a lightbulb? A: They don't have enough money to buy lightbulbs.*)
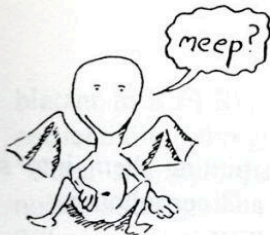
FLRP

with Al Halsby

Some of you may remember the proposed FLRP gamesmastering workshops we were planning to hold. The problem with them was that it was very difficult to reach a consensus about what should be said to new GMs, as all of us involved seemed to have significantly different styles of GMing. As such, it seemed a much better idea for everyone who thought they had something to say about FLRP GMing to say it themselves, in Nightflyer, and for people to make up their own minds.

So for what it's worth, here are my personal ideas and methods of writing FLRPs.

Firstly, I'd like to point out that GMing a FLRP is a very unusual experience. It combines the stress of writing a tabletop game, the complexity of crafting a society game and the out and out lunacy and problems of keeping a mob of unruly role-players waving rubber swords on the track of your intricate and fragile plot.

Not an easy job at all, but strangely rewarding, as long as you don't expect the game to go the way you planned it. This last point is very important indeed - the monsters and players will do things you hadn't expected, and the game's own mysterious meta-plot will stir, and next thing you know you'll be frantically making stuff up to keep everyone on some kind of manageable track, all the while pretending this is exactly how you planned it originally. It's a great experience, (especially if it goes right), but you do need the confidence to take control of the game - in FLRP more than anything else, you can be wrong, but never indecisive.

One of the best ways to boost your confidence while running the game is to have prepared as much as possible in advance, and this is really what this article is about. As far as I can see, the GM's responsibilities in FLRP are, in order of occurrence:

WE'RE NOT GOING NEAR THAT THING - ...IT DOES TRIPLES!

Preparation:
Coming up with the concept, Writing the plot & NPCs then putting them into scenes, Preparing the props (if desired) and player character generation and consultation.

Playing:
Giving the briefings: Monsters, Players, Safety.
Running the encounters and battleboarding.

This is obviously rather simplistic, as your primary task (and the one that is the most difficult) are the encounters, but being confident to handle the others makes this less of a daunting challenge. One important thing is to have read the rules - I am working on the new rulebook at the moment and hope to have it finished and printed by next term sometime, but draft copies are available now and you should ask either Hanbury or myself if you want a look at one. Spells are particularly important in this, as while it is possible to get someone else to organise them, it's nice to know exactly what your players can throw at you and be ready for it. Also, it's useful to know what format any special powers or monsters should take - any guru will be happy to help you with this.

Encounters
        All FLRPs are divided into several encounters (or scenes) of varying complexity. Encounters are any incident during the game which requires monster/player briefing, so they vary from the simple and traditional bandit warm-up scene to the ultimate denouement of the plot, and the termination of the villains. On the whole, there are about 12 major scripted encounters in a standard game, of about 15 minutes each, and usually no fewer than half of these involve combat of some sort. My personal belief is that the fight scenes should be evenly interspersed with the more role-playing orientated encounters, so the players (and monsters) don't get bored or tired.

Concept
        The concept of your game is really up to you - the FLRP gurus sometimes have certain plot elements that have to be handled in a certain way (no killing off Talen Coldblood for example) but on the whole, whatever the GM wants can be easily accommodated. If you want to use a major villain or race, go ahead, but it's normal to consult with the gurus in advance, to check they don't have something in mind or suggestions about how to organise things - for example, in many cases a certain race or NPC will have been created by someone (in my case, the Yama'Shu) and that person will be able to help you work these into your plot, while maintaining their integrity and character.
        The concept can be as broad, or as small as you like, from a simple 'this is a wilderness bash' to 'this is a complex and threatening town/village adventure with Cthuloid undertones' - it really depends what you're comfortable with. Personal concepts (those which hinge around a certain player or group) are much more difficult to handle, as firstly the players may not do what you want, and secondly you don't really want the remainder of the party to feel unimportant or left out. They can be done, but on the whole they are more complex and have a greater chance to go wrong - if the prime movers behind your plot are your own NPC characters, you can change them midway to cope with upsets - if your plot is dependant upon player actions, you're in for trouble, as players have a wonderful ability to make a mess out of anything. On that note, when planning adventures, it's important to remember that PCs have an even more wonderful ability to make plots up themselves while ignoring things staring them in the face. As far as I can tell, it is almost impossible to be too

blatant in a FLRP, so if there's a vital clue the players must know, it's best to tell them sequentially (with gradually increasing volume) -

"Oo-ar sirs, aye, there's been cows carried off without trace and strange creaking roaring noises at noight!'

'Y'know young Wilhelmina? The barman's young girl? Werl, nowt was found of her but 'er shift.... arrr... and some blood. Poor fing - never even been kissed neither...'

'You smell strange noxious sulphur fumes drifting down from the extinct volcano.'

'This looks like a DRAGON's lair. Yes, a big flappy flamy thing. D-R-A-G-O-N!'

(PCs - 'So perhaps its a vampire?' 'I still reckon we should check out the mage's tower'.)
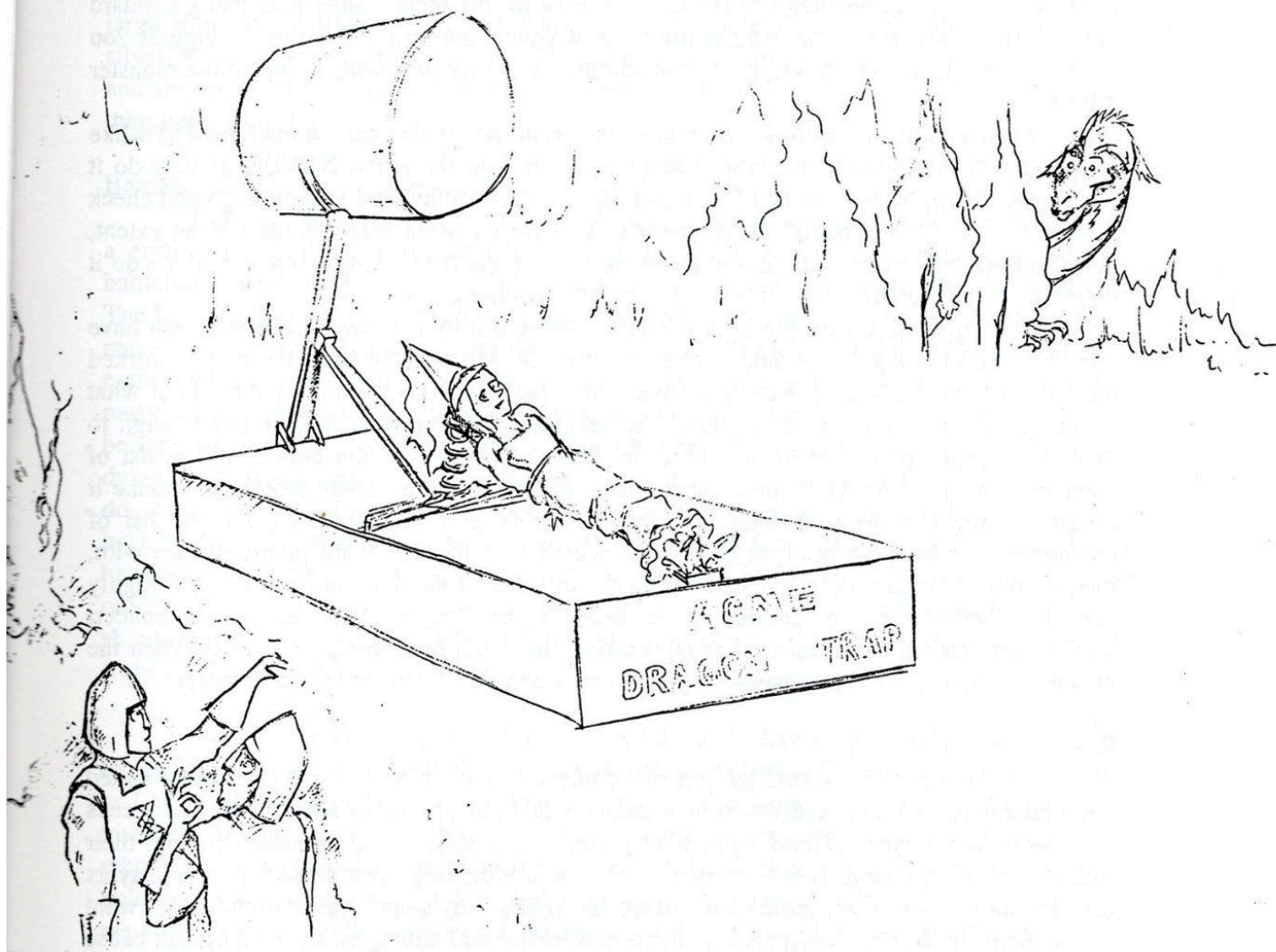
Plot

