

192 PAGES

APRIL 1979

\$1.25

UK 70p

Isaac ASIMOV's



SCIENCE
FICTION
MAGAZINE

CC 02648

**"The Napoli
Express"**
By **Randall
Garrett**

Margaret St. Clair
Isaac Asimov
John M. Ford



 A DAVIS PUBLICATION



ON TABLETOP UNIVERSES

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr

You can see them, out of the corner of your eye.

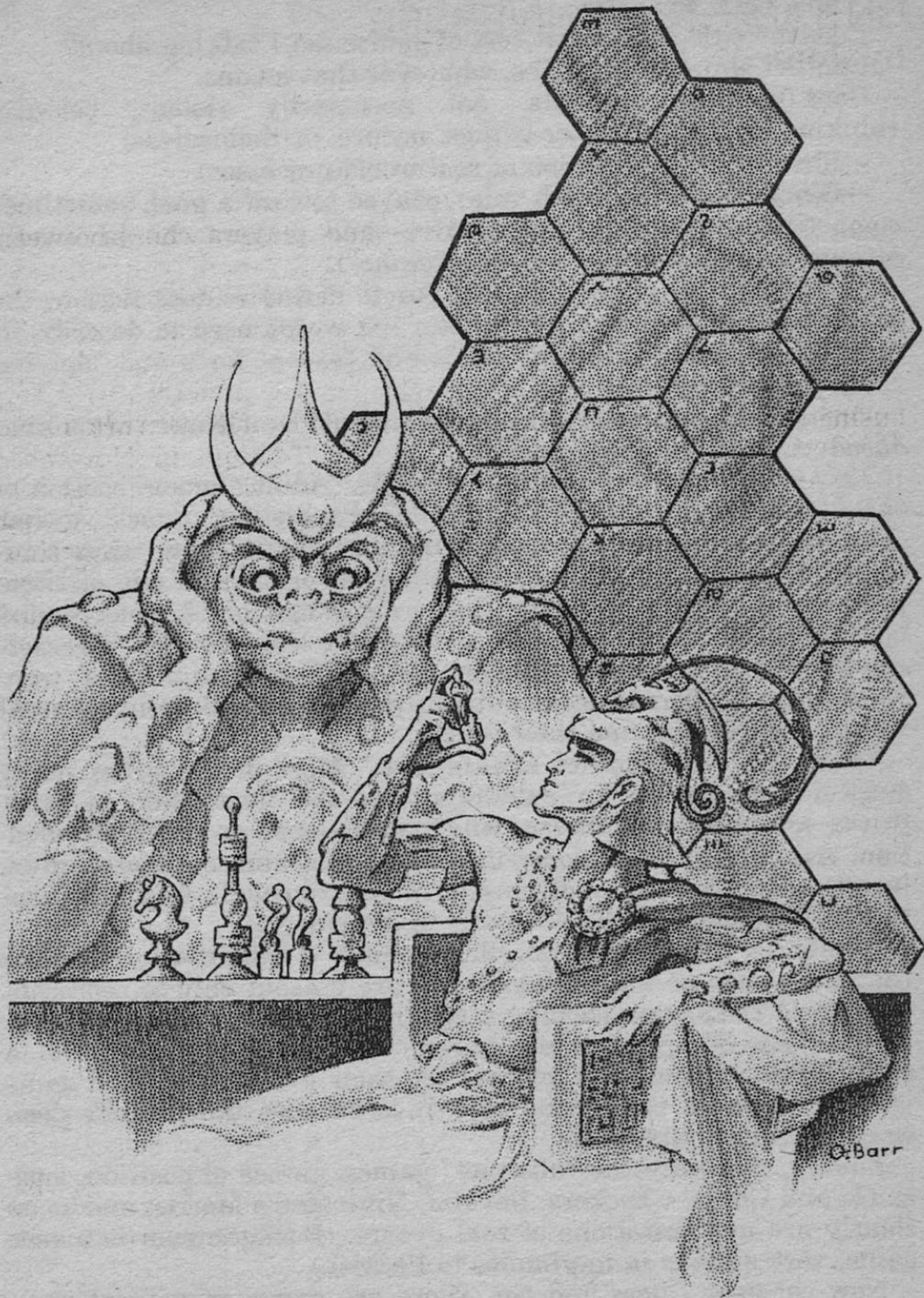
They're there in advertisements scattered through the SF magazines. They're on the bookstore shelves, somewhere between the hardbacks and the greeting cards. They're in your friends' conversation; have you been invited over for "an evening of D&D," and wondered if you should bring potato salad or call the Vice Squad?

They're science fiction and fantasy games, and they're a big business. Simulations Publications Inc. (SPI) of New York introduced *War of the Ring*, based on J.R.R. Tolkein, in November 1977, and in four weeks sold twenty-four thousand copies at \$20 each. By way of comparison, a hardcover book selling for half that price or less that turned over five thousand copies in that time would be a "runaway bestseller." Over *one million* conflict-simulation games will be sold in North America this year, and a large and rapidly growing percentage of them will deal with science fiction and fantasy situations.

All right, so you've seen them, on the periphery of your vision; the four-color map of Middle-Earth covered with hexagons and brightly colored bits of cardboard; the inch-high metal figures of dragons and robots and starship soldiers brandishing plasma rifles; the endless booklets of rules that read like: "If the monster achieves Complete Surprise (DR 1) the players may read readied Scroll Spells but may not cast unprepared spells of the Third Level or higher. . . ."

And there's the rub. That sentence, complex and barely grammatical, is typical of the rules (nay, even the advertising copy!) of these games. Like much recent science fiction, they seem to have been created for an existing in-group who already share a set of assumptions and speak a language of their own.

The purpose of this article is not to sell you games (only a few will be mentioned by name) or even particularly to sell you *on* games. Rather, the idea is to state some of those private concepts in plain language, to make you less of an outsider looking in, so that the games may interest and attract on their own merits rather than pretty packaging and ad hype.



ON THE BOARD

Like the title says, what sort of games am I talking about?

Conflict simulation games, whatever that means.

Conflict—(disagreements, not necessarily violent, between thinking beings and other beings, nature, or themselves)

—Simulation—(imitation of real-world processes)

—Games (activities with rules, played toward a goal; sometimes competitive, sometimes cooperative—and players can be deadly serious about something called a “game”).

As happens when anyone sets out to define science fiction, the possibilities of the form overwhelm the words used to describe it; one drowns under a sea of “but”s and “except for”s and “defying classification are”s.

Perhaps an exclusionist definition would be clearer: what kind of games am I *not* talking about?

Most of the games to be found in the “Adult Games” section of the bookstore are “race” games (like Pachisi) or “track” games (like *Monopoly*). In fact, a large number of the “new” games released each season are no more than reworkings of one of these games—sometimes no more than renamings of the pieces and board spaces. There were, for instance, at least two Presidential-election games released during the 1972 campaign that were *Monopoly* in different dress, substituting states and their electoral votes for properties and their rents.

These are not “conflict simulations.” Most of the great many stock-market games for sale represent the fluctuation of stock prices as a random process, which is at least an oversimplification. Ask a realtor if *Monopoly*—which contains no depreciation, interest rate changes, redlining, or urban renewal—faithfully represents his business. (Back to this in a moment.)

Gambling games are out, the essence of “simulations” being that risks such as the rolling of dice are present only to represent real-world risks (rain turning a general’s path of advance to mud, malfunction of an air-to-air missile, the accidental death of a charismatic commander) and not for their own sake. If the game is staked upon a roll of the dice, it is because the player’s decisions led him to that point.

Finally, there are the “abstract” games, games of position, such as Go and Chess. Checkers, Reversi, Nine Men’s Morris, and so on clearly are not imitations of real events. (Backgammon is a race game, very similar in mechanics to Pachisi.)

Now consider Chess and Go. These are games of tactical man-

euver, in which the pieces have defined functional roles. Long-ranged queens, leaping knights, slow pawns bearing the threat of knighting or queening, Go stones dropping like paratroops to harass the enemy's rear—now do we have a conflict-simulation game?

No. But the differences now are subtler, and will be better shown by a description of how conflict-simulation games do work.

The conflict-simulation/SF game generally has pieces and a board, but the model for their use is nearer Chess than *Monopoly*. Conflict-simulation game pieces represent specific real things, and the board indicates their relationship to one another.

In its most direct form, the pieces are military forces (from a man with a rifle to an armored corps), the board a map of the terrain over which they move and fight. The relationship is spatial: Falkenberg's Highlanders are *here*, the Dorsai Irregulars over *there*, across two rivers and a line of hills. Because of the intervening obstacles, they can only shoot at one another with long-range artillery.

The functions of board and pieces need not be so literal. As an opposite-end example, imagine a board covered with squares representing seats in a parliament (or, since I *am* discussing SF games, a Galactic Confederation). The pieces, probably small squares of cardboard, are printed with the name of a delegate, his home planet, and some numbers representing his political clout, his chance of reelection, and (say) his liberality on issues, on an arbitrary scale.

The positions of these pieces determine their relative positions of power in the Confederation. They move about as coalitions change, are removed through election (and assassination!), and are replaced by new appointments and delegates-elect. The relationship here is symbolic, like those corporate-structure diagrams that place the chairman of the board, the president, and the forty-seven vice-presidents in boxes connected by lines of power.

It might at this point be suggested that the *Monopoly* board is this sort of symbolic map. Actually, the *Monopoly* board is a partly-random device to determine what a player's buy and sell options are for the next turn. If some other system, such as drawing cards, were used to determine what properties were for sale each turn, *Monopoly* would be no better or worse a representation of what trading in land is really like.

And it of course isn't necessary to have a "board" at all. "Minia-

tures" games are played with metal or plastic figures and vehicle/spacecraft models over model terrain; hills, rivers, cardboard circles representing planets and stars, set up on a table or floor, instead of a printed map.

So: board and pieces. Chess is still a pretty viable analogy, at least of the symbolic-reference game. We break away from it, and from all non-simulation games, in the area of rules.

The rules of conflict simulation games attempt to imitate the effects of, and the constraints on, decisions made in the situation being gamed. While the rules of Chess are derived from the abilities of the elephants and soldiers of archaic Indian warfare (or perhaps Chinese; the truth is obscured by time) they no longer represent anything but limitations on the movement of the pieces. The rules governing movement of troops in a simulation game, on the other hand, relate to the distance and freedom of movement a real military unit would have over real terrain in the amount of time represented by one turn.

(An extreme—but not "wrong"—view is that Chess and Go *are* conflict simulation games, without chance elements, in which war is simplified to control of territory by interlocking fields of force. The trouble with this theory-equals-fact view is that it makes it impossible to differentiate games from reality. War is more than holding pieces of ground. A disarmament conference is not a poker game.)

A chess knight always moves two squares straight and one at right angles, never anything but. In a simulation game, a hovercraft tank might move two spaces over badly broken ground, five across a meadow, ten on open water. And while in chess the player must move exactly one piece each turn, never more or less, all of a player's tanks might move at once, or some of them, or none at all.

Similarly, any chesspiece correctly placed will always capture any enemy piece. Pawns take queens as automatically as the reverse. But a fully automated Bolo WV Combat Unit has an edge on a lone infantryman with a hand weapon—even an anti-Bolo weapon. And the rules, board game rules or miniatures manual, will reflect this, by giving the supertank a higher probability of killing the footsoldier than vice versa: say 85% against 10%.

Exactly this occurs in Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Chessmen of Mars*, in which the pieces in the living Martian chess game are armed warriors, and it is not enough to move one's piece into the enemy's square; the two pieces must fight, and the survivor holds

the space.

And how do game pieces "fight?" By a comparison of their strengths and weaknesses.

In the Galactic Confederation example given above, the game counters were described as bearing numbers, which indicated the delegate's abilities and his/her stand on issues. In a military game, these numbers, or "factors," will register the unit's firepower—"Attack Strength" or "Attack Factor" are common terms—its ability to withstand enemy fire—"Defense Factor"—and possibly its movement distance, weapons range, morale, identification number . . . game designers have developed a great facility for cramming data onto a cardboard chip the size of your thumbnail.

Example: The Imperial Battlecruiser *Oppressive* (Laser Cannon Strength 80) fires upon the Valiant Rebel Ship *Desdemona's Hanky* (Laser Shield Strength 25). 80 minus 25 equals 55, and the *Oppressive* has a fifty-five percent chance of piercing the Rebel shields and making the universe safe for autocracy. A pair of special dice might be rolled to generate a random number from 1 to 100, or numbered tiles drawn from a cup. (In case you're worried, the Imperial dice roll was a 20. Since 20 is within the required range of 01-55, the shot penetrates. That'll teach 'em to mess with the Empire.)

This emphasis on probabilities is the next important element. In non-CS games, dice are used to control movement (or for their own sake, as in Craps). In the CS game, movement is usually governed by fixed rules and not subject to chance; but other events are assigned a probability of occurring, and some system, almost always the roll of dice, used to find the outcome.

Does this make the CS game a game of chance? Not at all. In a properly constructed game the players' decisions are the important element. Random factors are present to reflect those things that in real life throw off even the most carefully considered decisions; fate, the unforeseen, and the basic cussedness of the Universe.

"God does not play dice," said Dr. Einstein *contra* Dr. Heisenberg, but time has shown the Uncertainty Principle valid nonetheless.

Now that there is a structure of rules that mimics real-life decisions and events, board and pieces can sometimes be dispensed with entirely or reduced to simple recording devices, like tote boards. There are three types of games in this group:

The "diplomatic" games involve several players, usually five to seven, in a negotiating situation, often a pie being sliced without enough pieces to go around. The first and classic such game is *Diplomacy*, published by The Avalon Hill Co. *Diplomacy*, which deals with pre-World War I political-military maneuvering, is not strictly an SF game (calling it an alternate-universe game is stretching points) but its remarkably simple and elegant game system has been applied to SF and fantasy situations, notably Middle-Earth.

A game of *Diplomacy* begins with seven players, representing the Great Powers of Europe in the year 1901. Only one of those players can win the game, by being the last nation with armies and fleets on the board/map of Europe. And in the beginning no single nation has sufficient military power to conquer another nation single-handed. Coalitions are necessary. And when a four- or five-way coalition has eliminated its enemies, the members turn on each other.

When played face-to-face (rather than by mail) a *Diplomacy* turn consists of fifteen minutes of more-or-less private negotiation, during which promises of military aid, mutual support, and nonaggression are made, followed by five minutes in which actual orders are written. Then the pieces are moved according to those written orders—and there is absolutely no obligation in the rules to actually do anything you promised to do.

"Moderated" games are played by groups of people, often widely scattered, who mail or telephone their moves to an umpire, or "Gamesmaster." The Gamesmaster collects the moves, determines the interaction and reaction that results, and mails/calls the results back. Because of the long wait between turns—two weeks to a month—moderated games tend to be big in scope: the players manage vast interstellar empires, great fleets of starships. A game typically runs more than a year. A good many are run on computers. (*Diplomacy*, it should be noted, is widely played by mail, with Gamesmasters. Such is the difficulty of drawing sharp lines and making absolute statements about the games field.)