The plot needs to be quite self-contained, with start-up scenes (such as a meeting with Lord Brandel or other NPCs), development (where the party slowly discovers what's going on) and finally a sequence of end encounters where the party resolves the problem, or achieves their aims. Personally I think it's best that the players do achieve something during every part of the game - they don't have to win every encounter, but they mustn't feel demoralised or helpless, as this both reduces their involvement and enjoyment and also means that if you have something spectacularly nasty set up (a particular favourite of mine) the players are less surprised and worried when it hits them, because they never expected to be able to cope. As the primary state of any player is one of almost complete confusion, it's best to allow them some faint illusion of control and competence, by letting them win occasionally.

I think this is a good time to introduce one of my personal essentials for writing a

good FLRP - the crafting of intricate monsters. While the monsters are (in theory) only there to provide the backdrop for the player's game, you mustn't forget that the monsters are excellent role-players themselves, and one of your greatest resources, and if you give them something to get stuck into, they will throw themselves into it with a will, making the game even more spectacular. You don't have to go to the lengths I do (I like to write named NPCs with specific traits and aims for every encounter) but don't neglect your monsters, or your game will suffer badly. For this reason, you should aim to write most scenes so that an almost infinite number of monsters can be used, whether being corpses, ubiquitous villagers, irritating goblins or simply gratuitous wildlife(1 Ralph). Giving even your simplest monsters specific things to focus on means their characters come alive for the scene, rather than being standard nasties. This does take some extra writing, but if you've got time, I'd seriously suggest you consider it while you're finalising your adventure, or simply deal with it during the monster briefing.

Finally (although there are a score of important points that can be made here) I'd like to say one more thing on the subject of plot. Never split the party. NEVER. If they do it themselves ('Alright, Kurgen and I will go to Igor's blacksmithy, and you three go and check out the pie shop') then punish them severely. This does restrict player actions to an extent, but it's a total nightmare to GM, and everyone ends up confused. Simply enough, don't do it unless you know exactly what you're doing, and even then, don't.

Once you have your plot, you are ready to hack it into scenes - it's best if you have this in mind all along, but it tends to be easy enough. Most of the time, the plot is worked out between the GMs, and then they have a long session of bickering amiably about what should go where. Each encounter should be relatively self-contained and simple enough to explain to confused and weary monsters in a few words out on the common. The list of encounters is also what you'll be reading out (normally) at the monsters briefing, so make it relatively simple - the GM needs to have the whole plot in their head, but the list of encounters can be quite brief, or at least annotated with the important points to start with, then a more complex description. I think it's very important for both GMs to be highly conversant with the encounters before they begin the briefings, so they can work in concert without referring back to each other all the time, as you'll be doing that anyway when the players get their sticky little paws on your game and molest it in unspeakable ways.

Running the game

This is the most rewarding part of GMing a FLRP - if you've got everything sorted out, you can relax into it and watch your creation come to life. Don't worry if certain scenes don't work out as you planned - just gently guide your players and monsters through their ordeal with a firm hand. However, don't make the all-too easy error of seeing your players as your enemies - they are more your victims (grin) and if by some strange impulse you want to see them suffer, coax and persuade them into scenes and situations where they can cause their own downfall.

Generally, the start of your job will be the monster briefing. I've already discussed this to an extent, but a few points might help - I don't think that monsters normally remember much more than the basics of the plot, so don't waste too much time explaining exactly why people are doing things or the specific descriptions of the scene - leave that until you are briefing the NPCs just before their encounter, as you'll have to do it anyway, so you might as well save your breath. Give the monsters an edited and honest assessment of the plot, then go straight into the scenes, mentioning every NPC you have created on the first reading. After you have finished, go through the whole thing again and allot monsters to NPCs, trying to get an even balance of all the monsters, even if some of them always put their hands up (I

tend to be guilty of this). If any of them have major roles, try and take them aside at some point before their scene and explain the character in more detail, ensuring they have plenty of time to assess their powers and work out how they might use them. Exploit the average monster's love of getting into character by giving them interesting teasers as well as fully developed NPCs, so they spend a while thinking and developing a personality. In my view, this is a great bonus to FLRP - you don't have to play every major character if you prepare your monsters well. Don't think that you have to explain everything - sometimes it's better (and less time-consuming) to say 'you make it up'.

When running the game, don't think you have to do everything yourself - there are a large number of experienced players who are quite capable of setting up subsidiary scenes or situations - delegate as much as possible rather than briefing everyone. 'You take 6 people and set up an ambush over there please - Orcs at 4/3 hits I think' is much more convenient than getting flustered!

Battleboarding

The mechanics of battleboarding is a complex issue which I won't go into here (ask a guru to explain), save to say that the battleboarder is always on the player's side. The battleboarder is telling the players how they feel - something they should know instinctively. The battleboarder should not tell the players how their hit points are going, but they should make every effort to explain exactly that in more descriptive terms, and the GMs should know extensively how the players are doing, so they can tone down (or up) monsters and other nasty scenes - players should not die or be totally crippled by normal fights. This rule can be ignored if the players show especial stupidity beyond the call of duty, but on the whole, dying is not something the GMs inflict upon their party, but something the player chooses to do. As such, if you discover that their cleric was unfortunately thwokked five times in the back by firebolts, and is to all intents and purposes dead (and the party is relying on her to heal the lot of them) then cheat with a clear conscience. While one GM is battleboarding, the other will normally be setting up the next scene and briefing the monsters. The battleboarder should return to the monster GM and discuss any problems ('one of em can't take a bruise from a goblin!') before the next encounter.

Well, I've rambled on enough for one article, and I haven't got half of what I wanted to say in yet, so I might as well stop there. Gamesmastering a FLRP is a great experience, as I have said before, but one of the biggest difficulties we seem to have is getting new GMs involved. The general idea is that you'll be paired with an experienced GM for your first one, who will show you the ropes and keep you on track, after which you simply have to volunteer. Don't be scared of GMing, or of making a fool of yourself - it's a bit pointless as we all do it very regularly anyway and no-one minds at all, so if anyone at all would like to chat about GMing at any time, I (and the other Gurus) would be only too happy to help.

Finally, (just to reiterate) this article is purely my own views on the subject of GMing - one of the particularly nice things about the campaign is the fact that almost every FLRP is different in style, and we'd very much like to keep it that way. I'm sure others will have lots to say on this subject, so I'll lay off and get down from my soapbox. Death to the Shadowpact!

seeya,
al.

Don't get any ideas PAL!

GREEN!!
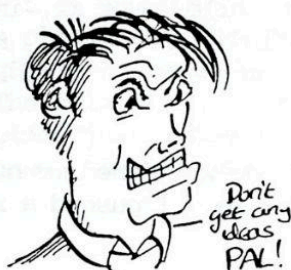
Dream-Lover

I don't know who makes the dreams, but they're a real bastard. A bastard or a saint, I'm not sure which. And now I don't think I'll ever know.

I met you for the first time in a dream. It was a silly little thing, I can't remember what about. The only remarkable thing in it was you.   I hung onto it as long as possible, trying not to wake up. But eventually I had to, and I almost cried when reality hit me over the head like a bucket of ice. I went back to my grey life, my grey school, my grey friends. The empty ache within me that you had filled for a night still hurt, nothing had changed.