"Rôle-playing" games are a different sort of creature than anything else discussed here. In the rôle-play, or *adventure*, games (of which TSR Games' *Dungeons and Dragons* is far and away the best known) a Gamesmaster player "creates" a science-fiction or fantasy environment by drawing maps and populating it with humans, aliens, and mythical monsters. Then, one to a dozen players assume the personalities of characters in this landscape;

dragonslayers, space pirates, traders and wizards and all the other types of adventurer—but a proper discussion of this unusual sort of game will have to wait for another article.

IN THE MIND

Board and pieces and rules and chance, we have now; but what do they all *mean*?

They mean that instead of Knight to King's Bishop 7 Check, the corrupt Terran Empire assaults the Human/Ythri planet Avalon. Instead of Go to Jail, Go Directly to Jail, the Ringbearer is wounded by a Nazgûl blade. Instead of a flush beating a straight, the superdreadnought *Chicago* gives a Boskonian battlecruiser one across her bows with a Space Patrol Primary Beam.

Oh, do they really?, the naturally skeptical reader asks of the burbling essayist. Yes, they do. Having shown something of the *what* and *how* of SF games, I will talk a bit about *why*.

People read fiction for entertainment—though “entertainment” is one more of those words we grasp at quicksilver to define. They read *science fiction* for a special sort of entertainment; three things in particular.

One: Suspense, surprise, and dramatic tension—the requirements of all literature. And of all games; anyone who has played any game at all, volleyball, checkers, three-card monte, will understand this.

Two: Stimulation of thought. Again, all great literature does this, but SF, being designed around ideas and novel thought patterns, does it with a special facility. The games fill this requirement in two ways. First, they demand an active involvement from the player; one has to be *doing* something, or one cannot properly be said to be playing. Second, the “might-be” possibilities of a game ask for hard thought about patterns and relationships. *What if* Marshal Ney gets to Waterloo on time? *What if* Japan is invaded on land, and the atomic bomb never used? *What if?*—which is, after all, the key premise of all science fiction.

Three: Creation of a “secondary universe” that captures the interest of the observer. Asimov's steel-cave cities, Smith's Instrumentality, Varley's Eight Worlds; these places take on a life of their own, are seen through the words on the page as living, illuminated entities. The people of Bradley's Darkover sometimes seem more real than the people we know. For games, much the same features apply. For the span of the game, as of the story or novel, the Confederacy won its separation from the Union, and

now the Union is fighting (with the new inventions the tank and the aëroplane!) to reunify America; now Cletus Grahame's Dorsai are fighting Dow deCastries's Coalition Army at improbable odds; now the Council of Lectors on overcrowded Angouleme fight an expansionist war on other worlds and bread riots on their own.

And there is a fourth factor to the attraction of the games: they play differently, every time.

Only a very few books and stories are of sufficient quality to bear rereading and re-rereading; only the best can provide the feeling of continual newness (like *Hamlet*, with its infinity of hidden facets) or of revisiting well-remembered friends (like *The Lord of the Rings*).

A game cannot help but be different. The dice roll in a new way each time; opponents change, or the same opponents change their style. Each time a game is played, it is a new book. The cast and the stage may be familiar, the plot old, but the story and the twists and especially the ending are waiting to be acted out for the first time.

OFF THE WALL

Supposing I've hooked your interest in games, what next? How does one begin?

Back to chess for an analogy. By far the best way to start is to be shown how by an experienced player—"gamer" is the favored term. And where to find one? Ask. Most science fiction fan groups have a few dedicated players. Many colleges and a number of large cities have organized clubs, which are usually eager (sometimes desperate) for new members. Ask at a hobby shop or bookstore that sells games; a number of these (especially the hobby shops) maintain Opponents Wanted bulletin boards.

If you're still stymied, or physically isolated, there's the Socratic-dialogue system: Purchase a game and examine its rules with the help of an agreeable friend. (The friend will be more help than you might think. Besides, you're going to need someone to play against.)

Which game? If you can find a gamers' group you can probably get a look at several and advice on even more. Barring this, read the manufacturer's literature, and (again) ask, at the hobby shop or bookstore. Box copy ranges from clear and helpful to nonexistent. Simulations Publications Inc. prints a "Complexity Rating" on a 1-to-9 scale on all its games; so have some other publishers. Avalon Hill rates all its games in its catalog.

Avalon Hill's *Starship Troopers* (from the novel, and officially authorized by Robert A. Heinlein) uses a "Programmed-Learning" rulebook that teaches game concepts in small, digestible sections that build up to a quite sophisticated game system featuring *everything* found in the book. Unfortunately, Programmed Texts are not easy to write, and (at this writing) *Starship Troopers* is the only SF game using the technique.

One more source of information is the magazines dealing directly with gaming (see the Appendix to this article). Be forewarned; these tend to be written in just that insider's dialect I mentioned early on, and their game reviews are often highly subjective (not to mention from the viewpoint of already-experienced gamers). But once involved with the hobby, they are valuable for variants and clarifications of existing games and announcements and descriptions of new ones.

The mention of new games is important as well, because the field is growing and changing rapidly—*exploding* is not too strong a word. Five years ago there were essentially *no* professionally published SF games; now there are dozens, and more being announced every day. Whole game companies have sprung up devoted solely to SF/fantasy games. Did someone mention the Great Science Fiction Boom?

Finally, how many readers of science fiction have also considered becoming writers of science fiction? (The editor of this magazine, from behind a mountain of manuscripts, will tell you that most of them have.) Gaming SF offers many of the pleasures of creation—you plot the story, *you* make the decisions—and all without the fear of rejection. Well, you *can* lose, of course. But as with any good writer, next time's another story . . . next time the other fellow won't be expecting me to . . . next time I'll get him. . . .

It's your move.

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION GAME PUBLISHERS

Aside from this (short) list, see the advertisements throughout this magazine. (And when writing, please mention where you heard about them.)

The Avalon Hill Game Company

4517 Harford Road, Baltimore MD 21214

Publishes mostly historical (non-SF) games, a notable exception being *Starship Troopers*. Also publishes *The General*, a bimonthly magazine on its own games.

Fantasy Games Unlimited

Box 182, Roslyn NY 11576

Primarily fantasy games, some SF.

Flying Buffalo Incorporated

Box 1467, Scottsdale AZ 85252

Moderates *StarWeb*, a computerized, by-mail interstellar empire game (the largest such operation going.) Also publishes some SF/fantasy games and game material.

Game Designer's Workshop

203 North St., Normal IL 62525

One of the first publishers in the SF field with *Triplanetary*. Their *Traveller* is considered by some to be the best SF role-playing game on the market.

Lou Zocchi and Associates

1513 Newton, Biloxi MS 39532

Sells an enormous number of games, and publishes several, including an authorized *Star Trek Starfleet Battle Manual*.

Metagaming

Box 15346, Austin TX 78761

Exclusively SF/fantasy. Publishes "Microgames," pocket-sized, uncomplicated games selling for \$3-\$4. Magazine: *The Space Gamer*.

Simulations Publications Inc.

44 East 23rd St., New York NY 10010

The largest line of conflict simulation games in the world. SF line growing rapidly. Magazines: *Strategy & Tactics*, which includes a complete game in each issue, and *Moves*, game analysis and design.

TSR Games

Box 756, Lake Geneva WI 53147

Best known for *Dungeons and Dragons*, also publishes a line of SF/fantasy games and rulebooks, including *Lankhmar* by Harry

The Chaosium

Box 6302, Albany CA 94706

Exclusively fantasy games. Magazine: *Wyrms' Footnotes*.



A THIRD SOLUTION TO THE THREE ROBOTS OF PROFESSOR TINKER (from page 77)

Say to any robot: "If I were to ask each of you whether you are male or female, and your two companions gave the same answer, would your answer agree with theirs?"

The truther would have to say no, the liar would have to say yes, and the sometimer would be unable to reply because she knows that her companions (one a truther, the other a liar) could not give the same answer. By directing this curious question toward any two robots, their identities are established and you will know the identity of the third.

"I must admit," said Isomorph, "that the sometimer could answer yes or no, and either answer would be, in a vague sense, a lie. But I assume that the question would at least cause the sometimer to think a long time before answering, if at all. Therefore I maintain this is a legitimate two-question solution to the first problem."

192 PAGES

02648



JULY 1979

\$1.25

UK 70p

Isaac ASIMOV's



**SCIENCE
FICTION**
MAGAZINE



**"Priest of the
Baraboo"**
by Barry B.
Longyear

**Grendel
Briarton**

John M. Ford



A DAVIS PUBLICATION

ON EVENINGS BEYOND THE FIELDS WE KNOW

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr

Here is the second of a set of articles on SF and fantasy games which have recently become popular. Mr. Ford has just sold his first SF novel, Air and Angels, to Pocket Books.

"Cleaned out a castle last night," one of your friends says. "Fifteenth-level wizard in the dungeon . . . he polymorphed himself into a Bronze dragon, but we Timestopped him and hit him with a 7-die lightning bolt, and mopped up with polearms."

As you gather your wits, another companion replies: "Actually, I am a Bronze dragon. Sixteenth-level."

Your "What?" betrays a certain lack of composure.

"The game, of course," your friends chorus. "*Dungeons and Dragons*."

All around nowadays are dungeons and dragons and wizards and space marines and the best thieves in Llynegath too. These are the elements of a new sort of parlor game: the fantasy, or science fiction, rôle-playing game.

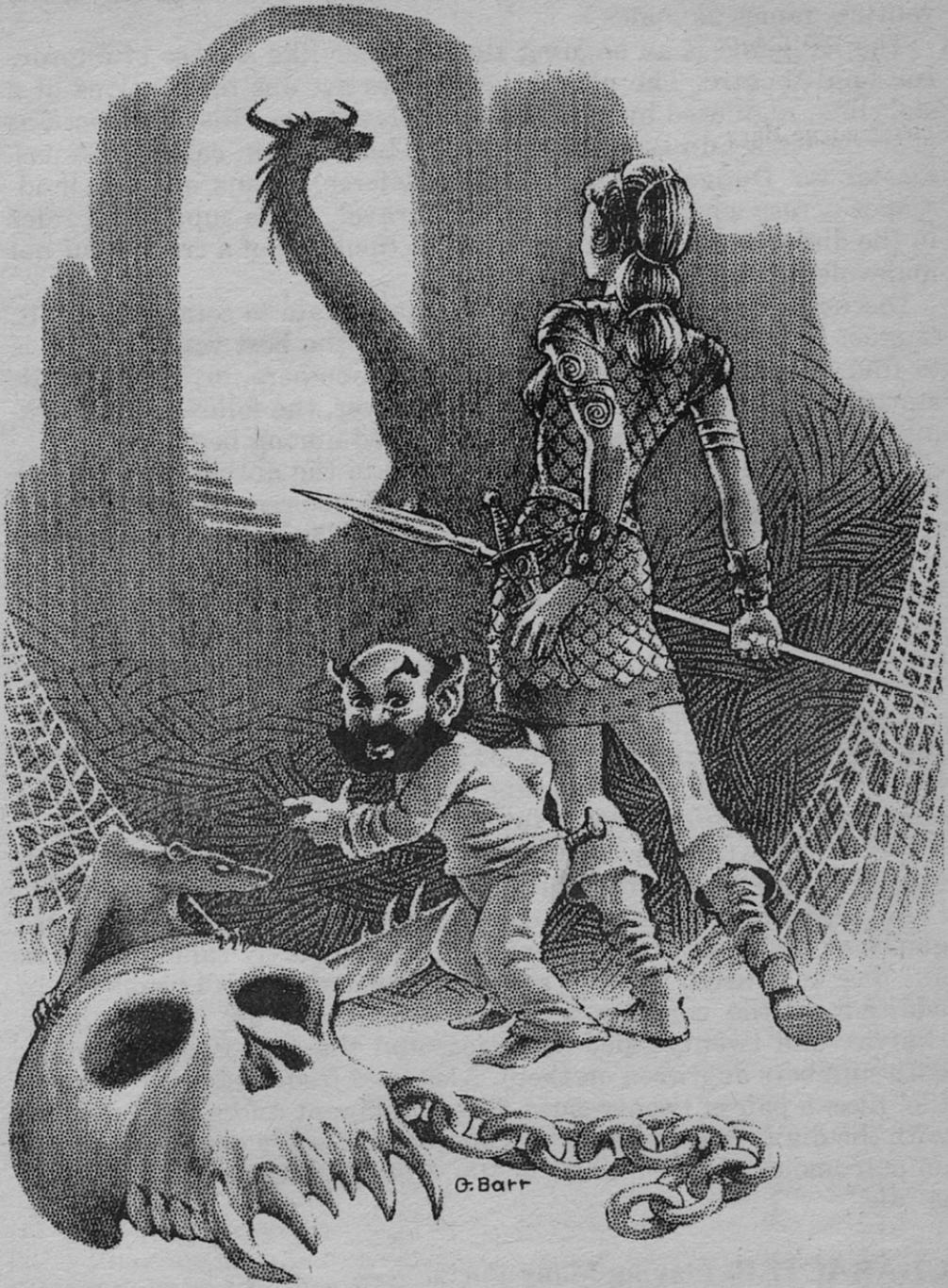
Rôle-play games do not use boards or decks of cards. They use pencils, and acres of paper, and dice, and rulebooks of an often awesome complexity. They provoke group interaction (and after-the-fact tale-telling) of a sort never seen around a card table.

What does "rôle-playing" mean?

In "conventional" games such as bridge or tennis or chess, the game is played for its own sake. If the player fantasizes being Oswald Jacoby or Chris Evert or Fred Reinfeld, he or she is not likely to talk much about it.

In a game such as *Monopoly*, the players are in the situation of making real-estate deals—but they are not projected very deeply into that situation; *Monopoly* is not really about real-estate, but rather about squeezing your opponents.

In the rôle-play (or *adventure*) game, however, each player receives a *character* who is far more than a chesspiece or the battleship or hat on the *Monopoly* board. The RP character has strengths and weaknesses and a personality, to be fleshed out by the player



G. Barr

behind him (or her, because as many females are attracted by adventure games as males.)

The RP game is an ongoing story, rather like a piece of improvisational theatre. The players/characters act out the motions of a storyline, regulated by an additional player who fills the functions of scenarist, set dresser, and director. This director, called a Gamesmaster (or Dungeonmaster, Judge, Referee), plans out the landscapes across which the players will travel, plays supporting roles in the dialogue and action, and acts as the hand of a crafty (but not malevolent) Fate.

Discussions of the game form are inadequate to communicate it. It must be illustrated by example. By far the best way to learn is to find a group of players open to new members, or, failing that, start one. As a third-best measure, however, the following is a dramatized example of a simple game, played among beginners.

The game is called *Starquest*, because to the author's knowledge no one has trademarked that name yet. It incorporates elements of a great many commercial games—including, for instance, both magic and spaceships. At that, these elements have been greatly streamlined for clarity: to explain a game as complex as, say, the most recent edition of TSR Games' *Dungeons and Dragons* would require tens of thousands of words—and indeed, the current rulebooks are impressively-sized affairs.

Since the flow of the game so closely resembles a story being told, the structure of this article follows the elements of a story: Character, Background, Conflict, and Plot. It will be seen how these elements articulate together into the game as a whole.

Key points—those general to all the games (for the variance in specifics is great) will be indicated by §, and *italics*.