Except my dreams. Because I dreamed of you again, months after. You were more real, this time, and I could almost believe in our dream-love. I woke with your arms around me, until I moved. And then I remembered my first dream, and dared to hope that I would dream of you again.

I had always lived in a world of dreams, it was an easy step to go to ignore the real world altogether. All I had to do was endure until the night, when sometimes you'd visit me. Those nights made up for all my pain. At last I experienced love, at last I had a place in someone's heart. I lived two lives in my time, and the only one I cared for was the one that others said wasn't real.

You see, I always knew we didn't have long. You were too beautiful to ever be touched by age, too reckless to die in your bed. You'd made the choice of the heroes, whether you knew it or not. Live fast, die young. And death is death, even in a dream.

Of course, I knew you were faithless. How could someone like you stay tied to someone like me? I'm not beautiful, or witty, or anything that could hold you, not even in a dream. It was enough that you came back to me, however long it took. The psychologists would say I imagined you like that because I didn't believe I deserved better. But then, nobody was asking their opinion. No woman could have deserved all of you. I had your heart, and it was all that I ever wanted. You were perfect. Beautiful, intelligent, witty, laughing, generous. Everything, in fact, except real.

I woke with your arms around me and lay still, trying not to lose the feeling. But this time it was you who moved. I rolled over and there was a man in my bed, in the spinster's bed I'd never bothered trying to fill. I wasn't frightened. Enlightenment rolled over me, in a golden glow of dream-light. I'd married you yesterday, hadn't I? How could I ever have forgotten! Three months ago I'd met a man called Kieran, and yesterday we'd got married.

You must have woken when I moved, because you whispered my name and pushed yourself up on one elbow, looking at me. I pushed a renegade

strand of hair away from your sleepy green eyes. And again I wondered why someone as beautiful as you wanted to hang around with someone like me. And I wondered how long we had.

I'll skip the next bit. If people want to read a love story, there's thousands of Mills and Boon out there. No need for me to make them sick as well. And there's people who can write Black Lace far better than I ever could. So let's just say that we were in love. You had my heart and I had yours, and that's all that anyone needs to know.

It felt a bit strange, being married. From a new perspective all my life, all my friends, seemed different. Take Aileen. All the time I'd known her she'd seemed a nice sort of girl, with boyfriend after boyfriend. I'd always envied her. But now, now she just seemed lonely. Your influence, I guess. Sometimes it felt as if you were at my elbow, pointing out the loneliness I'd never seen. Couples I'd thought were in love, just clinging together because they weren't strong enough to live apart. I knew what real love was, and I pitied them. They had so little, how could I grudge them my share of you?

Oh Kieran, I'd always known you weren't faithful. How could someone like you ever be tied to just one woman? Of course I didn't mind. the others could have anything of you that they wanted, as long as I had your heart. But the death I'd always sensed in you was coming closer.

It was Aileen that did it. The moment I knew you were seeing her, I was terrified. I didn't know why, except that you were going to die and she was all caught up in it. But I couldn't tell you that. For the first time we argued, and you left me crying to go and see her anyway.

We started to grow apart, Kieran. Your heart was still mine, but more and more your body was hers. Aileen and I grew to hate each other for the halves of you we had, and I hated her more because loving her would kill you. I was certain of it now.

You didn't understand what I felt. You thought I was jealous. But oh Kieran, I wasn't, I was just frightened. And you were going away from me when I needed you most.

And then one night you left me and didn't come back.

I think I knew what had happened from the first. Don't ask me how, I just knew. The nights passed and you didn't return to me, and there was a sick despair in the pit of my stomach because the doom I had seen for you pressed down on me, and nothing could lift it.

Four nights later, they found your body. Slit from throat to groin, wrapped in a black plastic bag and buried in the park. They called me in to identify you. But what could I identify of yours in that lifeless, mangled corpse? The pain hit me, more than I could bear. The love was gone, and in its place just a bleeding wound that would never heal past the aching loneliness. In hurt and in terror I did the only thing that was left me to do.

I awoke.

I woke alone, in the spinster's bed I'd never bothered trying to fill, and I dressed alone in the echoing house. And then, wondering, I went to my jewellery box and took out and held the uneven round shape that felt like soft leather in my hands.

I don't know who makes our fates, but they're a real bastard. A bastard or a saint, I'm not sure which. And I don't care anymore, because now I know that whatever happens I'll always have the only thing I ever wanted.

Your heart.
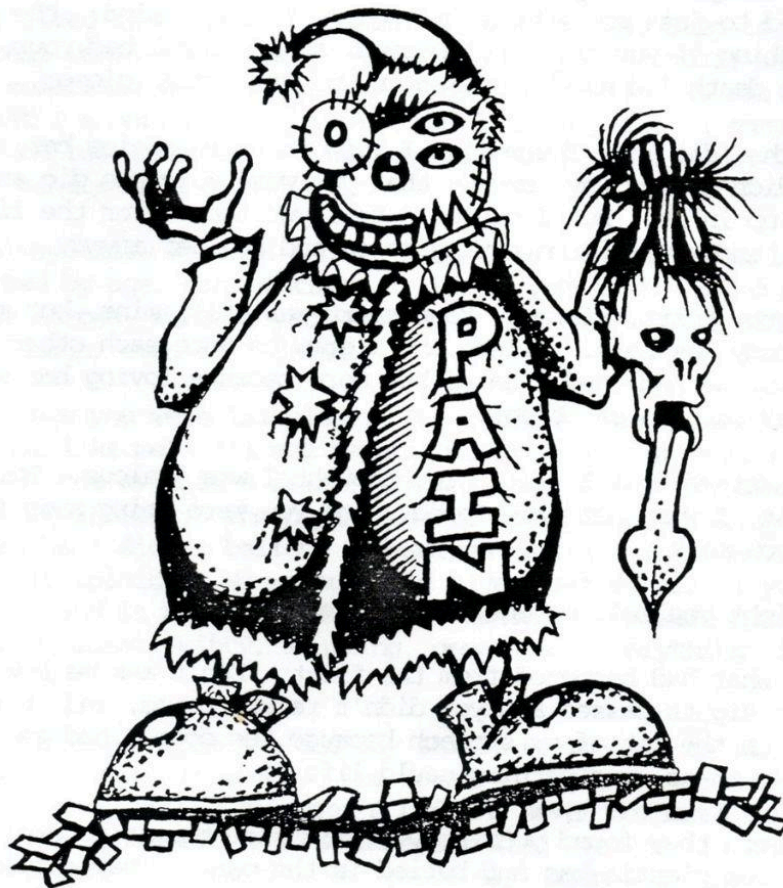
A Share of the Glory

Introduction

There are times that I want more from my players. As a GM, I do a lot of entertaining, and it should be reasonable to expect the players to entertain me for a change. But, whereas movie heroes manage feats of daring and bravery all the time, very rarely do you find the average PC swinging accross a room by a chandelier, or trying to skydive into a diving aeroplane somewhere in Siberia...

Cinematism is a particular style of roleplaying game, but rarely is it ever that - a roleplaying movie. Anecdotes about cinematic feats in games are few and far between, and usually revolve around luck of the dice as opposed to the will of the player. In order to be truly cinematic, you have to work at it. Luck has nothing to do with it. In a cinematic game, the player has to assume some of the responsibility to the GM's task of setting the atmosphere. Foremost, they have to take charge of the situation themselves, and step into the limelight...

Stepping into the Limelight

Often it is the case that the GM so dominates the game session that players are more spectators than active characters. This is not necessarily a bad thing per se., but for a cinematic, dramatic game it is the worst thing possible. Cinema is about character interaction and character action. It is about individuality and characterisation much more than plot development. Most of all, it is larger than life - and this is the point at which players begin to falter.