An explanatory note on random numbers and dice: Adventure games make an extensive use of random and partly-random events, and dice of unusual types to generate unusual random numbers. In addition to the common six-sided dice, there are four-, eight-, twelve-, and twenty-sided varieties; and the five Platonic solids, with numbers engraved on them. Also used frequently are "percentile" dice: a pair of twenty-sided dice, of different colors, each marked with the digits 0 to 9 twice. One color die is always read first, giving an outcome of 00 to 99, or 01 to 100. Finally, the singular of "dice" is "die."

CHARACTER: Playing Many Parts

A story is people. People are the heart of the RP game, both the

players and the imaginary characters—crafty dragons, evil wizards, starship captains and interstellar emperors—they will meet in the course of their adventures.

Each player will have a “character card” on which are recorded the important facts about the personality he/she is playing. In the *Starquest* system, the card would look something like this:

NAME: <i>Allan Quarterhour</i>
STRENGTH: 10 INTELLIGENCE: 5
DEXTERITY: 8 EGO: 12
GUILD: <i>Warriors</i>
FAMILY: <i>Blacksheep son of an Overculture Naval officer</i>
EXPERIENCE: 0

Breaking this down one set of elements at a time:

“Allan Quarterhour” is not the player’s name, but the one he or she (it doesn’t really matter) has picked for the character. Some Gamesmasters prefer the players to have game names; some find it confusing; some don’t care.

§ The “depth of immersion” in the game world varies according to the tastes of the participants.

Strength, Intelligence, Dexterity, and Ego are collectively called *Requisites*. The numbers are determined by rolling two ordinary, six-sided dice. It is assumed that only above-average people get to be adventurers; if a player should roll a character whose *Requisites* total less than 28 (four times an average roll of 7) he may discard the character and try again.

The Strength *Requisite* determines the amount of weight the character can lift and carry, and his chance of successfully performing “feats of strength” such as snapping chains or holding a door shut against hordes of attackers. Allan’s roll of 10 is well above average.

Intelligence represents a character’s ability to learn and memorize. Allan’s roll of 5 means he is incapable of mastering such skills as piloting a starship, and though magic works in the world of *Starquest*, Allan would be limited to memorizing five spells, each of which he could do once per week. He therefore leaves the study of

magic to those better qualified.

Dexterity measures the chance a character will have of hitting his enemy when he uses a weapon. There are also "feats of dexterity," such as picking a lock (or a pocket); firing a gun from a wobbly ladder without falling off; putting on a spacesuit before his ship loses atmosphere. Allan's Dexterity of 8 is slightly better than average.

Ego is the character's strength of will. It determines his chance of persuading other characters with his appearance and voice; of resisting hypnosis and certain forms of magic. It is also a measure of Allan's ability to lead, should he find himself in command of an armed force. Allan's Ego is 12, the maximum; he is a born leader, practically impossible for others to dominate, but who persuades at a word.

§ Requisite numbers measure inherent physical and mental abilities.

These numbers considered, Allan decides he will join the Guild of Warriors. His other choices were Magicians—not likely; Engineers—for those of high Intelligence who don't care for magic, not for Allan; Artificers and Thieves—Dexterity not high enough; and Traders—Allan's Ego was more than good enough for this, but he prefers the "more adventuresome" life of a soldier.

There is a chance Allan will be blackballed from the Guild; since his father is a Naval officer (of which more in a moment) the chance is small—one in twenty. A 20-sided die is rolled and comes up 14. Allan is admitted.

As a Guild member, Allan is entitled to wear insignia of rank, even when not on active duty. He will receive priority of hiring if he applies for mercenary work, and is guaranteed a short-term job with the Overculture Armed Forces if he's broke and desperate. He also must pay 5% of any military wages he earns into the Guild General Fund.

§ Characters are usually organized into "classes" or "types" such as Warriors, Magicians, and Thieves, each of which has its own set of benefits and obligations.

A series of die rolls on a special table determined Allan's father's profession, that Mr. Quarterhour was still living, and that his son had left home under trying circumstances. Another roll gives Allan

the moderately large sum of five thousand Credits (C 5000) anyway; possibly a bribe to get out of the house quietly.

Allan's player hypothesizes (without dice) that Allan is a darkly handsome, dashing young man who cuts quite a figure in his lieutenant's uniform—but not too clever, and always in over his head.

This kind of interpolation between the numbers is what gives the game its color and flavor. It should be noted again that *Starquest* is a deliberately simplified system; most games contain more details, more tables to determine such things as appearance and background. Four Requisites is an unusually small number, though not the smallest in use; six is more common, and some Gamesmasters use a dozen and more, assigning numbers for Swimming and Gambling Abilities, Psychic Ratings, Disease Resistance, and so forth.

Experience represents the victories Allan has won in "life"; the foes defeated, the treasures won, the plans carried through. Experience Points (EP) can be considered Allan's "score" in the game, though he is not actually competing against the other players but playing alongside them. The Gamesmaster awards EP according to certain standard values—defeating a human of similar abilities to his own in single combat is worth 20 EP, for instance—and at his discretion. GMs are very individual about awarding Experience. One might give Allan ten points for winning over a lady pirate; another might disallow such because Quarterhour's Ego makes the winning too easy. A third might compromise by matching Allan against an equally strong-willed lady, and to the victor—

Experience points have a direct value in the game as well. For each 100 EP Allan earns, he is raised one "Level." This is an improvement in his natural abilities, gained through sweat and application. In *Starquest* Level is used as a dice modifier. Allan's presently Level 0, and has no such adjustment; after 100 Points he'll be Level 1, capable of adjusting certain die rolls by a point up or down. At 10th Level, he will clearly be a formidable character—though, of course, he will be facing equally powerful opponents.

§ *Advancement of abilities takes place through an "earned experience" system.*

BACKGROUND: Worlds Within Worlds

Once the character is created, it is necessary to set him down in a world in which to have adventures, and usually to provide him with some adventuring-companions.

Starquest takes place in the Overculture, a loose organization of forty human-inhabited planets. Humans are dominant on twenty of the Worlds. Ten are controlled by the Rasheni, a wolf-like race who do not like humans but are not openly hostile. Ten more belong to the Zu'ul, humanlike but amphibian, who slightly favor Man over Rasheni because of shape, but are generally indifferent to both.

Of the twenty Human Worlds, magic works on ten, as a result have not developed much machine civilization. On the other ten, including Earth, technology is dominant. There is a certain mistrust between Engineers and Magicians, but no great anger. Clarke's Law is seen to apply: "A sufficiently advanced society is indistinguishable from magic." Also, the Koniichev Hyperdrive for faster-than-light travel is a mechanical device that draws power from the magical energy field, and requires both guilds to maintain and operate it.

On the planet Castelnuovo (Human; Magic-positive) in the city Tarano, in the elegant atrium bar of the Hotel Pisa (which tilts ten degrees from the vertical and is held up by gravity generators) Allan Quarterhour meets with four other people.

Beatrice de'Nuovo is a Magician, the thirty-fourth in line for the Monarchy of Castelnuovo. She figures she is too far from the throne to waste her time as a courtier, and wants to make her own way in the Overculture.

Carl Tanner is an engineer, a starship pilot. He's taken out a large loan to buy a small space packet, the *Lemminkainen*. It's all he owns, and he needs some quick Credits to keep it.

Dade Odens would like to be an Artificer (the polite name for a Guilded Thief) but was blackballed. A big score, she believes, will change the minds of the membership council; and if not that, she knows that a large bribe will.

Epaimonidas is a Zu'ul Trader. (His real name sounds like an unstopped drain.) Rasheni raiders hijacked his freighter; he escaped with his life, but not much else. He has brought these people together with a plan: to hit back secretly at the Rasheni, revenging himself and making them all wealthy in the process.

"Isn't that illegal?" Carl asks. "Library computer."

The Gamesmaster, in a droning "computer" voice, tells the players that indeed it is; it's piracy, in fact.

"The Rasheni pirated *me*, and *they* got away with it," says Epaimonidas. "Are you in or aren't you? I can find somebody else if you're not."

"We could always turn you in," Dade says thoughtfully.

"I can always find an assassin who's hungry—or four."

"Tell us some more," Beatrice says. "Will we be on a magic-positive world?" She does not add that her powers are equally useless aboard a starship, since the K-Drive soaks up all the magical energy around it.

"Yes, of course. Why else would I have invited you?"

"And what about me?" asks Allan Quarterhour.

"You'll be force leader. You're a Warrior; that gives you certain privileges. Of rank, for instance."

"You want me to wear my Lieutenant's bar? That won't get me into half the Officers' Clubs around."

"Not a Lieutenant's bar. These." Ep pops open a black leather case. Inside is a set of Colonel's eagles.

"Do you know how illegal that is?"

"Surely no more illegal than piracy."

Allan thinks a moment. "What's the payoff?"

"Ten percent each."

"That comes to sixty percent for you," Carl mutters.

"Ten percent of how much?"

"My stolen goods were worth a million. I expect you to find at least five times that much loot at their base. So your shares come to five hundred thousand Credits. Each. Minimum."

"We'll do it," say all four at once.

Now, some explanations:

Epaimonidas the Trader doesn't exist. That is, he's not a player-character; instead he's being played, with appropriate hissings and rubbings of "webbed" fingers, by the Gamesmaster. His function is to bring the four new characters, Allan, Bea, Carl, and Dade, into the game world by giving them a specific task to complete—one that will leave them in a less precarious position than they now occupy.

Five hundred thousand credits is a lot of cash in game terms, but there are constraints on it. Carl needs practically the whole sum to pay off his ship. Dade will spend at least half of hers bribing the Master Thieves. As for Allan and Bea, who want experience, they have to hope there's a battle to win; this Gamesmaster uses a logarithmic (sliding) scale to award Experience Points for money won. A payoff of C 1000 would be worth 10 points, but C 500,000 is worth only 35.

The players are not worried about being led into a trap. If the party were more experienced, the GM might use an offer such as

the Zu'ul's to trick them into an ambush; the Rasheni might be trying to provoke an interworld incident by capturing four Humans as "spies and provocateurs." But the Gamesmaster knows that the new characters have enough trouble ahead of them without needless complications; this offer is straight and he says so. (What he tells them is that Beatrice has used her father's intelligence network to check Ep's claims, and found them to be true.)

The party accepts an advance payment from Epaimonidas, uses it to purchase supplies, including weapons and fuel for Carl's ship. Ep also gives them a sealed navigation-tape (the GM hands them an envelope) with the coordinates of their target.

The four board *Lemminkainen*, lift from Castelnuovo's skyport, and play the tape. (Open the envelope and read:)

TARGET WORLD: Mardicinq (Human; Magic-positive)
TECHNOLOGICAL LEVEL: Early gunpowder
ENVIRONMENT: Quasi-medieval (Compacted)

The party members groan over that last word. A Compacted world (affectionately borrowed by the GM from Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover* books) outlaws all weapons that throw projectiles: bows, guns, energy weapons.

§ *The game environment is usually liberally seasoned with borrowings from fiction: place-names, magical and scientific gadgets, and often even guest appearances by the characters (assigned Requisite values for the purpose).*

"Well," says Allan, "we're outlaws anyway. Carry the guns hidden and use them only if we have to."

Carl sets the controls on the K-Drive console.

CONFLICT: The Hand of Fate

All these happenings must be backed up by rules; by tables and charts, ratings and dierolls; quantifications of the variable world.

Carl Tanner's hand comes down on the drive lever—actually, Carl's player tells the Gamesmaster, "We're going now."

The GM picks up a sheet on which are recorded the values for various systems on the *Lemminkainen*, as well as a schematic diagram of the ship. He reads down to

K-Drive Reliability: 94

And from there to

Months since Maintenance: 7

Each month Carl doesn't pay for basic maintenance (he's been short of cash lately) reliability of ship systems goes down 1%. $94 - 7 = 87$. The probability that nothing will go wrong with the Drive this time is 87%. The GM rolls percentile dice, and a 62 comes up. "Drive successful," he says, and goes back to the ship chart:

General Reliability: 92

$92 - 7 = 85\%$. The die roll is 70, and nothing goes wrong. If the roll had been over 85, additional rolls would pinpoint the trouble: life support, computers, communications, and so on.

Note that each system could have been given a separate reliability number; this way takes less time, at least when failures are rare. Also, the probability of failure might have been checked instead of non-failure. The attempt would then have been to exceed rolls of 13% and 15% respectively.

Allan, wearing the phony Colonel's eagles, blusters at an orbital packet-monitor and gets permission to enter orbit around Mardicinq. His Ego of 12, plus 2 for the "disguise," totals 14; he rolls three dice, getting a 9, and passes with flying false colors.

"You're in orbit," the GM says. "Do you want to go down in a shuttle, or take the whole ship?"

Carl wants to leave *Lemminkainen* stashed safely in orbit. The others are less sure; the packet mounts a laser cannon that could help cover their escape. The shuttlecraft is unarmed.

Allan asks if he can use his persuasive powers on Carl.

"It's a three-die check if you want to try. If you fail, you automatically do it Carl's way." The GM looks at his watch. "You have to decide in exactly five minutes, or you miss your injection point."

§ Disagreements among the players are permitted; the referee arbitrates them only by applying natural constraints such as time limits.

Allan decides to try his winning personality on Carl. He rolls three 6-sided dice. Note that Bea and Dade could ask Allan not to try—since if he fails they're committed to the shuttle—but they could only force him by game means, such as the character of Dade

knocking the character of Allan out cold.

Allan's dice come up all fives. 15 exceeds his Ego of 12. Grumbling (except for Carl) the adventurers board the shuttlecraft and head for glory.

Shuttle General Reliability: 95
Months since Maintenance: 30

$95 - 30 = 65\%$. Carl bought his ship used, and he doesn't know that the shuttlecraft was not repaired at the ship's last tune-up.

§ *Many of the values in the game are not known, or not fully known, to the players: the old "we'll know what's faulty when it breaks" system.*

The GM rolls a 94, and something does break. Red lights flash in the shuttle, and Allan is relieved to note that everyone is now grumbling at Carl.

Dierolls identify the trouble: the main engines have flamed out. If Carl can't restart them, he will have to land the shuttle dead-stick, with no guarantee that it will be able to take off again.

"Can I go back to the starship?"

Dieroll: elapsed flight time. "Too late."

Starquest measures mechanical aptitude by Intelligence and Dexterity. The GM rates restarting the engines as a 7-die test: Carl must roll seven dice, attempting to score lower than his combined Intelligence (10) and Dexterity (7).

Note the pattern of these checks. Allan's Ego test requires him to roll three dice and come up with a number no higher than his Ego Requisite number. Obviously, the higher the Requisite value, the easier the check is to pass; and the more check-dice thrown, the harder the test is.

The difficulty of such a roll can be measured by the ratio between the "average score" for the number of check-dice rolled and the number the character is attempting to beat. In this case, the average roll with three dice is 10.5—that is, half the time the dice will show ten or fewer spots. (It is, of course, impossible to actually roll half a spot.) Allan's Requisite score, the number he must roll equal to or less than, is 12. The ratio, then, is 10.5 to 12, or 0.875 to 1. The Gamesmaster rounds this number, multiplies it by 10, and calls it a *Difficulty Rating* of 9. (The actual probability of rolling 12 or less with three dice is 0.74, or about three chances in four.)

Suppose Allan's Ego were only 7, the average roll with two dice. The ratio would then be 10.5 to 7, or 1.5 to 1, a Difficulty Rating of 15. (The probability of 7 or less with three dice is 0.16, about one chance in six.)