Players can handle characterisation fine, 'cos that's what roleplaying is, and the degree to which the plot affects the PCs is largely up to the GM. However, being a larger than life stereotype is not something which comes naturally to us. Perhaps it is because it is generally accepted that it is the GM's job to build the plot and to provide atmosphere, and the player's job to respond to it (which is fair enough). But, if you want to be truly glorious, you need to go further - you need to seize the plot and the attention of fellow PCs for yourself. What is more, you need to be autonimous, at least to a certain extent. You need to be prepared to write parts of the script yourself, rather than depending on the GM to come up with all of the drama and atmosphere. It's hard work, this GMing lark...

Some interesting player - GM psychology can be observed. Some players are unwilling to step into the limelight and add to the atmosphere because it could be seen as a challenge to the GM's "authority". At the same time, other players can assume too much of their capabilities, forcing the GM to continuously say "no!". There is, therefore, a fine line between player autonomy and player anarchy. Generally, this is exemplified by the simple rule - do anything that you like as long as
>   (a) it's in character
>   (b) it's impressive, cinematic, stereotypical or comical
>   (c) it doesn't require a skill roll

That last point is particularly important - and demonstrates the fine line between autonomy and anarchy.

Something like this...

GM: *you stand at the huge double doors, behind which you are certain to find Shao Kahn, leader of the Dark Tide which is the scourge of the civilised worlds.*

Players: *We open the door...*

...becomes this

GM: *...you stand before the huge double doors, behind which you can almost sense the presence of Shao Kahn, leader of the Dark Tide which is the scourge of the civilised worlds...*

Player 1: *I KICK open the doors, and stand there as an impressive silhouette with my companions at my sides. "Prepare to die, Kahn!"*

In this example, the players have not assumed too much (beyond their ability to kick open a huge door...), but the amount they have added to the scene is obvious. It is also very rewarding to take charge of the situation in such a way (it's one of the main rewards of GMing...).

<u>Who Dares, Wins</u>

There is a distinction to be made between describing your action in a cinematic sense, and actually doing something which is cinematic by definition. Opening a door, addressing a crowd of onlookers, and even fighting can either be done with style or without. But running along the roof of a moving train, swinging from chandaliers, or jumping a horse from a quayside onto a rapidly receding barge are by their very nature extremely risky, daring, foolhardy and above all, rewarding actions if they go in your favour.

One of the reasons that PCs don't behave in this way is the fear of failure. It's sort of embarrasing to say to an arch-bad "I'm gonna kick your ass" and then fail to do just that. In order to be a hero in a cinematic game, you need to develop an over-inflated ego, a certain flair, and a knack for world-class stupidity. For example:

Scene no 1: the villains are escaping justice via a helecopter from a skyscraper rooftop, when Our Hero (tm) appears on the scene.

Sensible player: *I'll use my pistol to take out the pilot, preventing then from escaping.*

Stupid player: *I'll make a heroic leap onto the landing skids of the helicopter as it takes off, and try to hang on and fight my way into the cabin whilst dangling from 1000 ft up...*

Scene no 2: the Our Hero is being pursued accross a narrow rope bridge by the Bad Guys (tm), above a bottomless chasm. Suddenly, he finds himslef confronted by more Bad Guys approaching from the other side of the bridge.

Sensible player: *I'll draw my gun and shoot everyone.*

Stupid player: *I'll cut the rope bridge and try to hang on as it impacts withthe chasm wall...*

Scene no. 3: Our Hero has been captured by Mr Big (tm), the boss. Mr Big intends to kill Our Hero... but how?

Sensible GM: *Right, Goldfinger draws a gun and shoots you between the eyes, then twice in the chest, then in the head again just to make sure. You're dead.*

Stupid GM: *Goldfinger leaves you alone, about to be dissected by a powerful laser beam. You still, of course, have your acid watch that Q gave you...*

Fundamentally, what makes action cinematic is risk. It is the sheer preposterousness of the situation, the audacity of the hero in attempting the most dangerous course of action. Of course, in order for the players to have the opportunity to perform feats of such staggering idiocy, the GM must somehow fit them into their action scenes. But that's a simple matter; a rickety rope bridge here, a chandelier there, and Bob is your manservant.

Of course, there is one overriding force which prevents players from acting in such a fashion - ie, common sense. If they manage to succeed, then surely the glory of the situation is a reward greater than mere experience points. But, if they should fail, well, the consequences could be dire, and more than most players are willing to risk. Of course, there are some times when the GM deliberately puts the players in such a situation, but ideally it should be self-inflicted; it's so much more entertaining that way. But, should things go wrong, then I implore you...

Have mercy, O GM!

If things do start to go awry - such as swinging accross a ravine and losing one's grip on the rope - the GM should be as lenient as possible. A mean GM would say that losing one's grip on the rope whilst swinging accross a ravine would be fatal, whilst a lenient GM would allow for an uncomfortable impact with the far side of the chasm and ask the player to test the strength of his character's fingernails.

Basically, GMs aren't usually trying to kill PCs anyway, but in the event that they do something stupid then it is occasionally justified. But above all, even if PCs die, they should never, ever go quietly. Every well-played PC deserves at least a couple of final words at their deathbed, a chance to shoot the villain in the back from their prone and dying position, a few more seconds of breath long enough to haul themselves along the floor to press the big red button...

GMs should work with players to ensure their survival. If the PCs are really asking for it, then at least their deaths should be glorious, even if their lives weren't.

Shout about it

Players are normally very good at roleplaying verbally in non-stressful situations, but the moment action occurs, players automatically switch their roleplaying from I say to I do.

In the movies, both the good guys and the bad guys are identified as much by their catchphrases as anything else. One-liners, jokes and simple dialogue are all used in books and movies as a method of characterisation, so why not in rpg? Witty repartee in swashbuckling combat ("Have at thou, sirrah!"), grim one-liners ("Hasta la Vista, baby"), or wisecracks ("those were $500 sunglasses, asshole") all add a little extra to the average combat.

and finally...

Ten Dos and Don'ts

1. Don't open a door when you can kick it down.

2. Do use your environment whenever possible. Kick over tables, swing from chandeliers, and bash opponents over the head with vases and bottles.

3. Don't shoot your opponent when you can throw them into a convenient lava pit or pool of piranhas.

4. Don't arrive early to defuse the bomb. No-one ever defuses a bomb with three hours left on the counter. Wait until it has a couple of minutes left and start then.

5. Don't use the lift when you can abseil through the window after skydiving onto the roof.

6. Do carry one less round of ammunition than you have opponents. Ensure excess ammunition hits aforementioned (expensive) vases, chandeliers, and bottles.

7. GMs- Do make sure your NPCs dive off catwalks and into nuclear reactors, piranha pools or lava pits when fired upon.

8. GMs- Don't forget to fill your scenes with ravines and rope bridges, expensive vases, lava pits, ferocious animals and stupid NPCs to dive into/onto/be eaten by them.

9. GMs- Do remember that the bad guys take prisoners, and take delight in preposterous death traps, especially large lasers that could result in your PCs singing soprano.

10. Do exploit any situation which takes place at 10,000 ft above sea level or higher.

Why Science Fiction?

by Patrick Juola

Few if any role-players dislike science fiction. Personally I thrived on it; I could never decide whether I wanted to grow up to be Avon or Mr. Spock. I designed my first FTL drive at the age of six. (No it didn't work.) My birthday wish list usually included things like"the complete Galactic Patrol series." My first day of college, I skipped the orientation banquet to attend an all-night Star Trek One-through-five film festival twenty miles away. I can quote from Dune's Orange Catholic Bible more extensively than I can from the real one, and I use phrases like "a cool and hoopy frood" and MEAN them.

So what went wrong? Last term I was playing a Roman God in 1st century Britain, a shape shifting wizard, a swashbuckling piratical noblewoman, and a spy conspiring against the dark elf Talen Coldblood. Where did all the science fiction go? Why, in a group of imaginative people who can do anything, are we all riding horses instead of landspeeders? On the assumption that forty-odd intelligent role-players can't all be wrong, what is it about science fiction that makes us not play in those universes?