Carl's check involves seven dice, compared against two Abilities combined. The average roll with seven dice is 24.5 points. Compared to Carl's combined Intelligence and Dexterity, the ratio is 24.5:17, or 1.44:1. Rounding 1.44 and multiplying by 10 gives a Difficulty of 14. (The actual probability is—roughly—one in five. Calculations of probability involving lots of dice are a bit complex; there are 36 different numbers that can come up on seven dice, and $6^7 = 279,936$ ways the dice can roll—which is why this Gamesmaster uses the less-precise ratio and Rating system.)

Finally, suppose that Carl's Intelligence and Dexterity were only 3 points each, poor fellow. The ratio would be 24.5 to 6, or 4.08 to 1, the Difficulty 41 . . . but were that the case, the characters would be scrambling for crash cover right now, because Carl would be a long time rolling 6 points on seven dice. In this system, a Difficulty Rating of 35 means rolling all ones on the check-dice (for seven dice, that's a probability of 0.0000036, one chance in 279,936.) Anything more and you'd better forget the whole thing.

All of which is as it should be; what is easy for one person is difficult for another, and impossible for a third, dependent upon the abilities which game Requisites measure.

§ There should be some system for a graduated challenge to abilities; not all situations are as tough as others.

Looking back at the time the engines flamed out (his earlier roll) the GM determines that Carl will get two attempts to reignite, or three if he decides not to leave his seat and take cover against a crash.

First roll: 19. Close, but too high.

Second roll: 28. Carl is given five seconds to decide for or against a third attempt. He decides to stay at the controls.

Third roll: 15. Ignition! The landing is rough but not disastrous. At least, not yet.

They have landed right in the center of a Rasheni outpost. Wolf-faced sentries are snatching up their weapons and howling into communicators. One of the things Epaimonidas' money bought, however, was a jamming device.

"Is the jammer working?"

"You see a Rashen throw down his radio and stomp on it."

§ Whenever possible, the GM tells the players facts in the form of observations, which they then must interpret, rather than as Godlike statements.

Dade asks if their delayed motor burn reduced the chances of their being seen.

The Gamesmaster thinks a moment. "Yes," he says, "but you don't know how much. You may have been reported as an explosion or fire on the ground."

§ The players have the ability to insert their own suggestions and modifications, as long as the balance of the game is not upset. A good GM can think on his feet and never structures the game so tightly as to deny the players this freedom.

The party is ready to open the hatch. Facing them are six confused, angry Rasheni with drawn swords. Allan has a sword out. Carl has a meter-long axe. Dade has a steel-cable bolas on her belt, and a sash with half a dozen daggers thrust in it. Beatrice is chanting, and her eyes have rolled up in her head; she is preparing to cast a spell.

The spell, if it works, will put all the Rasheni to sleep. It has several disadvantages: it will require her three full minutes to prepare, and it covers a limited area of ground. Any Rashen outside that area will be unaffected; any party members inside it will be. So they must wait.

While Beatrice chants, the GM rolls six dice. He has decided that each Rashen has one chance in six of leaving the sleep circle. One die comes up 1: one departs. The others are now exposed to the spell, and must check against their magical resistance (Ego).

§ This particular kind of abilities check, not to perform a "feat" but to dodge some ill effect, is referred to as a "saving roll." Some games use extensive tables of saving rolls against specific effects such as spells, fire, and poisons. Objects may be assigned saves, such as a wooden wand's chance not to burn in a fireball.

The GM examines a sheet listing the abilities of all the creatures played as characters or encountered by characters in the game (known generally as a "Monster Table," though not all the creatures

on it may be monsters). The line he wants reads:

	STR	INT	DEX	EGO	COM	FER
Rasheni	3-18	2-12	1-11	4-14	7	8
	(11)	(7)	(6)	(9)		

The upper numbers indicate point ranges, and imply the dice thrown to find the number. Rasheni strength is found by rolling three six-sided dice, rather than the human two. Rasheni Dexterity is rolled on two six-sided dice, and one subtracted from the result.

The two last numbers are Commonness and Ferocity; not dice rolls, but rather indications on a scale of 1 to 9 of how widely found the creature is (7 here, fairly common) and how likely it is to attack on slight provocation (here 8, very likely).

By way of comparison, another line on the chart runs

	STR	INT	DEX	EGO	COM	FER
Humans	2-12	2-12	2-12	2-12	9	7
	(7)	(7)	(7)	(7)		

Finally, the parenthesized numbers are average values, which the GM may use if he does not want to roll a lot of dice for "bit players," who may not even need all the Requisite values. He uses these values here, and all the Rasheni get the standard Ego value of 9. He rolls five sets of saving rolls: 11, 7, 14, 8, 12.

Two Rasheni "make their saves"; the other three fall asleep. The fight is now three on three; rather better odds.

Beatrice notes on her character card that she has successfully cast a spell, which is worth five Experience Points.

The hatch cycles, the intrepid three venture forth (Bea will be incapacitated for another five minutes) and the battle is joined.

"Do we have surprise?" Allan asks.

"You do."

The Rasheni have been unsettled first by the sudden intrusion and second by the blackout of half their number. Because of this, Allan and his friends can each strike the first blow in their combats.

Dade throws her bolas. Her Dexterity is 11: ordinarily she would need to roll that or less on three dice. In addition, since the bolas covers a large area (four feet across) it receives a "to-hit" modifier of + 1. $11 + 1 = 12$. However, a Combat Table notes:

RUNNING TARGET: -2

and the Rashan is certainly running. So the actual "To-Hit Number" is $11 + 1 - 2 = 10$.

Dade rolls a 9. The bolas winds round the Rashan's legs, and he falls.

Carl swings his axe. His Dexterity of 7 is not modified; he is in close combat (called Melee) and his target's movement does not matter. He rolls a 3, the smallest possible number. This means he has done more than hit; he has scored a "Critical Hit," an exceptionally severe wound.

The GM rolls dice, checks a table. Carl's blow, it seems, has crushed the Rashan's skull outright; the alien drops instantly dead.

Allan strikes. He is also in Melee; his 8 Dexterity is also not modified. He rolls a 7; a hit. Now he checks for damage inflicted. His broadsword is rated at "1 + 1", so he rolls one die and adds a point. The roll is 4, the total 5. Five is then subtracted from the Strength of the Rashan; $11 - 5 = 6$. The Rashan is far from dead.

§ Some system of "hit points," "damage factors," or the like is used to keep track of progressive damage to a character. When sufficient "wounds" are absorbed, the character "dies." Points can be healed through time, medicine, and magic. Powerful magic may even restore dead characters to life.

The alien swings his sword now. The GM rolls, and the blow strikes Allan, not critically. The Rashan sword has a damage rating of 1. The GM rolls a 2, and Allan loses Strength. He has 8 points left; he's doing better than his opponent, but they're not yet to the Rashani stronghold, where who knows how many foes await. . . .

PLOT: The Concept of Campaign

If the adventure game seems like a "continual crapshoot," it is because the need to show how the game *functions* has gotten in the way of showing how the game *feels*. The skeleton has been displayed without the flesh clothing it. In actual play, the *storyline* occupies the interest, and the die-rolls flow by, no more noticed than the phrase "he said" is noticed in fictional dialogue.

The memories one carries away from the game are of its events, not its mechanics. . . .

For those of you who are wondering what happened to Allan Quarterhour and Company, fear not. After defeating the Rashani guards, they bound Allan's wound and used the guards' passkeys (and Dade's Dexterity) to get inside the pirate stronghold.

It was a great, dimly lit cavern, piled high with the kinds of things that pirates hijack: atomic disintegrators, gravity generators, quantum black holes crated for shipping. And half a dozen hijacked freighters, all in a line.

They found a lone Rashen asleep, and woke him up rather roughly. Allan used his persuasive powers—which worked this time—and the alien helped them find old Epaimonidas's ship, shovel it full of loot, and escape, blasting down the hangar door with an atomic disintegrator. As the five adventurers flew full-throttle toward the sky, Bea created a dust storm behind them that kept the raiders from pursuing.

And back on Castelnuovo, Epaimonidas was so pleased at the return of his ship that he gave the party an extra 10% for their Rashen ally, Farrnigrarr (but call him Fang). And Carl said, "Do you all remember when you promised me a tenth each of yours if I could fly you all out in one piece?" Despite a case of sudden mass amnesia, Carl wound up with 14% anyway.

Ep disappeared, then, with a promise to recommend the company to his friends.

Then Carl said, "Now that the ship's all mine, I can have some *real* adventures."

And Bea said, "There have been three assassinations since I've been gone, and four births in the royal family. That makes me thirty-fifth in line for the throne. I think I've got some time to kill."

And Fang said, "I sure can't go back to my Packbrothers now."

And Allan said, "Who wants to be a Lieutenant?"

And Dade said, "Give me two weeks to bribe the Guild examiners before you do anything."

"Pardon me," said the Gamesmaster, affecting a Gaeian accent, "but your services were recommended to me by a mutual friend . . ."

And off they go again.

This whole adventure might have taken a weekend afternoon and evening to play out, counting time to create characters. ("Rolling up" characters is the prevalent phrase.) But the game does not end when the adventure ends. Stored on cards between sessions, the characters return at the next evening together to earn more Experience; improve their abilities; and grow famous or infamous, powerful or notorious in the game world. Some will "die," to return as entirely new characters—or even their own avenging relatives.

Numberless games of bridge are played in the world among groups of people who consider it a "social activity." No one is suggesting that rôle-play games will replace contract bridge. But with the frac-

tion of the population that prefers group interaction to taking diamond tricks, that wants to share an *experience* rather than idle cardtable conversation, the games are taking hold.

There are no physical barriers whatsoever. The author knows of handicapped, deaf, even blind players. Since the action is in the mind, any sort of communication will do. The financial investment required is a few dollars for a set of rules, pencils, and paper. The most elusive and precious commodity involved, in fact, is someone with the time and creativity to be a Gamesmaster; and more and more play-aids—castles prestocked with monsters, maps of dragon-haunted landscapes and the spaces between stars—are available to make his job easier.

In an important way this piece has been a foredoomed exercise. No article of the length allowed to me can teach you to play games, or more than suggest the incredible variety and richness of living out a well-plotted story. (Notice that there were no dungeons here, nor any dragons, and hardly any magic; but *next* week, when Beatrice's powers have increased . . .) The only way to find out for real is to play for real. Hesitant adventures are better than no adventures. And that dreamy member of the circle who hates bridge just might be an outstanding Gamesmaster.

You've read this far; the next step isn't such a large one. For the Road, as Professor Tolkien said, Goes Ever On. . . .

RÔLE-PLAYING GAME PUBLISHERS

While no list such as this can hope to be complete or up-to-the-minute, the following are the most widely available and commonly played RP games. Also see the advertisements elsewhere in this magazine. (And when writing, please mention where you heard about them.)

Fantasy Games Unlimited

Box 182, Roslyn NY 11576

Fantasy: *Archworld, Chivalry & Sorcery, Bunnies and Burrows*
(inspired by *Watership Down*—honest!)

Flying Buffalo Incorporated

Box 1467, Scottsdale AZ 85252

Fantasy: *Tunnels & Trolls*

SF: *Starfaring*

Game Designer's Workshop
203 North St., Normal IL 62525
SF: *Traveller*

Heritage Models, Inc.
9840 Monroe Drive, Bldg. # 106, Dallas TX 75220
Fantasy: *The Emerald Tablet*
SF: *John Carter of Mars, Star Trek*

Lou Zocchi and Associates
1513 Newton, Biloxi MS 39532
Fantasy: *Superhero 2044*
SF: *Nuclear Survivors, Space Patrol*

Metagaming
Box 15346, Austin TX 78761
Fantasy: *The Fantasy Trip, Melee, Wizard*

TSR Games
Box 756, Lake Geneva WI 53147
Fantasy: *Dungeons and Dragons, Empire of the Petal Throne*
SF: *Gamma World, Metamorphosis: Alpha*

Also worthy of mention is: Judges' Guild, Box 773, Decatur IL 62525, who publish a large number of play-aids for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Metagaming and TSR Games publish magazines (*The Space Gamer* and *The Dragon* respectively) that contain articles of interest. Finally, Lee Gold, 2471 Oak Street, Santa Monica CA 90405, issues an enormous fan magazine, *Alarums and Excursions*, patterned after the SF-fannish Amateur Press Associations.



Isaac Asimov's

JULY 1980
\$1.50
UK £1.00

ASIMOV'S

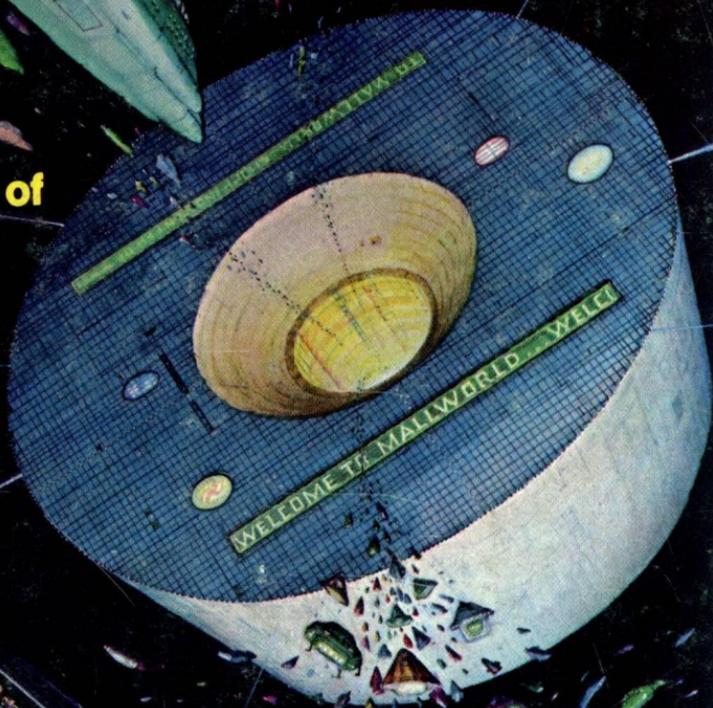
SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



**Somtow
Sucharitkul
"Sing a Song of
Mallworld"**

James Gunn

**E. Hoffmann
Price**



Back to neutral ground, thank God, and just space to note the publication of yet *another* reference book. This one is *The Literature of Fantasy* by Roger C. Schlobin, a "comprehensive, annotated bibliography of modern fantasy fiction." It seems reasonably complete, though as ever one can quibble about where the boundary lines are drawn, and most of the novels are provided with a brief synopsis. Not just scholars will find it useful, though I am afraid that all these handy, dandy guides are killing the wonderful serendipitous adventure of finding great books on one's own.

And finally, announcement of the publication of *Isaac Asimov's Adventures of Science Fiction* edited by George H. Scithers, a collection of stories from *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine*.

—Baird Searles

ON A MAGAZINE

For over ten years Simulations Publications of New York has, in addition to the world's largest line of conflict-simulation games, published *Strategy and Tactics*, a military history magazine that in

Special Introductory Subscription To ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

For the first time, new readers are offered this shortest-term, get-acquainted subscription to one of the most entertaining magazines in the mystery field.