It can't really be a lack of source material. A simple stroll through the stacks at a well equipped bookstore reveals vast hoards of bad SF novels. Furthermore, nearly any story can be moved into any genre. How many of the Blake's 7 plots started off as Victorian short stories? Is the Star Wars plot any different from a thousand other peasant-rescues-princess fairy tales? And would your players really notice if you tried to run "The Scarlet Pimpernel", but rescuing political refugees from the Tralfmador instead of aristocrats from France?

It can't be the people. Characters are characters anywhere in the multiverse; that's part of the allure of role-playing. And although the ravenous methane-breathers of Splugorion VI may be aliens, they're no more alien, and no more unplayable, than a properly done elf.

It can't be magic. The awesome powers available to the wizards in their lonely towers are equally available to psis in their hidden strongholds, or for that matter, anyone with a Galactibank VISA card and access to the local Marks and Pthltip (est. 2614). "Special offer, this month only, teleport harnesses for only 1500 credits, marked down from 2250!"

So what *does* science fiction lack? I think the only thing it lacks is imagination on the part of the writers gamemasters, and storyguides. Science fiction is still waiting for its Tolkien, the writer who is willing to spend a lifetime developing a full universe to play in. In Tolkien , we find the reality of a world with a history, a mythology, and a variety that makes every step of a journey different. The halls of Moria are more than a simple dwarven mine; they have a history and relevance known to every member of the party -- and to the reader as well, from the first paragraph of their mention. the inscription at their gates was drawn by the hand that forged the Rings, though nothing else remains of the elves of Hollin. Balin's expedition is more than a simple treasure hunt; it is the return of a king to his own hall, with a heroism and glory of its own. In these halls, the reader meets centuries.

Meanwhile, there was sandstorm on Tatooine. All over the planet.

The "real world" provides this depth as well. To the north of Kyoto, in the green foothills to the Japanese Alps, is the village of Ohara, where the last Heike Empress retired after the disastrous navel battle at Dannoura. Her temple at Jakkoin is still open, as is the Imperial Palace at Kyoto where Minamoto Yoritomo was proclaimed Shogun following her defeat.

On Trenco, it rains. All over the planet. Forty-seven feet, five inches, each and every night.

The easiest way to achieve this depth is to steal it. In its least subtle form, I can run an entire campaign in someone else's universe. Both Star Wars and Star Trek have published game systems, and its easy enough to buy the GURPS supplement for many other sources. I can also steal bits and pieces from many spots. This part of the galaxy is a semi-feudal empire, like Dune, except that there's no Guild

monopoly on transportation and instead everyone needs to use large fixed jump gates like in Buck Rogers. It's bordered by a hostile military state like the Romulans (itself largely stolen from a romanticised history of Imperial Rome), and on the other side is a collection of little independent states like the pirate havens in the Caribbean. These little client states can then be fleshed out as needed the night before by renting old Errol Flynn movies and re-reading Treasure Island.

By defining the universe in terms of known things, the game master can easily create depth. But at the same time, she's also lost part of the magic of science fiction -- the thrill of discovery, the wonders of the unknown, and the exploration of the unconquered frontiers of space and knowledge. The planets in this universe, like the forest moon of Endor can be summed up in a single sentence, which is probably obvious to the first person to orbit the world.

Of course there's a difference between editing and oversimplification. One doesn't need to visit every street to adventure in London, nor does one need to visit every village on every planet to explore a galaxy. But the depth should still be there. And the oversimplification of technology, in a large part, is what can kill an SF game.

It's the same sort of oversimplification. In a universe where everyone can have a blaster, nearly everyone will -- and blasters will be commonplace, innocent, and simply an excuse to roll damage dice at a distance. When every ship has access to hyperspace, travelling between planets becomes as exciting as travelling on British Rail. With Star Trek style transporters, we may never see the outside and simply be beamed directly from our ship to the gravel pit . . . excuse me, adventure site.

So what makes worthwhile science fiction, and how does it transfer into a game? In writing SF, the rules are fairly clear and well-known. The author gets one chance to define his universe, typically changing only one aspect of the real world, and spends the rest of the work writing within that universe and exploring its meaning. The science fiction comes from the exploration, both of the cultures and the technology. For it to be worth the effort, both the cultures and the technology must be different -- and different enough to make it worth the player's effort to learn what the differences are, and what they mean. In a fantasy world, the fantastic and the marvellous is rare, magical, difficult, and the stuff of high adventure to acquire. In a world of science fiction, the fantastic and the marvellous is yours for a handful of credits. But there should still be the rare, magical, and difficult -- the stuff of high adventure somewhere for the brave character who is willing to explore the differences and work with the stuff of which stories are made.
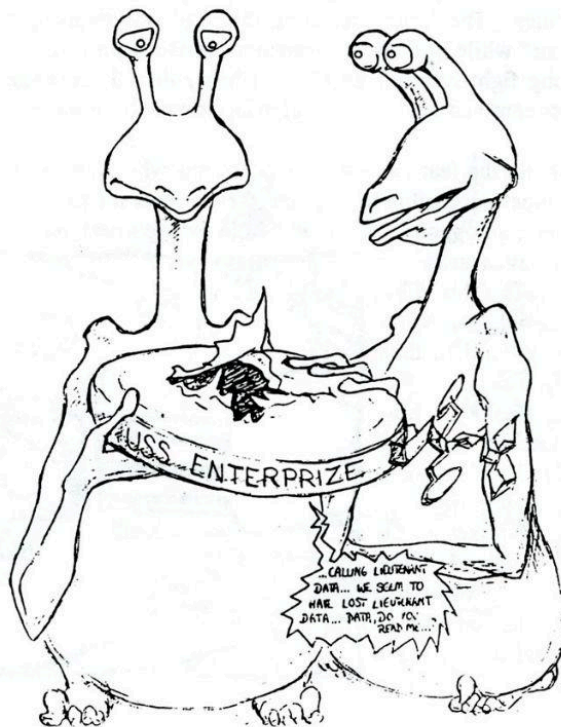
"SORRY, LOOKS LIKE THAT WAS THE ONLY
HARD CENTRE IN THE BOX."

CHARGE!

Fresh from the battlefields of ancient Britain, Martin Lloyd wonders just how glorious combat really is.

Combat is an essential part of any role-playing game. From the 15th level paladin slaughtering his 1000th goblin to the Cthulhu investigator mugged and left in a Victorian gutter, it catches up with all characters sooner or later. Even the threat of violence can be enough to add spice to a game, weak characters trapped in a dodgy bar that's about to turn nasty may not be in mortal danger, but the possibility of a ride home in an ambulance will get them scared anyway.

The problem is that role-playing systems rarely cater for violence in a realistic manner. The one which comes nearest is Rolemaster but it does become rather too complex at times. The fumble result "you trip on an imaginary turtle and fall, prone and stunned for three rounds" is probably the best example of this. Of course some systems aren't meant to be realistic. AD&D may have begun life as a skirmish wargame but it has since degenerated into a cinematic style of combat where Conanesque heroes plough through dungeon after dungeon without so much as a scratch. This can be fun, but it's not so much use for a GM that is trying to scare the PCs.

One of the main reasons for system 'defects' is a misunderstanding of what combat is really like - and that is the point of this article, to do a little mythbusting and open a few eyes.

The first thing to realise is that most combatants don't want to get hurt, never mind killed. History is full of examples of this but a few examples will do. During the Napoleonic wars it was found that very few wounds were caused by bayonets - even in battles where close combat had been particularly important. Even more telling was the fact that a large proportion of these wounds were taken in the back, dealt out to fleeing opponents. Similarly the tenth century Eglis Saga records a fight in which Egil and his comrades were attacked by a group of Danes. The Danes, realising that Egil was trapped, restricted themselves to "thrusting with long weapons" while Egil and his warriors - certainly no slowies in warfare, kept behind their shields and after a long fight surrendered alive. Clearly then the average combatant is not in a hurry to close with his opponent and risk death, preferring to wait until he loses his nerve and tries to flee.

This may well explain the fear caused by those troops who didn't care about dying. Modern day suicide bombers are almost impossible to stop and their medieval equivalents, the beserkers, had a similar reputation. Faced with an opponent who cares little for their personal safety and who is willing to take risks to succeed, even seasoned warriors may decide to back off. This effect is also seen in modern martial arts where fighters who are able to intimidate their opponents almost inevitably win.

Another point to make is how dangerous fights are. According to a self-defence instructor I talked to it only takes a knife 2" long to reach any major organ in the body. A 2" long shortsword is therefore quite scary and a halberd or two handed axe terrifying indeed. What this means is that hit points as commonly understood are wildly unrealistic. A good

"CROSSBOW? WHAT CROSSBOW?"
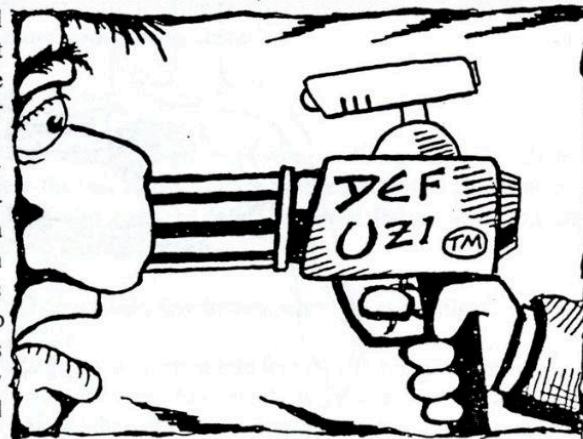
blow to the body will put most people in severe trouble and may well cripple an opponent completely regardless of how healthy they are. Similarly archaeological finds have turned up a number of skeletons whose limbs have clearly been severed. Getting hit should then be extremely serious for any character in a 'realistic' combat system. It is no myth that whoever gets the first blow in usually emerges the victor.

This striking the first blow is something most systems have cottoned on to - usually by the use of initiative rolls or scores. However this is somewhat surprisingly a futile approach. I know for a fact that my reactions are better than my 60 year old fencing instructor but this doesn't give me much of an advantage. The difference between us is due to his ability to anticipate my actions and time his own actions. These come with practice and skill, not reflexes. Raymond of Toulouse was about 60 when he led the First Crusade to Jerusalem and took an active part in many battles. His survival probably owed much to the abilities of his bodyguard but his skills probably played a large part as well.

What then should a 'realistic' combat system involve? Firstly it should be dangerous. Re-enactment groups often give themselves one "hit point" in each location or even the entire body. This makes a lot more sense than an arbitrary "20 hits". I've even come across FLRP systems that do this, but they tend to be systems where combat is rare to say the least. Secondly, more attention should be paid to the combatants state of mind. A system which gave veteran fighters bonuses for simply surviving might be an idea, but a more practical solution is to follow the Rolemaster line where a character splits his combat skill into attack and defence. Thus, providing combat is sufficiently dangerous, PCs will concentrate on surviving at the expense of hitting their opponents, leading to more realistic 'cautious' fights. Of course those playing beserkers would sacrifice self-defence for offence, giving them a far greater chance of killing their opponents but at greater risk to themselves. Finally I would argue that rather than attempting to simulate every blow and counter blow, of a combat two opposed dice rolls should be made, each combatant rolling an 'attack' and a 'defence'. If neither attack beats its opposing defence nothing happened, the target parried or neither fighter fancied getting 'stuck in'. If an attack beats its defence then damage is caused. Clearly it is only a vague idea at present but it make an interesting change from 'fully detailed' (but unrealistic) combat systems.

In conclusion hand to hand combat is frequently misunderstood by games and game designs. There is nothing wrong with Conan style swordplay and vicious slaughter, that take only a few seconds but they should not be mistaken for reality. This article aims to suggest a more sensible starting point for combat systems allowing rules to be modified to make things more cinematic or unbalanced if GMs like, but always bearing in mind how far they have come from a 'real world' game.
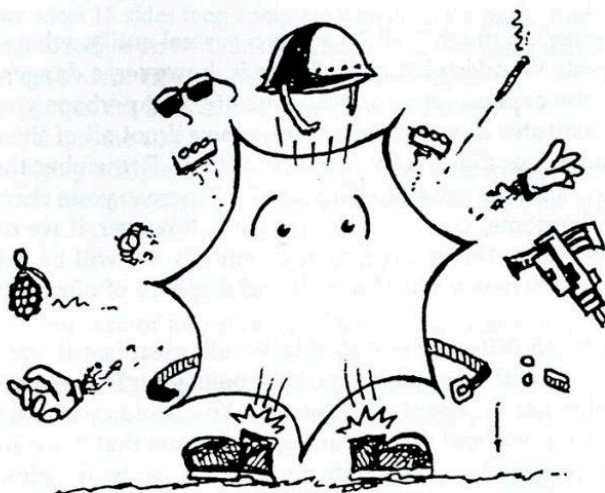
RPG soc up its own arse
or
Roleplaying Too Much?

Without a doubt, the Oxford University RPG soc is one of the largest and most advanced collections of roleplayers in the country, possibly in the world. Over the past few years while I've been around, there has definitely been a cultural revolution amongst the roleplayers of Oxford: the active membership has swollen, the roleplaying aspect of the games has been made more accessible to the average member by the addition of such marvels as the Society Game (tm) and an expansion of the FLRP to include indoor social events and the "extended" FLRP, and the active membership constitutes a much greater social group in general.

How long will it last? We are in severe danger of becoming complacent and riding the successes of past years without looking to the future. Think for a moment about how long the average gamer has at Oxford (or indeed any university) to carve out a name for themselves in the annals of gaming history. It takes at least a term to "get in" to the society and make friends before one feels confident to take an active role in the design and running of the larger "official" games that RPG soc runs. Towards the end of your course, you will probably want to concentrate on passing finals. That makes for two years of gaming time. However, there is a paradox at work - the longer you have been in the society, the better qualified you are to run games, but the less time you have to achieve great things; the younger you are, the more time you will have to act out your plans, and at the same time, the less credibility you have with the society as a whole for being an unknown.

This has led to the attitude that the only people who are qualified to run games are those who are just about to leave. This isn't an official policy, it's an attitude perpetuated by the situation we have now - there is an unofficial "GM's club" that you have to be a member of before you can do anything. All of the games running at the moment appear to be run by "old" people (and in the context of a three year course, to a first year, anyone in their third year or older is "old"). In order to get in on the running of the games, you have to get in on the GM's social scene, our very own old boy's network - and that takes time, which few people have.

This attitude is mirrored by the general consensus that the committee is chosen by the Old Guard and by the outgoing committee. In my opinion, this is completely true - but, there are two very good reasons for this. Firstly, there is continuity: the people who have done the job of running the society as a whole are the ones best qualified to scout out new talent. Secondly, and more fundamentaly, the system harks back to the days when the active membership was very small and finding people to take committee posts was difficult. This second point illustrates the fact that, while the social structure of RPG soc has changed significantly, the informal administrative structure has not. It's nobody's fault, but it does need to be reviewed.

This article is subtitled "Roleplaying too much?". RPG soc is a surreal entity, where all of its members can act out their fantasies and create wonderful stories. There is, however, a danger of roleplaying too much, [patriarchal mode ON] at the expense of your academic life, and perhaps your social life as well. While the active membership constitutes a vast social group, many if not all of the events which the society holds are either "in-character", or marked by furious plotting. Remember the fundamental rule outlined in the Basic D&D rules - "Players are not characters!". Whereas your character is limited to a subset (ie clique) within a particular game, you as a player are not; however, if we continue to let roleplaying dominate social activities to this degree, then eventually we will be calling each other by our character names and limiting ourselves to the (limited) social sphere of our alter-egos.

Player and character personalities can differ a great deal (after all, escapism is the whole point of RPGs). However, if your only contact with another person is through your PC, you can end up giving very different first impressions to another person about who you are. You could even unintentionally insult someone else, through your character, without ever meaning to. I know that there are some older players who will read this and scoff at the very notion - "It's only a game, for goodness' sake! How can people be so childish?". Nevertheless, it has already happened: real ill feeling has been caused by some people behaving in deliberately destructive or offensive ways towards other people's characters, and other players have taken offence because they view it as a personal attack on them as real people (no, I'm not going to name names). Perhaps this is a product of the more competitive spirit that the Society Game has taken in recent times. Remember, players, it's only a game - but, think about it: if the only contact another

player has with you is from being crapped on or insulted by your character, what sort of opinion are they likely to form about you as a person?