No one but the Master of Suspense guarantees you so many unnerving and delightful hours of suspenseful reading!

Bill me \$4.98 for 5 issues.

Enclosed is \$4.98

(Outside U.S.A. & poss., \$6.00)

I prefer to use my MASTER CHARGE or VISA credit card; however, only longer terms are available:

Send me 14 issues for ONLY \$13.97 (outside USA \$16.35)

Credit card #

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Expiration date _____

Signature _____

NAME _____

(Please print)

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

ZIP _____

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Box 2640 Greenwich, CT 06836

Allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of your first copy.

HOG248

addition to the usual articles and reviews includes a complete game in each issue. Now SPI offers *Ares*, which applies the same format to science fiction and fantasy.

The first issue of *Ares* contains short fiction by M. Lucie Chin and Henrik Nordlie, a science-fact article on manned starflight by Dr. John Boardman, book, film, television, and game reviews (a lot of the latter) and the boardgame *Worldkiller*. There is also a two-page "storyboard" on the game situation, which is a space-opera classic: the Desperate Human Defense against the Alien Horde.

Ares is an intriguing attempt to bridge two fields with much already in common. Due to the game components and other enclosures in each issue, *Ares* will not be sold on newsstands. Look for it at hobby shops and bookstores that carry other SPI products, or subscribe direct.

—John M. Ford



The rate per word for Classified Ads is \$1.00 each insertion, minimum ad \$15.00—payable in advance. Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. Space reservations close 1st of 3rd month preceding COVER date. Send order & remittance to R. S. Wayner, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

CALIFORNIA

A CHANGE OF HOBBIT, 1371 Westwood Blvd., LOS ANGELES 90024. (213) GREAT SF. Send Want-Lists/SASE.

WARRIORS, WIZARDS & ROBOTS, 14376 Brookhurst St., Garden Grove, CA 92643, in ORANGE COUNTY 714-638-9101.

CANADA

FANTASY, Science Fiction, and related items. Hardcover, paperbacks, scarce and out-of-print books. Catalogues issued. Star Treader Books, 434 West Pender, Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6B 1T5 (604) 688-5119.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

MOONSTONE BOOKCELLARS, INC., 2145 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., WASHINGTON. 202-659-2600. Open seven days 11AM-6PM.

NEW YORK

THE SCIENCE FICTION SHOP, 56 Eighth Ave., N.Y., NY 10014. Virtually everything in print, and much that isn't. FREE catalogue.

NEW YORK—Cont'd

FANTASY ARCHIVES, 71 8th Avenue, NEW YORK. Uncommon books. By appointment only. #929-5391.

MAIL-ORDER

WE Deliver the Best and Most Complete Selection of F&SF Anywhere. Free 48 page Catalog. Nova, Box 149-I Brooklyn, NY 11204.

OHIO

RODNEY: Compleat Bookshop, 144 S. Water, KENT, OH 44240. SASE for sf and fantasy catalog.

OREGON

ZERO-GEE SCIENCE FICTION, 1890 SW 3rd, CORVALLIS. 12-7 Weekdays, 11-5 Sat. 754-9422.

WASHINGTON

MAGAZINE CITY, 1315 Third Avenue, SEATTLE. 624-6084.

SEPTEMBER 1980 \$1.50
£1.00

© Isaac Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



"Hot Pursuit"
by John M. Ford

Sharon Webb

Somtow Sucharitkul



A DAVIS PUBLICATION

ALAN SCHONBERG

ON PLAYING RÔLES: A SECOND LOOK

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr

Games based on science fictional or on fantasy settings continue to be popular.

Here, another in an irregular series of articles on that field from Our Man in Bloomington, Indiana.

About a year after we last examined adventure rôle-play games ["On Evenings Beyond the Fields We Know," August 1979], what began as an exotic parlor pastime has become part of the culture: there have been articles in the national press, game designers interviewed by Tom Snyder, and a very bizarre disappearance. (Kidnapping? We may never know)

The previous article was a broad, general explanation of the adventure idea. Now that the idea has become widely known—if still exotic—it seems appropriate to take a specific look at the games on the market.

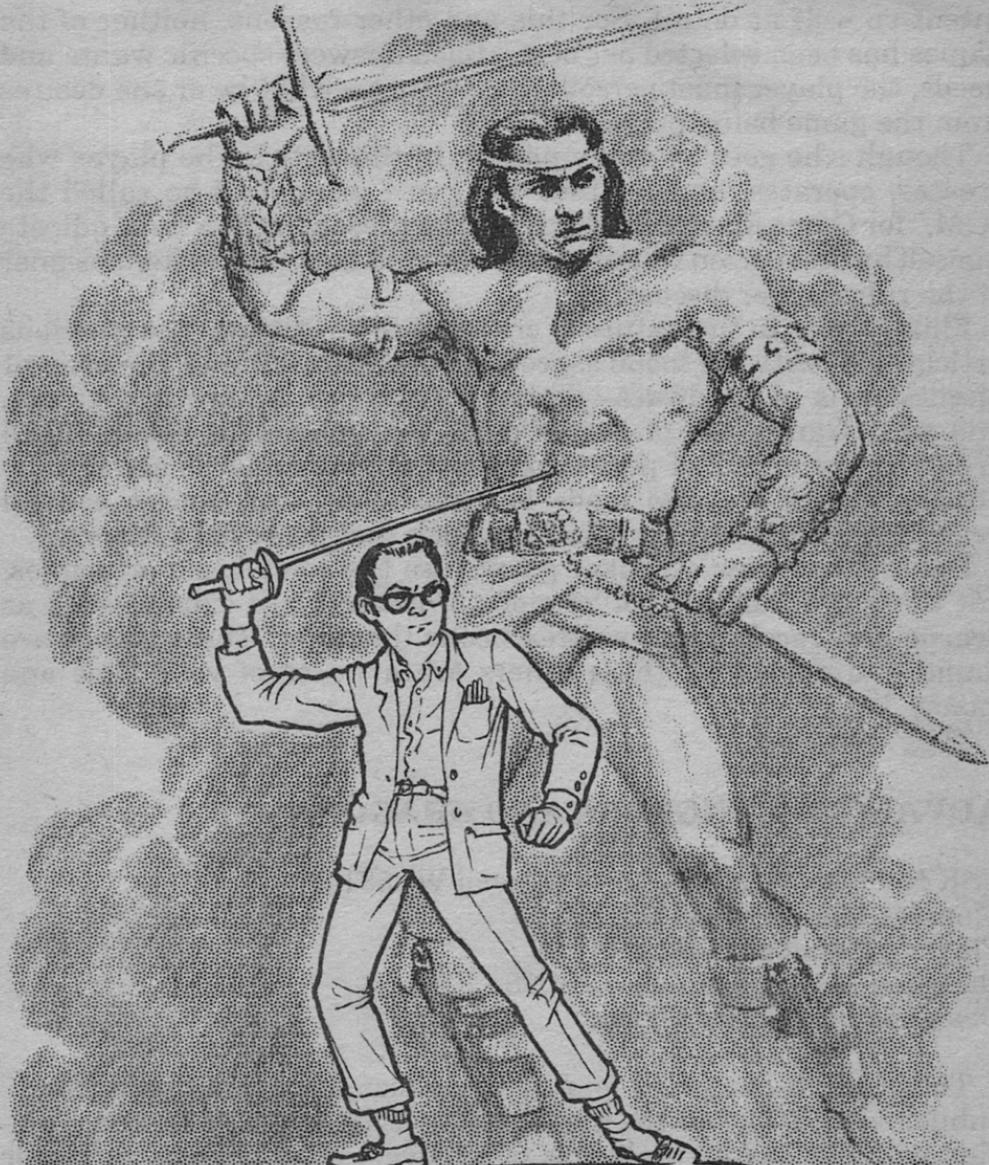
Games such as these—more properly, rulesets—do not lend themselves well to brief-notice reviews of the kind given books. Game rules do not have secret plot twists, they are not read once and judged; they are played with, they *work*—and sometimes fail to work. A game review must therefore be a structural criticism, showing not only what but why.

This does not mean that you are about to read—or quit reading—an elaborate, esoteric technical analysis of dice probabilities and the kinetics of two-handed swords. Think of this rather as a sort of *Hyborian Consumer Reports* (with apologies to both that magazine and the nameless editorial horde of *Amra*).

Because of the need for depth and the limits of space, only two of the numerous available rulesets will be reviewed in this article. If the response so indicates, others may be covered in future articles.

The games reviewed were chosen because both are generally available, and they have been around for a while, long enough to develop a following.

Another criterion: The "first generation" of RPGs [Rôle-Playing Games] were sketchy, were often less game-systems than outlines of such, requiring extensive patching and filling by Gamesmaster and players before play was possible. These games are "second-generation," complete—at least according to their advertising.



RUNEQUEST
DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

G. Barr

A last factor is that the rulesets here covered represent different concepts and philosophies of game design—matters of approach and intent as well as detail. For this and other reasons, neither of the games has been selected as “best.” Each answers specific wants and needs; the player must personally determine what he or she desires from the game being played.

Though s/he goes by many names, in this article the player who creates, operates, and referees the game world will be called the “GM,” for Game Master or Mistress. The present author will indicate himself by first person singular; “author” will mean the writer/designer of the rules under discussion.

Finally, it is in the nature of criticism to be critical. The previous article dealt with the social aspects of adventure gaming; the present discussion is of hardware—where it functions, where it does not, and why. Games are of course made for enjoyment, not to fulfill arbitrary standards of perfection—but some standards are not arbitrary. Books are also made for enjoyment, and honest critical examination has never yet killed a book that deserved to survive.

Put another way: all poker games use the same basic principles, but there are hundreds of versions of poker. Card experts such as Scarne and Jacoby have written books that say, “These games are sound and enjoyable; these others are a waste of your time and money.”

That’s the idea.

ADVANCED DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

TSR Hobbies, Box 756, Lake Geneva WI 53147

Monster Manual—\$11.98

Player’s Handbook—\$11.98

Dungeon Master’s Guide—\$14.98

Designed by E. Gary Gygax

The original *Dungeons and Dragons* (usually abbreviated *D&D*), published in 1974, was the first commercially-available fantasy rôle-play game. It had its problems, most severe of which was very poor organization as well as major gaps and ambiguities in the meanings and uses of important rules. It was, in fact, not possible to play with the original three-book set without imposing several house rules and interpretations—some of which proved to be not at all what the designers had in mind.

Many supplements and play-aids followed, from TSR and others,

attempting to solve these problems. More than once it was suggested that what *D&D* really needed was not patching and supplementing, but a complete overhaul, front to back, and the hand of a competent editor.

Now we have *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, which claims to be just that revision. TSR advertising casually tosses around words like "ultimate." The package, three case-sewn hardcover books, is impressive.

Is *AD&D* an improvement on the original? Definitely. One can study these books and, with the usual props of dice and graph paper, construct a "dungeon" and go adventuring.

The first volume published, the *Monster Manual* (MM), contains tabular data, descriptions, and illustrations of the beasts that inhabit the *AD&D* universe, alphabetically from Aerial Servants (a sort of low-grade angel that assists Clerical types) to Zombies.

The second volume, the *Player's Handbook* (PH), has the information generally available to inhabitants of fantasy game worlds: the types of characters, their requirements and abilities; prices of standard equipment; spell lists for those with magical abilities.

The *Dungeon Master's Guide* (DMG) contains that information normally the exclusive property of the GM: background notes, case examples ("What if I cast the Wall of Stone spell as a bridge?"), lists of magical gadgets and their powers. There are also many suggestions on how to set up and operate the game—something long needed.

This division into volumes makes sense from the GM's standpoint: the secret workings of the world stay secret—and from the players' viewpoint as well: they need not buy more books than are actually necessary to play the game.

It has been said (and in fact was suggested to TSR) that loose-leaf bindings would have been a more useful format than hard boards. The book covers are garishly colored; those for the MM and DMG are exceedingly ugly as well.

AD&D rules are relatively simple and straightforward, though there are a lot of them. There are frequent comments on the complexity of other rulesets; some of these comments are rather sharp, and many seem aimed at an audience much younger than the college-and-up group that first made rôle-playing popular.

Combat in the game depends on a single roll of a twenty-sided die, with modifiers for unusual physical abilities and type of weapon used. No choices are involved, other than original selection of weapon and armor. Damage done by a blow is also determined by

weapon type, and is scored against a simple linear scale of "hit points." When hit points are reduced to zero, the character is dead. (In one of the few optional rules sections, characters may be given a range of "negative hit points," in which they are alive but critically hurt and in need of aid.)

The system is quick and simple to use, if a little undetailed—characters' point totals bounce up and down, without any permanent hurt being suffered from all that fighting. The author says: "The location of a hit or wound, the sort of damage done, sprains, breaks, and dislocations, are not the stuff of heroic fantasy." (DMG, p. 61) This would seem to ignore the Ringbearer's wound on Weathertop, the Dolorous Blow struck Amfortas, or any of the many other specific hurts that have shaped the careers of heroes and villains.

Characters capable of magic memorize spells to a limit of mastery; when recited, these are forgotten and can not be re-used—rather like bullets loaded into a gun. This system was taken, more or less, from Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* stories. Also required is a "material component"—some physical item that is used up in the cast, such as a seed, a gem, or an inked rune. This seems to have been added in response to comments that, while the mechanics of *D&D* magic were simple (write the spell down when memorized, check it off when used), they bore no resemblance to the magic of folklore—or, for that matter, most fantasy fiction. A "rationalization" of magic, involving something called *dweomer*, is presented piecemeal, but never jells into a coherent whole. The reader is finally referred to the works of Vance and John Bellairs.

Another difficulty with original *D&D* magic was that there were loopholes and logic lapses in the descriptions of how spells functioned. Some of these have been well and tightly mended. Some have only been made worse. There is no consistent relationship between the level (difficulty) of a spell and its physical power—something one might find in reality but which certainly is not proper in a game.

In the description of the "Clerical Command" spell (PH, p. 43), which allows one-word orders to be given, "Suicide!" is forbidden as a command "because *suicide* might be a noun." Yet case examples are given for *back*, *fall*, *fly*, and of all things, *die*—one of the most frequently used nouns in the book!

In a way, all these problems are the same: there is no organized explanation, no *system*, of *AD&D* magic; there are merely some descriptive words (this spell is an Evocation that *dweomers* the door,

etc.) tacked on after the fact.

The philosophy (there's that word) of *AD&D* is Anything Goes; any item, creature, or character, so 'tis said, can be written into the system. (I well remember the arguments as to what level of Magic-User Gandalf was, and the list of game-factorings of Lovecraft's Cthulhuoid creatures.) The GM is encouraged to toss anything that catches his fancy into the game, without regard for logic and consistency. (He is warned, however, that any *purchased* materials not approved by TSR will damage his game. And there are constant exhortations to maintain "game balance," which seems to be defined as not letting the player-characters win too often.) The DMG contains rules for connecting *AD&D* with the same publisher's Wild West and post-Bomb rôle-play games.

Now, one of the great features of this kind of game is its flexibility; the power to make the game into whatever the participants want. And if they want a deuces-wild universe where the Fantastic Four can plunge into Castle Gormenghast to recover the Ring of the Nibelungs—well, nothing *anyone* says is likely to stop them.

I am not sniping at anyone's style of play. I've run some of those wild-card games myself; and they're a lot of fun, for a while. But eventually the dazzle fades, the shock effect of submachine-guns-and-unicorns wears off. What, then, about the GM and players who want a more limited, subdued, and—more importantly—internally consistent game? What has been done for them?

Unfortunately, not very much. Dungeonmasters (this is TSR's term, and their consistent use of it rather than "game-" or "world-master" indicates the confines of their thinking) are told, often, to pick and choose among the rules as they see fit. But there is no sign of how the rules so chosen are to be made to work together.

Suppose, for example, the GM decides not to have Druids in his world—they are, after all, pretty culture-specific. Can the Druid magic spells (most dealing with nature) then be assigned to other characters? On what basis? When a Druid is encountered on a chart or in a preplanned adventure, who or what can be substituted?

Some types of characters given in the books, most notably Assassins, are presented with the admonition that they are "too powerful" to be operated by players. Something is wrong here. Why have these types (who, after all, are human beings) been given such powers? Certainly some types are unsuitable for adventures—sages sit around thinking all day, cooks and bakers don't get out much either—but to first build a "supertype" and then to put an arbitrary ban on its use does not seem like very good design.

Upon examination, most of the "GM guidelines" turn out to be advertisements ("... only those [products] noted as *Official* or *Authorized AD&D* products should be accepted."—DMG, p. 11, original emphasis), irrelevant to the rules (e.g. how to handle unruly players), and tables to make random those game elements that most call for thoughtful planning—governments, religions, and so on.

Without intending to impose a phony "educational" purpose on the game, it might be pointed out that in the past, GMs studied the real world and real folklore to add color and detail to their imagined worlds. Creativity was sparked.

Not here. Participants are instructed to obtain only those materials with the publisher's seal of approval. Details of society can all be found in the DMG. When an outside reference *is* given, it is not to a primary source but to a piece of modern fantasy—and those are not even carefully chosen. Further, many of the charts given as "aids to world design" are seriously distorted or just plain wrong.

And since variant-rules games have been running since the rules first appeared—in fact, given the vagueness of original *D&D*, it could be argued that nothing *but* variants exist—the warning to avoid such games because they will "wither" is rather ridiculous.

Well, now: who is going to be disturbed by all this? Perhaps not many at all. *AD&D* can and will be played and enjoyed widely, particularly by the younger players who want to "kill monsters and grab treasure"—because fundamentally *AD&D* is an action game, not a psychological one as are some other rôle-play games. This understood, it can be said that a table that confuses schizophrenia with multiple personality, or one that puts the noble rank of Baronet (created in the 17th century) into the Middle Ages, will not matter to most players—and the rest will probably be inclined to create their own such tables anyway.

But if the errors are not worth noticing, surely the carelessness that caused them *is*?

There is a basic and serious misunderstanding here. The author repeatedly refers to fantasy and to his game as "illogical." Apparently he is unaware of the difference between illogic and imagination, and of how insulting this statement is to fantasy writers who take care and pride in their work. What, after all, is *The Lord of the Rings* if not a triumph of internal consistency and reasoned construction?

This is a game with many good and playable rules—but without any system underlying those rules. The kitchen sink approach governs all. And there is nothing wrong with that sort of plumbing,

provided that the potential player—and especially the potential GM—is aware of it and willing to either play along or exert the effort necessary to build a framework underneath the chrome.

And when we're talking about games, isn't "ultimate" a word without meaning?

RUNEQUEST

The Chaosium, Box 6302, Albany CA 94706

120-page rulebook—\$11.95

Designed by Steve Perrin, Ray Turney, Steve Henderson, and Warren James

And now for something completely different:

Runequest, unlike most RPGs, is set within a specific imagined world. Glorantha, first created in 1966 by Greg Stafford, is a planet poor in ferrous metals, which only certain cult initiates may work; the predominant metal is bronze. Gloranthan culture has an elaborate mythology and numerous small religions (called cults) instead of strong central faiths. The overall "feel" is Near Eastern rather than Western European.

Interestingly (and, it must be noted, completely coincidentally) much the same situation applies in M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne*, published first by TSR Games' ancestor Tactical Studies Rules in 1975 and now published by Zocchi Enterprises (01956 Pass Rd., Gulfport MS 39501). *EPT*, the lifetime creation of philologist Barker, was a marvelous achievement of imaginary society. As a game it was much less successful, since its rules were first-generation *D&D* grafted on without regard for the unique features and possibilities of Professor Barker's world Tékumel.

No such problem applies to *Runequest*. The game system is both original and closely integrated with the background, since—unlike *Petal Throne*—the world designer was present at and involved with its creation.

Runequest characters start with the usual set of personal requisites: Strength, Intelligence, and so forth. They will also have a societal background, and may belong to a semihuman or nonhuman race—and these are genuinely different from humans in game-play. In some games a player-character troll is just a big, dumb, tough, ugly human. In *Runequest*, Trolls have their own society, gods, reasons for being. (They're still big and dumb and tough and ugly, by human standards.)

Characters also have skills, and the skills system is the best feature of the game mechanics. Instead of skill magically (you'll pardon the expression) appearing upon the accumulation of n experience points, characters must go to the sources of knowledge. Some skills are available in one's home tribe (or city or whatever); some are learned from professional instructors, for money; some are available only to the members of specific cults. Each skill that a character possesses has a mastery number, from 1 to 100, attached. Mastery increases through use of the skill, and through purchased training.

This does require an involved, almost baroque, character record sheet; samples of these, suitable for copying, are included.

All these rules are presented with explanations of "The Reason Why" each rule is present, as well as an ongoing story that illustrates both the application of the rules and the flow of the game. No other ruleset shows quite so well how the game is to be *played*.

Treasure has always been a problem in RPGs: not its lack—far from it!—but its lack of utility. Paper gems do not glitter; an expensive paper meal tastes no better than a cheap one. Even in adventuring equipment, there is a limit to the amount of military tinware a character can carry around. *Runequest* solves this problem most elegantly. Treasure once acquired is spent on training, both providing a real reason to acquire hard money and taking it out of the players' hands.

But it isn't all cash-flow statements. Much more important than the Loot Problem has been the Classes and Levels Problem. Fantasy RPG characters tend to be filed in tight pigeonholes: 3rd Level Magician, 5th Level Fighter, 22nd Level Insurance Salesman, that sort of thing. In *Runequest* a character may at once be an Impala clan barbarian from the plains of Prax, a master swordsman, a former lay member of the Storm Bull cult who is now a Rune Lord of the cult of Orlanth Adventurous, with spells including Bladesharp and Farsee—

In other words, characters are round, complex, and best of all, unique individuals.

Runequest combat involves a roll of percentile dice, modified by weapon skill, personal abilities, and the target's defensive abilities. If a hit is scored, another roll determines its location, and another, dependent on weapon type, determines amount of damage done. Armor on the area struck will absorb some of the damage. There are also chances for critical hits, which ignore armor protection, and impalements, which double damage from long pointed weapons such as spears.

This system is moderately complex. Choices available are primarily of weapon and armor types. The hit-location system means that characters need not wear homogenous armors (all metal, all leather, etc.) but may mix types. Combat is extremely deadly; it takes no more than a couple of well-aimed blows to damage a limb beyond natural healing, and healing spells are not the every-party's-got-some proposition of other games. (High lethality in combat does tend to make players seek alternatives to fighting, which I find a welcome thing.)

Runequest magic is of two types. Battle Magics are available to anyone (who can find a teacher, anyway). Rune Spells, much more powerful, are available only to cult Initiates (of which more later). All magic involves the investment of a character requisite called, logically enough, Power. Some spells are "reusable"; others must be paid for each time they are used.

This magic system is simple and straightforward, which makes practical another feature: instead of a huge master-list of spells, there are many short lists, one per cult. Thus the magic one learns must follow the lines of the philosophy one has chosen.

Most RPGs ignore religion. This seems contradictory, since practically all of the games have some kind of "priest" or "cleric" character type; but a not-very-close examination shows that these types are actually specialized magicians, usually combat medics.

In *Runequest*, a character's religion—expressed as membership in a cult—is vitally important. Unlike the old fantasy RP distinctions of Good, Evil, Law, and Chaos, which were used primarily as excuses to kill something differently aligned, the cults system defines a character, puts reasonable constraints on behavior, and provides a route to power through initiation into the higher mysteries.

Most cult members are Lay Members. The requirements for admission are usually few: race, birth, abilities, a fee. Lay membership gives access to cult skills and Battle Magics, often at reduced cost. Some cults provide room, board, and healing services.

After a period of time and the fulfillment of certain personal requirements, a character may apply to become an Initiate. There are two types. Rune Lords are heroes-at-large in service to the cult and its god. Rune Priests direct temple services and are the direct link between members and deity. In exchange for their special powers and privileges, Lords are required to perform great deeds, Priests to give up much personal freedom.

Rune Lords may also acquire the ability to work iron, which makes weapons and armor far superior to those of Gloranthan bronze. Pro-

vided, that is, that they can find the stuff.

A character who changes cults may, depending on the nature of the cult and the depth of his involvement, face penalties from a small fine to combat with a powerful spirit, monster, or demon.

This cult business may puzzle some and put some off, but it is an important step in RP gaming: not just because it adds depth to the game background, but because it gives characters something they have not had before.

Characters "fight and die" a lot in fantasy RP, in order to kill monsters and take their treasure, or to get something called "experience" which will make them better able to kill monsters and take their treasure; armored hamsters on a wheel. One can of course play *Runequest* in this fashion, but how much of a difference it makes to have characters fighting and dying for beliefs and causes instead. The game becomes what it allegedly was all along: character rôle-playing. (I hasten to add that many people *were* playing in this fashion from the beginning—but this is the first commercial ruleset to build the idea into its structure.)

There is, unfortunately, a price for all this philosophy, and it is this: To enjoy *Runequest* completely requires that one enjoy, that one get involved in the world of Glorantha. Not everyone is going to do that. Some elements of the game in fact work against the illusion: the metal called "bronze" differs markedly from the Earthly article; and the Gloranthan races of Elves, Dwarves, and Trolls—among others—do not match the images evoked by those names. (Though this is hard to entirely condemn—I find the authors' creations much preferable to another batch of imitation Tolkein characters.)

Now, there is no problem if you are a ruleswriter and worldbuilder; the *Runequest* game systems will transfer easily to a different culture, and the authors have included suggestions to help the job along. But not everyone can go to these lengths.

This is an awkward note to end upon—rather like saying "the cake is delicious, but you may not like the icing." Certainly no one should be frightened away from Glorantha simply because it is different, especially since so much care has been taken to make *Runequest* usable by the novice or occasional player.

And it's *good* icing; just a very distinctive taste.

EXTRODUCTION: ON SUPPLEMENTS

Books of this type beget books: rules additions and clarifications,

variants, aids to design and play. A few of these were mentioned in the reviews; following is a highly selective list of some of the better material available both from the original publishers and others. Due to the instability of *real* gold pieces, prices have not been given; a stamped, addressed envelope to the publishers (not, please, this magazine!) should bring current information.

For *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, TSR Games publishes pre-built "dungeon" and "wilderness" adventures of high quality. These contain maps, descriptions of the local inhabitants fair and foul, and what treasures await the victor. Recent releases have included illustrations of dungeon features, occupants, etc. to aid in visualization of the scene. They also publish a magazine, *The Dragon*. The Judges' Guild [1165 N. University, Decatur IL 62526] produces several such adventures and play-aids, Officially Approved by TSR; the most interesting of these is the "City-State of the Invincible Overlord," an enormous walled city (the map is about three feet square, and comes with a thick guidebook). Unfortunately, JG's work suffers from haste and almost nonexistent proofreading. Not Officially Approved, but of interest to the GM in search of ideas, are the three volumes of the *Arduin Grimoire* by Dave Hargrave [Grimoire Games, 2428 Ellsworth (102), Berkeley CA 94704] which contain new spells, monsters, and other details from Hargrave's high-powered world of Arduin.

Runequest's publishers offer several scenario packs. One of the best is *Snake Pipe Hollow*, which not only defines an area but provides several possible approaches to adventures there; most of these go beyond mere looting. It is typical of The Chaosium to back up its products with such suggestions for using them. Background packs, books of pre-created characters, are available—given the individuality of *Runequest* characters, these are more valuable for the price than most such lists. The book *Cults of Prax* details fifteen Gloranthan cults and rules for creating cults (including non-Gloranthan ones); this is a strongly recommended purchase. Two additional rule-books, *Heroquest* and *Godquest*, dealing with earlier periods in the world's history, are in preparation. Chaosium publishes two magazines: *Different Worlds*, a general gaming magazine, and *Wyrms' Footnotes*, dealing specifically with Glorantha. Finally, there are two board games set there, *White Bear and Red Moon* and *Nomad Gods*; a third, *Shadows Dance*, has been announced.