But, back the the real message. In my opinion, we need an increase in communication between real members as opposed to an increase of in-character plotting. However, communication isn't something that simply happens; it must be worked at. The creation of a PR officer at the last AGM was a glorious step in the right direction, but it is not a soulution. There is only so much the committee can do to try to involve people - the members have to meet them halfway and show an interest, otherwise the machine will fall apart. If you are reading this and you think that you can and want to contribute to RPGsoc, then you have to make it known. Also, committee posts are not the be all and end all: we need a large number of talented people to write for FLRP, the society campaign, Nightflyer, and so forth. If you are lucky, you might get invited to add your input, but the chances are that you won't, and therefore you must put the oar in yourself. I'd like to dispel the myth that you have to be an established "oldster" before you can GM, run large games, or hold a committee post - we want to attract as many 1st years as possible to positions of responsibility. On the other hand, we don't want to discourage older members from adding their input too. So, if you were thinking about standing for the committee but didn't (for whatever reason you care to mention), don't give up - there are a great many jobs that need capable, talented and committed individuals such as yourself. Stand for a post next year, and in the meantime get involved in whatever you fancy. Ask around, it's the only way you'll get what you want. Full training will be given, and there is no age limit. The only prerequisite is talent, and I know that everyone I have met here has a lot of that.

And that's about it. The older members who "run the show" at the moment won't be here forever, and once they're gone, you'll need new ones to take their places. If there aren't any, then you could risk losing the excellent society you have. Use it or lose it, folks. Over and out.

15 WAYS TO IRRITATE YOUR SOCIETY GAME GM

You're sure no-one can trace me? I'm risking my life talking to you. You don't know them. You don't know what they can do. OK, OK, hear are the documents. Take them, take them! I'll just be glad to get them off my hands. Now just give me the money and let me get out of here. ... No! What are you doing?!?
<BLAM>

Having gone through some personal danger to obtain these documents, I would just like to say thankyou to all those on the inside who aided me, and I'll get those flowers for your graves just as soon as I get out of hiding. Meanwhile...

1) Create a character sheet 18 sides long complete with contents page. Add index if you feel lucky
2) Randomly attempt to seduce an NPC on the grounds that you fancy the GM playing him/her.
3) Notice and point out that the GM has lost your character sheet.
4) Notice and point out that the GM has lost your latest turn sheet.
5) Notice and point out that the GM has lost the entire plot.
6) Give the GM a highly complex turnsheet, with many interactions with other PCs and strokes of genius which may alter the entire session, verbally, 30 seconds before the meeting is due to begin.
7) Ignore the plot
8) Find the plot
9) Create the plot
10) Write little stories on each of turn sheets and threaten to keep writing them for the GMs until you get your way.
11) Ignore all attempts by the GMs to finish the session until after closing time.
12) Crash the plot session and refuse to move until the GMs tell you what everyone's been doing to your character.
13) Refuse to allow a 'GM ex machina' when they've cocked up. Point it out loudly to all and sundry.
14) Spend your entire turn sheet doing only one thing because then they'll have to let it happen. Make it the thing they want least to happen.
15) Write and distribute a list of ways to irritate them.

Disclaimer - All character and events in this list are fictious. Any semblance to persons living, dead or resident in your demented mind is strictly imaginary. As are they.

PANTHEON

The epic struggle between
Celt and Roman

PANTHEON: THE MOVIE

Starring

Lance Henrikson as Arter Spectus (Warlock)
Michael Caine as Cawdav (Martin Lloyd)
Brian Blessed as Mars (Alister Halsby)
Tom Cruise as Apollo (Jon Walgate)

also starring

Woody Allen as Claudius (Mo)
Diane Keaton as Alia (Kat)
Tom Hanks as Eaglebearer (Andrew Huddleston)
Patrick Stewart as Kerux (Rob White)
Robert de Niro as Septimus (Patrick)
Katherine Bates as Amia (Liz)
Harry Enfield as Cortinus, the essex man (Dan Mitchell)

and

Jo Brand as Eluned of the Catavalani (Kate Harding)
Sting as Trogain of the Welsh (Dylan Owen)
Kenneth Branagh as Cucernunos of the Wild Hunt (Hanbury)
Nigel Hawthorn as Aeden of the Wild Hunt (Alistair Jackson)
Mystic Meg as Tarinn, mistress of storms (Sarah Keogh)
David Bowie as the Gremlin King (Martin Hornsey)
Kate Bush as Killin, mistress of the Moon (Sarah Blake)
Bob Hoskins as Godeater (Matt Nesbit)
Robert Maxwell as Berag the Swindler (Tony Short)
Shaun McGowan as Duha Mohr of the Picts (David McKnight)
Richard Briars as Eliddod of the Parisi (James Hanscombe)

guest starring

Jack Nickolson as Pan (Andrew Lucas)
Bob Geldolf as Freke, lord of Wolves (Ralph Lovegrove)
John Cleese as Bo, gothic god of Ambush (Jack Harris)
Anthony Hopkins as Gerelain the Demon King (Paul)

also featuring appearances by

Christopher Lee as Balor of the Evil Eye (Matt Marcus)
Richard o'Brian as The King of the Sidhe (Reuben Wright)
Calvin as Crumhail, and Hobbes as Thaldor
Alan Rickman as Cotta, governor of Britain

Maticore, Fertile Long Sheep, Ovine Thaldocotticore and assorted wolves
by Jim Henson Productions ltd.

HUNDREDS AND HUNDREDS AND HUNDREDS OF WORDS

The final bow of the gods of Roman Britain

Celtic Gods

Berag the Swindler

In the first light of dawn, an inconspicuous cart wends its way through the busy streets of Londinium. Settled in the hay, Olwen can just make out the irate cries of Romans awakening to find their wealth gone and the sign of Berag daubed on their walls. Grinning, he recalls the turmoil in the ninth legion when their beloved eagle disappeared, the confusion of the diplomats he has impersonated and the jailbreaks, robberies and scams of the past few years. Idly he runs his hands through the bulging sack of gold to his side, and offers a silent prayer to his god. Times are good...

Cucernunous of the Wild Hunt

I was the hound of Herne. I was his jackal, leading the pack to those who had done evil, to those who had done wrong. I had be a small god once, a finder of lost things, blessed by some, smiled on by all. But Herne took me up, and chained me to his dire purpose. Then I hunted men. I had gained a brother, but lost too much. Herne has gone, and the chain no longer binds me, but I keep it still, for should I show pleasure in what I do, then I would be justice no longer. My keen eyes now see too much. I shall bear the torch of truth, bear it until it burns me.

Duha Mohr

During the past few years, a great and glorious war has been waged with the Roman invaders. All the northmen rallied under my banner, as we slew all before us, led by the light of the ancient treasure of Britain, the flaming sword Dyrnmyn, which cleaved many hundreds of the invaders. Several of the Celtic nations have shown their cowardice by joining the Romans. They shall soon be no more. With the departure of the Sidhe and the Formori, a new order is emerging, and the great northern Duha Mohr will be at the front of it, destroying those who oppose him... the future beckons, and it will be glorious for the north.

Eliddod the farmer

Now Eliddod was a farmer,
Highly skilled at growing food.
But he was scorned by all the soldiers,
And thought of as a prude.
The Celts felt rather threatened,
And ganged up against their foe.
But when they turned to Eliddod,
He told them where to go.
He was good at tending turnips,
But when it came to war,
He wasn't really all that keen
On joining Duha Mohr.
He promised that he would help them,
If they'd swear they wouldn't raid.

He'd let them march through Yorkshire,
And feed them if they paid.
Eliddod was used to saving,
Any surplus for next year
A basket and a pact with Tarinn,
Were made to banish fear.
They saved up all their worship,
'Till they counted *Forty Six*.
Even Cawdarv was impressed, we think,
By Eliddod's little tricks.
When the GMs saw what happened,
They bombarded him with plots.
He didn't really mind, you see,
His worship had gone up lots.

Apollo was clearly vermin,   So remember him as a farmer,
And so he had to die.   Of turnips, sheep and grain.
Eliddod met a tragic end,   Remember him when it starts to pour,
It brings a teardrop to my eye.   For he always loved the rain.

Elinud of the Catavalani

Stare across the crowd, the fear and love in their faces
The children of the tribes, prisoners of the flag unfurling
Protect us in these changing times,
The warm embrace, the killing price...
My people right or wrong.

Remember running from the hall as the voices screamed behind us
I felt I'd die for you in the sunlit hills of our home
The moments come then recede away,
The empty words, the hollow light of day...
My people right or wrong.

And outside is cold
Staring up at the lighted windows
And in the bitter home
The thicker the blood the faster it keeps on flowing.

Get in your place, boy
Let's take what's ours, boy,
Understand the price, boy.

I've seen those who try to make a life without kin forever
So I've taken my place uncertain at your shoulder
The last few prayers, the whistle blow,
And into the fray once more we go
My people right or wrong.

My people, NMA

Killin

In the beginning I was Killin, the Order in the world, and the moon was perfect and unchanging. And then I lay with a mortal man, and though I killed him he changed me, for I was wrent apart in spirit, and no longer was I Order but instead Mercy, Justice, Vengence and Destruction. And in the spirit of Vengence did I kill my own child, she who had scarred me at my birth, and return her essence to me without the taint of man. But again, the scars remained. I am no longer what I was. I tread paths I was never meant to tread, and my gentle Agmen mourns the screaming thousands Aridhel and Mogen have slain. My balance is fragile, and I fight to keep it. Forgive me my wrongs. Understand my acts. Allow me my vengeance. And die beneath my sword. These are the words of the Aspects of the Moon. Obey them or die.

Killin   Agmen   Mogen   Aridhel

ROMAN GODS

Alia

"For I have known I shall find, my own piece of mind, for I have been promised a land of my own"
- J.A.T.A.T.D.

Child of Nemesis, Goddess of Vengence; and March, God of Freedom; Alia was to be the instrument of her mother's repentance and her father's curse. Raised in Rome (a city with Nemisysean roots), she and her people looked upon the sojourn in Britain as a wilderness to which they would journey in trial; their first of many. The wars between the Roman and Celtic gods, the wrath of Apollo, and the temporary merging with Killin were only the beginning of those. Yet throughout, the Alians maintained their faith and were led truly Alleathea (the Heroine, named for the Sister of the Goddess). We have suffered much, but we do not fear, for we are chosen and the time of our triumph is high.

Allarsix

Allarsix is still a young and perhaps slightly idealistic god. He finds peace and tolerance the easiest and best way to live and is sometimes slightly confused by the reasons people go to war. Surely it is easier for everyone to just get along? Integration and social equality - economically and in education especially - are his major priorities, and mercy and pacifism his principles. Despite this, he is capable of protecting himself and his followers and will participate - passively generally - in a conflict which seems just.

Amia

Amia's only interests are in the welfare of her own people, and in converting as many people as possible to her worship. She deplores war for any reason, but if any harms her followers she will retaliate swiftly.

She dislikes most of the Roman Pantheon, especially Aterspectus, but counts Allarsix, Kerux, The Gremlin King and Tarinn as friends.

She's generally regarded as a nice Goddess - Mainly because that's how she's more likely to increase her worship.

Her people are fanatically loyal. They love their goddess, and she trusts her devotees, especially Lianna, her high priestess, totally. They would die for Amia, and she would kill for them.

Claudius

The Lay of Claudius and Belthara (To the tune of *The Miller of Doe*)

Oh Claudius he a-wooing went
And found a fair princess
But when old Eliddod found out
He made a frightful mess

Belthara said "oh Eliddod
Don't be so jealous, dear :

For Claudius is a Roman god
And you don't even come near"

They clapped her in a temple sound
For she was great with child :
But when her lover Claudius found
Out, he went fairly wild.

"Stand in the way of love, would you,
Parisi gods so weak?"
And all the temples down he threw
In a nasty fit of pique.

"Belthera, just you wait for me
You won't be pris'ner long

Those Celtic wights 'll surely see
The Roman arm is long."

He freed her from her durance vile
With a rather cunning plan :
So take this lesson home, dear child,
Don't stand between God and Man

Cortinius

Er, what to write? Chariots. They're great, Chariots are. Chariots, like, rule and stuff. Perhaps giving the technology to one of the more warlike and aggressive Celtic tribes wasn't the wisest possible move in the situation - but have you seen the Picts drive? There's not going to be much of a second-hand chariot industry until someone invents chariots which don't, well, fall apart quite this much.

Oh, and perhaps I might have done better not writing "keep warm and cosy" spells on my heroes at the same time as they were crossing a frozen lake. But, I got the 1025 (or M25, using the correct numbering) road built, so I'm happy.

Eaglebearer

.... Again the Northern Celts attacked and again they fled back over the border, repulsed by the Eaglebearer and his IX legion. Only this time, it was not the Roman settlers that the Eaglebearer was protecting, but the Belgae and the other tribes to the south. Here it was that his champion and descendant, Darius, had died protecting the Romano-British, and it was here the Eaglebearer would also stand or fall to defend this island. And so it can to pass that he became the defender of Britain, protector of his new found homeland, and wherever other gods sought to destroy life he looked to shelter it behind his shield...
from the Tales of the Defender

Kerux

The heavy boots of Rome fall again, now on the land of Britannia, so I decide at last, now that their strength will be stretched by distance, to intercede. Cold and wet, many starve in the Trinavanti lands, product of damaging war. The legions roll on, until they hit the wall that is Brigantia and Wales. Rome cuts us off, so there is it seems a chance for peace. Two years our aggression is stopped, as we rebuild the Celts, until the Rage begins again. It so incenses the Celts, that war, to bring this Rage to an end, is inevitable. I watch helpless as the destruction and death follows, only intervening to ensure the Sidhe only combat warriors. Instead I concentrate on the ceding of power to the Catevulani. Wales is subjugated, and the Brigantes never shall be, so at last an impasse is reached; at last peace and diplomacy can return to this all too ravaged land.

INDEPENDENT GODS

<u>Freke, one of Odin's Wolves</u>

Der Odin,
    Affix Stamp

    Here
    Having a very nice tim in Brittan. The wether
it is cold but not cold like in the homelands. Last
summer ther was big fights and I rended much flesh.
This winter I will rend much flesh. I have made lots of
new frend, lik Cawrdav who is a godd of warr and fight
with a big speer. He give me his speer last season, I fight
good with it. I am disapontd becos somewon kiled all the
Gyants and the Elfs wen I wasn't loking. I wil rend much
flesh this summer. Bo is very wel, he sends his regrds.
Next yer we are gong to rayd Gaul and get lots of Beer and
Wine and rend lots of flesh. I hop Gere is wel. He shoud
come over and fight. The fights are lots of fun her.
Wish you wer her.
Freke

Odin

I, Valhalla Drive

Valhalla

HappyHunting
Grounds

Scandanavia

SCI VH21

<u>Geralain: A synopsis</u>

A Demon's job is made so much easier when all the elder gods leave the land and the younger gods have forgotten the cardinal rule when having dealings with demons.

"Demons are not to be trusted!"

I can truly say that I enjoyed my revenge on the Celtic gods. It is only a pity that I was unable to destroy their forebears who chained my brethren.
I can look back with delight at all the trouble I have caused them. To lose their sacred grove once could be excused, since they did not expect it; to lose it a second time suggests a certain amount of carelessness. Carelessness exemplified by their failure to safeguard the last and greatest treasure of the land. Oh, what a joy the Cauldron of Bran has been to me.
However, it was only after they threw me out of their meetings that my strength really began to grow. You can really stir up fear to feed the soul when you can be blatant about what you are doing rather than working behind the scenes. With my gathering reputation among the mortal scum, it might not be long before I can release the ultimate predators upon the world, to reclaim their rightful place!