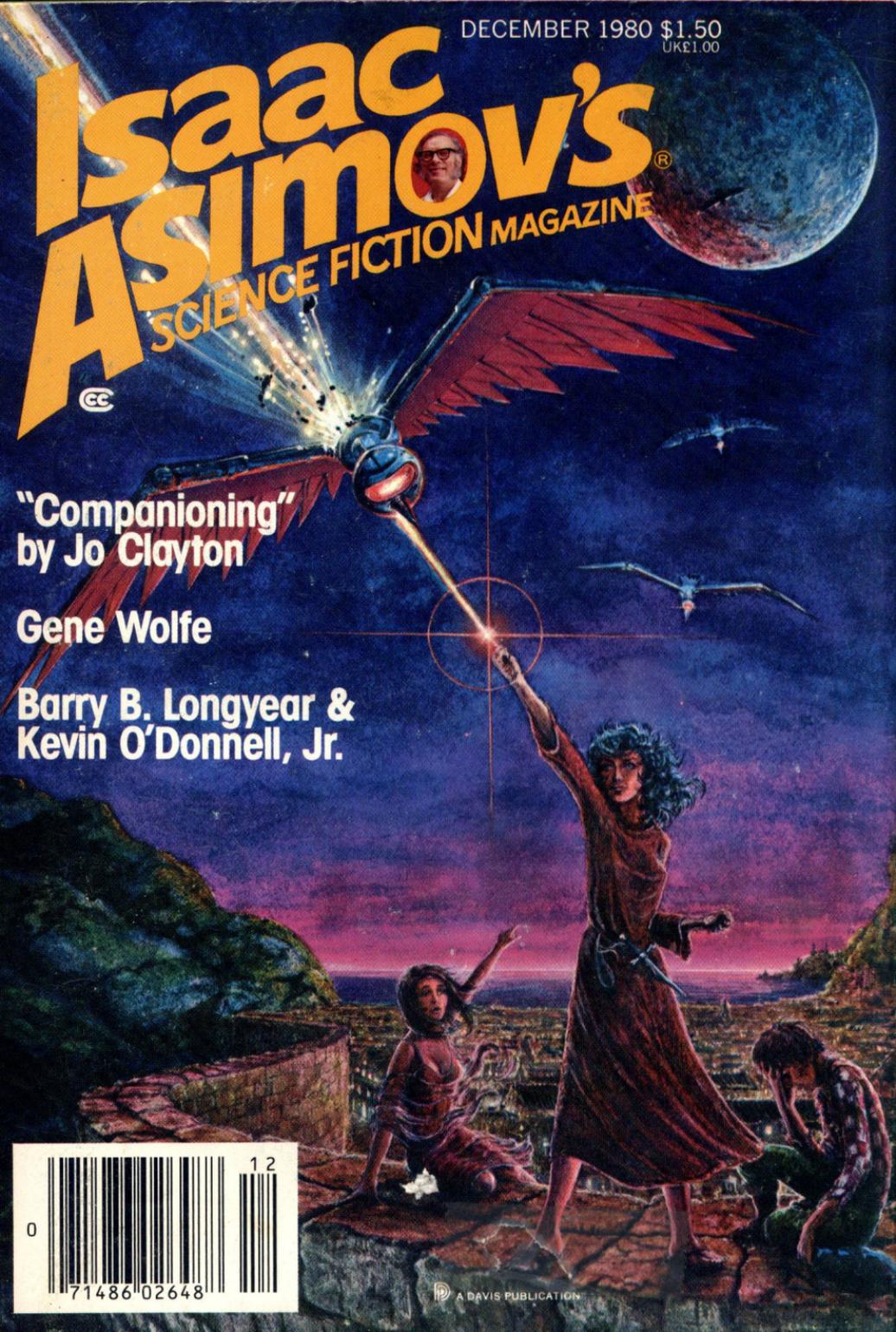
DECEMBER 1980 \$1.50
UK£1.00

Isaac Asimov's



ASIMOV'S

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



CC

"Companioning"
by Jo Clayton

Gene Wolfe

Barry B. Longyear &
Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

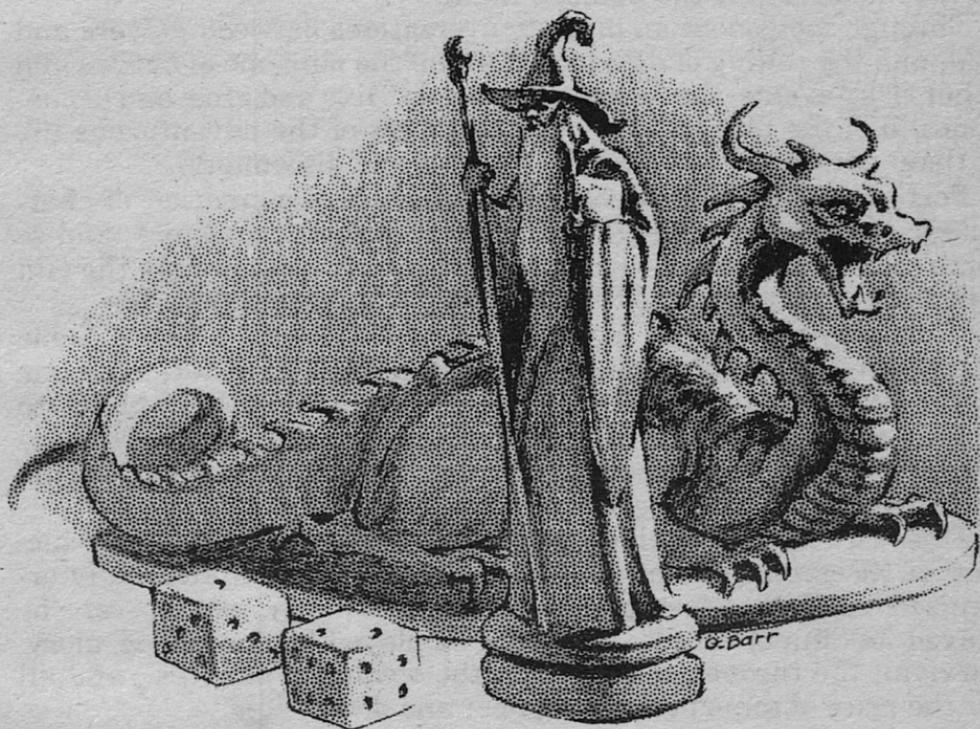


A DAVIS PUBLICATION

ON PLAYING RÔLES: A THIRD LOOK

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr



Mr. Ford's first novel, Web of Angels, has just been published by Pocket Books.

For those of you who missed the previous article and the rôle-play phenomenon in general, here are some aids to navigation:

In the rôle-play game (RPG) the players take the parts of characters in an imaginary world. These characters are defined by numbers that measure such things as strength, dexterity, and intelligence. In all but a very few games, the world is laid out and operated by an additional participant called the Gamesmaster or Referee (and sometimes other things, especially after the players fall victim to a fiendish trap of the GM's devising). These "worlds" may use the props of heroic fantasy or science fiction, or less often such places as the Wild West or the Spanish Main.

Through movement on maps, conversations between players and GM, and the rolling of dice to determine the outcome of battles and other risky events, the "player-characters" live and grow and (sometimes) die; the players enjoy the pleasures of the adventurous life without personally suffering its hazards and discomforts.

Portions of the rules cover such things as the creation of characters, their social background, combat, magic, economics, and so forth. Some of these rules may be optional. Almost always the GM will create house rules to fill gaps and personalize the world.

"Rôle-playing" should not be taken in too literal a sense. Some players enjoy becoming deeply immersed in a character, even one radically different from their own personalities. Others prefer to remain themselves in an altered environment. Similarly, GMs may create worlds ranging from simple arenas for fighting monsters (the "dungeon crawl") to completely realized alien societies.

This is a very powerful form, which explains the tremendous success of RP gaming despite some very badly written and badly organized rulesets. Most games—chess, *Monopoly*, poker—can be played for "fun or blood"; RPGs can be played for fun, blood, glory, survival, the thrones of kings and the wealth of empires—and all for the price of some books and paper and dice.

CHIVALRY AND SORCERY

Fantasy Games Unlimited, Box 182, Roslyn NY 11576

128-page rulebook—\$10

Designed by Edward Simbalist and Wilf Backhaus

Here we have an attempt to do everything at once: along with the usual character, individual combat, and magic rules, *C&S* contains

social rules (including Influence and Courtly Love), army rules suitable for miniature figures, economics rules, and a lot of commentary. The page count is misleading—*C&S* is an 8½ by 11 book printed in eyestrainingly small type, containing easily 100,000 words. It is *not* for the casual role-player.

Character creation involves casting a horoscope, a longer-than-usual list of character requisites, and a number of calculated factors: Personal Combat Factor, Basic Influence Factor, Body and Fatigue Points (which give rise to the unfortunate heading "Fat." in character tables), and more. The system is slow, especially for the GM, and tends to produce large numbers of superpowered or hopelessly inept characters.

C&S combat uses percentile dice. Each weapon has its own combat table (some have more than one; a broadsword behaves differently in the hands of a knight than a yeoman) giving chance-to-hit against each of ten types of armor. The die roll is modified by personal ability, the target's defensive ability, the type of blow chosen, and the movements the combatants have made.

The system is very complex. In addition to weapon and armor choice, the player must select movement and attack type; not all these choices are apparent or strictly logical. A system of "blows" allows lightly equipped characters to strike more often than encumbered ones—if, that is, the players can fathom its use.

A recurring problem with *C&S* is that the rules are exhaustive but not lucid or organized. This means that one must read and well digest the entire book before play can begin, since all the factors affecting a particular subject may be spread out over five or six sections of the rules. Looking up a specific reference is just about impossible. Not one ruleset on the market today has an index worthy of the name; in a book of this size this is disastrous, not to mention very hard on the binding.

Probably the most unusual element in *C&S* is its treatment of magic and magicians. Rather than inventing their own system of magic (like *Runequest*) or filching one from fiction (like *AD&D*) the authors have gone to such "real" sources as Aleister Crowley, A.E. Waite, and P.E.I. Bonewits and attempted to reproduce and quantify the systems and laws of magic (or Magick, if you will) that according to these authors actually apply to the real world.

(As an aside: Bonewits, who has a B.A. degree in Magick, has written a manual of such systems and laws specifically for game designers. *Authentic Thaumaturgy* is published by The Chaosium, publishers of *Runequest*.)

This system is complex and highly detailed. It is also quite fascinating, if one is not put off by the conceit that all this is the real thing. There are more than a dozen specialized types of magicians, from tribal Shamans to Weaponsmith-Artificers to Cabbalists. All types share in various ways in a master list of spells divided by type (Divinations, Communications and Transportations, etc.). Casting spells costs the magician in physical fatigue.

Instead of receiving spells as automatic rewards for advancement, the C&S wizard must spend large chunks of his time practicing. Most of this "practice" takes the form of die rolls, and some have complained that the magician becomes a boring, unadventurous character who spends the game session in a corner with a box of dice. The authors reply that the "real" medieval magician was a philosopher who sought to master the Grand Art, not a fireball-pitching superhero.

(Well, he was and he wasn't. I highly recommend L. Sprague and Catherine C. de Camp's *Spirits, Stars, and Spells*, a book that explains the anthropological mechanisms behind magic without swallowing the concept whole.)

In actual play, the C&S magician is indeed playable. Large parts of the *character's* life must indeed be spent out of action—but not necessarily the *player's* time. Soldiers are also inactive during the winter; priests must spend time with their congregations. There is a great deal to be said for the idea that game characters must back up their daring adventures with mundane pursuits. Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser sleep and eat and drink too much, and frequently have to hire out to keep eating and drinking; and they are all the more believable for it.

C&S clerics actually are given priestly functions to perform, and restrictions of faith and piety on their actions, though they still tend to be a specialized, weapon-toting sort of magician. The religious framework provided is that of a central monolithic Church, opposed by the Powers of Darkness in the form of various Black Witches and Demonologists. Though some elements are missing—there are no White Witches, no heresies—this is well constructed, if it is what you want.

There is, however, no easy way to modify this structure, something that is true of the game as a whole. Despite claims that the rules are modular and adaptable, they are quite firmly welded to their Medieval European background—though this is changing as FGU publishes supplements. Modifications are still a major task.

And there are many unsettling features to the existing back-

ground. The authors have, they say, attempted to simulate the world of the High Middle Ages as its inhabitants believed it to exist: magic is real, alchemy can turn lead to gold, dragons roam the countryside battling parfit gentil knights. A quote from the rules: "The Feudal Age was chosen as the setting of the action. There is a powerful and most appealing tradition of glorious deeds and stirring events surrounding the whole period of Chivalry."

Except that that tradition is the creation of Renaissance nostalgics, nurtured and preserved by such later writers as Tennyson, Scott, and White. There would certainly be no objection to using this synthetic tradition, provided it were labeled as such. But the authors are terribly vague in this area.

Here is another quote, from the *C&S Sourcebook*, p. 26: "No matter how fantastic the setting, the basic laws of the universe should apply." What basic laws? Magic works in the game. Alchemy works. Magic swords can cut through tempered steel plate like cheese. Biology as understood by the medieval person was a far different thing from the present-day science. Yet a few pages after that first quote is a sharply worded criticism of RPG monsters that "ignore biological truth."

The authors continuously use words such as "authentic," "realistic," and "facts," but also claim to be using the worlds of fantasy, not history.

Certainly there is such a thing as "authentic fantasy." It implies being true to one's source materials and to the subconscious elements from which fantasy grows. But the authors never make clear when they have drawn from history, when from historical fantasy, when from other sources (the *C&S Vampire* is right out of a Hammer film) and when invented entirely—and the whole is prominently labeled and stoutly defended as "authentic."

And none of this is necessary—one must willingly suspend disbelief to play the game at all—and it is a considerable shame, because *C&S* makes a real effort at completeness, logic, and consistency, and is mostly successful. In many ways it is a triumph. Just as a GM's aid it is valuable, provided its limitations are understood. As a game, it requires a deeper commitment to world and character than the usual RPG; its players tend to be its strong partisans, and that is certainly an indication of success.

§ § §

TRAVELLER

Game Designers' Workshop, 203 North St., Normal IL 61761

3-book boxed set—\$11.98

Book 4, *Mercenary*, and Book 5, *High Guard*, \$5.98 each.

Designed by Marc Miller

No, it isn't all swords and sorcery out there. *Traveller* is science fiction in the grand manner: starfleets, space marines, pirates of the void, vast interstellar empires (evil and otherwise).

Traveller players begin by rolling dice for the usual abilities—Strength, Dexterity, et cetera. But the rest of the character-creation system is absolutely unique. Instead of beginning play young and inexperienced and progressing gradually upward, *Traveller* characters enter a service and, through a dice-and-choices system that is essentially a small game in itself, earn skills, ranks, and decorations. (The basic rulebooks concentrate on military services; the *Citizens of the Imperium* supplement adds civilian activities such as asteroid mining and the Imperial bureaucracy, and is recommended.) The system as given in the basic three books is simple and rapid—almost always taking under ten minutes per character. Books 4 and 5 expand the procedure, taking more time but producing more interesting and varied careers and usually better-rounded characters.

After being mustered out/retired and entering play, a character does not change except due to aging and wounds. This lack of an advancement system works, at least partly because of the high lethality of the weapons available. Unlike a sword cut, a burst of gunfire or plasma bolt tends to settle the issue all at once, all the more so if characters are in space or toxic atmospheres.

Thus, characters (those who get into fights, anyway) are lost fairly frequently. But since they do not slowly and laboriously pile up experience, and since the creation system is quick and interesting, the loss is not so deeply felt as in other games.

Another, perhaps more interesting, effect of this deadliness is that players have a real incentive *not to get into fights*. Negotiation pays off; a quick wit is better than a quick trigger finger. *Traveller* characters do not endlessly prowl starship corridors looking for something to kill.

They may, in fact, not prowl starship corridors at all. The economics of starship construction, purchase, and operation are meticulously dealt with (Book 2 is titled *Starships*). "High passage," a

first-class ticket between worlds, costs ten thousand credits, in a society where CR 5,000 is a tolerable annual wage. Even "low passage," travel in frozen sleep with a considerable chance of never waking up, costs CR 1000. (These terms, by the way, are lifted from E. C. Tubb's *Dumarest of Terra* novels, which the author annoyingly does not mention.) A small scout vessel, large enough for eight persons, double occupancy, costs in the neighborhood of thirty million credits. Ships are normally financed on forty-year leases.

Wow. Of course, players may hire on to ships that some non-player character is struggling to pay off. Or contract with a government or supercorporation for some military or shadier service, with a ship as payment. Or sign a lease and skip (a rule notes that one ship in thirty-six is in skipped status). Or hijack one (about one trip in two hundred will see a hijack attempt).

A straight-faced statement at the end of Book 3 reads: "The typical methods used in life by 20th Century Terrans (thrift, dedication, hard work) do not work in *Traveller*. . . ."

To return to the subject of weapons, *Traveller* combat is resolved by a roll of two dice, modified by personal skill, abilities (each weapon requires a certain level of strength and/or dexterity), range to target, and the type of armor or other protection the target wears. If a hit is scored, a number of dice are rolled and applied against the strength, endurance, and dexterity of the victim. Weapons effects range from one die for bare knuckles to *sixteen* for the "Fusion Gun, Man Portable, Mark 16." Characters will often lose consciousness and be taken out of action before they are mortally wounded; this blunts the aforementioned lethality a little.

This system is about average in complexity. Choices are limited to weapon type, but this choice is real, not artificial, determined by user skills and abilities, intended target, purchase price, and technological availability (more on this in a moment). Also important is "combat environment"—fighting in zero gravity calls for weapons that do not inadvertently act as propulsion units, and the heavier "small" arms tend to make embarrassing holes in starship hulls. (From the rules: "The cutlass is the standard shipboard blade weapon . . .") In short, players must choose weapons by other criteria than simple firepower.

This *functionality*—for want of a better word—is characteristic of *Traveller*. There is an enormous amount of functional data in the rulebooks. Nothing is presented for its own sake, or to show off the authors' erudition. Instead of lists of allegedly unique polearms or transcriptions from Latin bestiaries, there are simple, clear tables

that are aids to design rather than prescriptions.

Animals, for instance, are defined by their feeding patterns, plus size, toughness, etc.—a brilliant idea that allows the behavior pattern of an encountered beast to be determined while leaving room for real alienness in its physical characteristics.

Planets are created by a series of die rolls, taken in order with early rolls modifying later ones; thus the size of a planet influences its atmosphere and ocean percentage, and population density influences type of government and severity of laws. All these may alter the world's technological level.

Tech level matters a great deal in *Traveller*, though the author does not make an issue of it. Technology, and all manufactured items, are rated on a scale from 0 (fire and the wheel, barely) to 15 (the glorious Imperium) with hints of what Level 16 and up will bring. Earth A.D. 1980 fits in at about 7.5. A couple of points' difference can determine whether your wrecked starship can be repaired locally, how fast one can travel cross-country, how effective one's weapons are against the natives—which by itself is the plot of several SF novels, notably Gordon R. Dickson's *Space Winners*. (Though I might point out that a technological superiority does not always equal a military superiority, *vide* Vietnam.) And once an item becomes available, its price will decline as the tech level continues to rise, setting up opportunities for trade and restraint thereof.

Traveller may have the best-integrated economic system of any RPG. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (see "On Playing Rôles: A Second Look" *IA'sfm* September 1980) is widely inflated, with gold and jewels in heaps high as a manticore's eye; *C&S* bogs down in the minutiae of medieval agriculture and pay scales—and is correspondingly deflated; *Runequest* uses money as a counter of success and largely ignores its motion through society, despite the presence of a trading cult.

This is *Traveller's* great strength and beauty: everything is there, everything works—and the background is a framework, not a cage. Unlike *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which everything has a label but no structure, in *Traveller* everything has a structure, but the labels are left up to the players. If they find fusion guns too devastating (or cutlasses too silly) upper or lower bounds may be set on the available technology. If the rich markets and vast armadas of the Imperium seem to clutter things with hardware, move the game a few dozen parsecs out into the black frontier. If the players would rather explore one world in detail than flit among a hundred, build

one without a starport, far off the space lanes; if that planet plays out a ship can always hard-land there. And if one cannot do without a little magic in one's vicarious life, an optional rule section adds psionic powers—in fact, this set is better defined and balanced, and flows more smoothly into the rest of the game than the magic "systems" of many of the strictly fantasy RPGs.

There is no other rôle-playing game on the market that allows so much freedom to alter the *style* of the game without *altering the rules*. All this and clean, readable graphics (from GDW's superb art director, Paul R. Banner)—it is difficult to ask for more.

EXTRODUCTION: ON SUPPLEMENTS

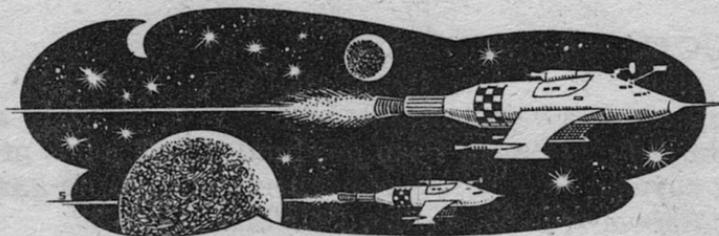
As before, here is a very brief list of some of the player and GM aids available. Publishing costs being what they are, no prices are given here; send a stamped, addressed envelope to the game publishers (not *Asimov's*, please) for more information.

For *Chivalry and Sorcery*, the *C&S Sourcebook* is indispensable; it contains background information on the magic and economic systems, rules for medicine and the hunt, and the errata to the original rules. Also available are *Swords and Sorcerers* and *Saurians*, books dealing with barbarian cultures and intelligent reptiles (!) respectively. Forthcoming are supplements on the Arthurian Age, the Crusades, and feudal Japan (this last promises to be especially interesting). Play-aids include *Arden*, a complete medieval kingdom, and *Destrier*, a set of rules and special playing cards that attempt to make *C&S* combat more manageable.

Traveller currently has four supplements (Books 4 and 5 are major expansions of the rules, and recommended purchases as such). *1001 Characters* is just that; prerolled people—hard to justify with these rules unless the GM's time is severely limited. *Animal Encounters* is similar in format. *The Spinward Marches* contains star charts and world profiles. *Citizens of the Imperium* contains more instant characters, but is recommended for its new character-creation tables. An announced fifth supplement, *76 Patrons*, promises to be more interesting; it will have complete mission-for-hire scenarios. An Adventure, *The Kinunir*, concerns a large starship with a too-clever computer; it is, however, short on ideas for using the ship. An even bigger adventure on an even bigger ship, *Azhanti High*

Lightning, will be released as a board game in Summer of 1980. *Snapshot* and *Mayday* are board games that may be used as *Traveller* play-aids; *Snapshot* concerns combat aboard starships, *Mayday* ship-to-ship actions. Both are recommended, particularly *Snapshot*. GDW publishes a quarterly magazine with the awesome title *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society*.

And to insert a much-overdue correction, the address of *Alarums and Excursions*, the extraordinary RP amateur press association, is: Lee Gold, 3965 Alla Road, Los Angeles CA 90066.



How to order Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine

To: Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,
P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, CT 06836

- Bill me \$6.97 for 6 issues (outside U.S.A. \$8.00)
 By paying now I receive 7 issues for \$6.97 (outside U.S.A. \$8.00)

I prefer to use my MASTER CHARGE or VISA card and take advantage of the longest-term, CASH-ONLY BARGAIN . . .

- 14 issues for \$13.94 (outside U.S.A. \$16.32)

Credit Card # _____

Expires _____ Signature _____

- Enclosed is \$13.94 (outside U.S.A. \$16.32)

Name (please print) _____

Street/No. _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first copy.

HOL122

ASIMOV[®]

Isaac

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



MAY 11, 1981 \$1.50

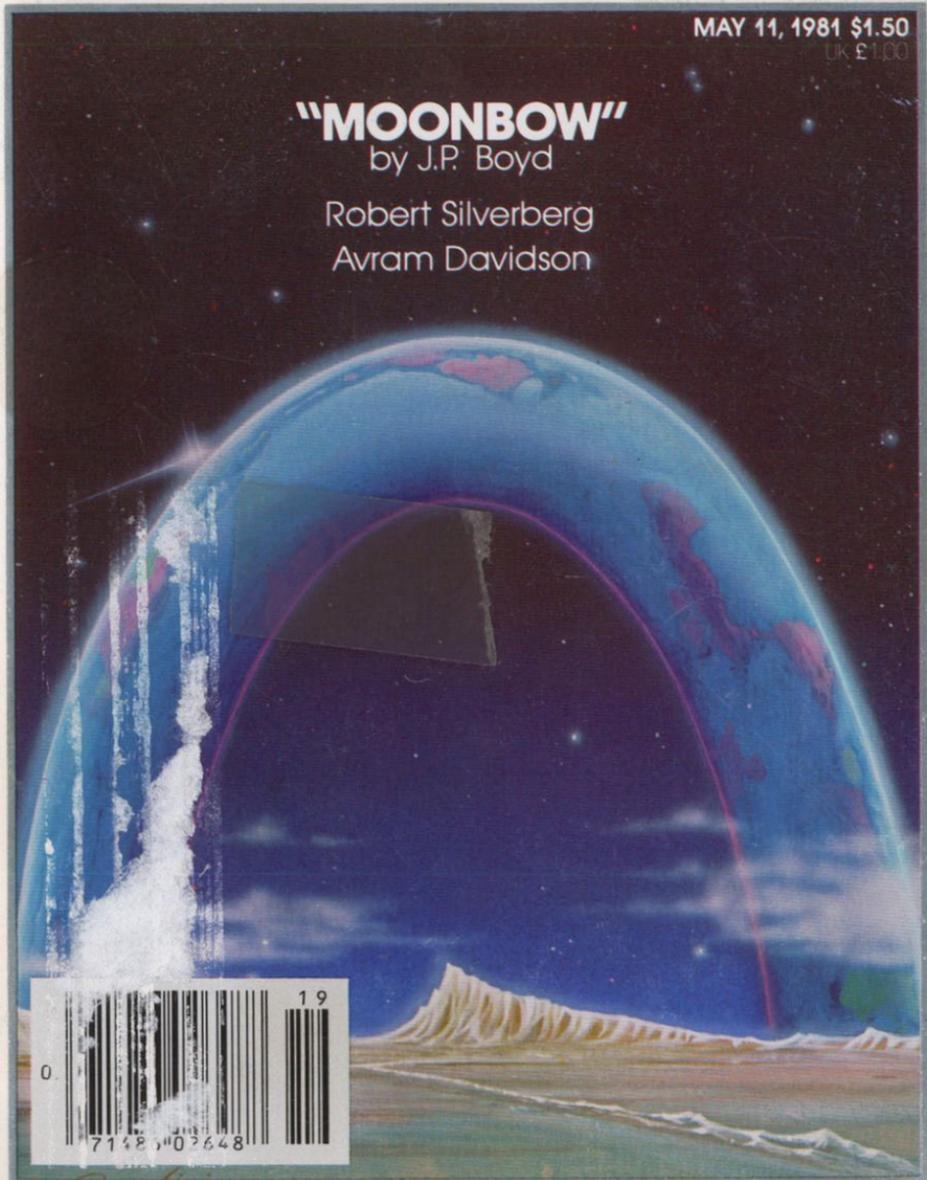
UK £1.00

"MOONBOW"

by J.P. Boyd

Robert Silverberg

Avram Davidson



collection of semi-connected stories, at least one of which comes close to being a masterpiece. *Wave Rider* did not sell at all and is easily the finest neglected book of the year. I'm still a Heinlein lover (even though I did not like his new novel), and this huge (200,000 words!) collection of Heinlein sweepings fascinated me. Even the bad stories were readable and interesting. Tom Reamy, alas, died three years after his first story appeared. *San Diego Lightfoot Sue* contains nearly all his exceptional short fiction. The title story won a Nebula. Gene Wolfe is a superb short story writer and this, his first collection, is outstanding, although the title causes quite a bit of confusion. And finally, the essence of Bradbury has at last been reduced to one volume.

The Arbor House Treasury of Modern Science Fiction is an admirable attempt to provide a one-volume anthology covering the best short stories of 1946–1975 much the way *Adventures in Time and Space* edited by Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas and *The Best of Science Fiction* edited by Groff Conklin covered the earlier period of modern science fiction. A companion volume featuring novellas is not as successful. The three "bests" of the year have very little overlap. All are good books; and, among them, you have nearly every good SF story of 1979.

Finally, I've put two non-fiction books on the list: The L. W. Currey index would be useless on a desert island, but its complete and accurate listing of the first editions of all the master science fiction writers is indispensable to a collector. The second half of Asimov's autobiography, on the other hand, would not only do well on the island, but it's nearly thick enough to use as a ladder to pick the coconuts.

AND—ON SOME GAMES by John M. Ford

[These addenda will appear occasionally to give brief notice of some science fiction and fantasy games of interest to readers in general, not just the entrenched gamers. Game publishers please note.]

TimeTripper, designed by James Dunnigan. Simulations Publications Inc., 257 Park Avenue South, New York NY 10010; \$5.95 (boxed)

This is the one about: If you had an assault rifle at the battle of Waterloo (or Zama or Gettysburg or wherever) what could you do? It seems that an American grunt in Vietnam, A.D. 1971, accidentally punches a hole in the timestream, and since anything beats Vietnam, through the hole he goes. . . .

TimeTripper is a (basically) solitaire game in which you, as the Tripper, go caroming up and down the timeline, pausing to shoot it out with the temporal locals, and trying to get back home alive (and maybe with some loot to boot). Along with the historical arrival points—pitting the Tripper against *T. Rexes*, hoplites, Wehrmacht troopers—are science fictional and fantastic situations, including robots, vampires, starsoldiers, the L. A. Freeway, and an outtake from *Night of the Living Dead*. (Doesn't the timeflux go anywhere peaceful?)

The game is reasonably easy to learn, and mildly addictive after a few plays. It is also very simple to teach to another person, even one who doesn't usually play wargames—and once you've done that, the two of you (or three or four) can jump the flux as a team. Really ambitious players can put themselves at the mercy of a game operator ("Timemaster") who shuffles the pattern of history and may slip in battles of his own devising.

This is a really fascinating game, with a lot of elbow room for different styles of play. (You can negotiate with the Swiss pikemen, as well as blasting them.) And as solitaire, it takes up less table space than double-deck Spider. Next time, I'm gonna be *ready* for those zombies. . . .

Asteroid, designed by Frank Chadwick and Marc Miller. Game Designers' Workshop, 203 North St., Normal IL 61761; \$5.95 (boxed).

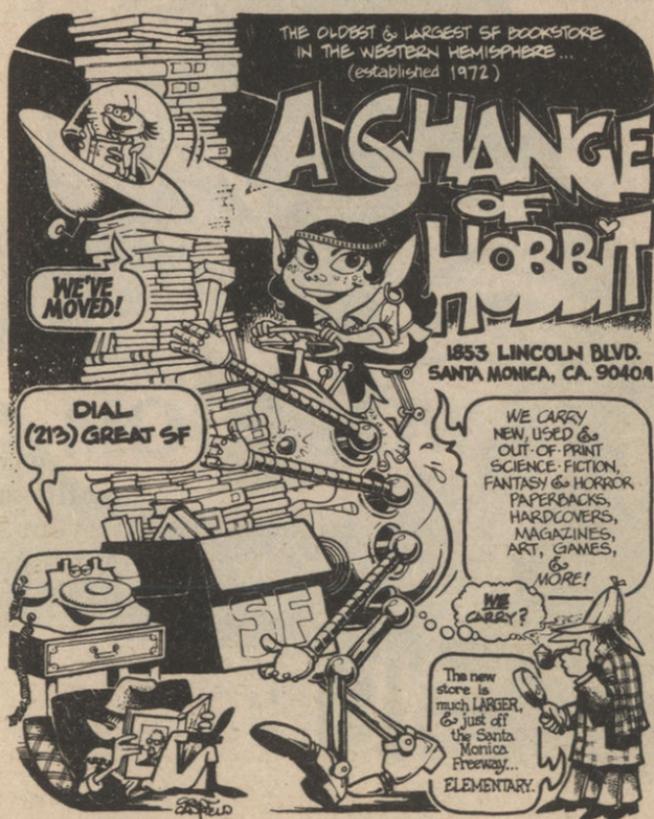
Mission: Impossible meets *Planet Stories*: The demented computer brain of a mining asteroid has kicked the rock onto a collision course with the Earth, and only a dozen brave souls can prevent The End of Civilization As We Know It. There's the elderly professor and his beautiful daughter; ace reporter "Scoop" Phillips; the luckiest man in the world; the demolitions expert; Captain Hanson of the Air Force (blond, good teeth); Sasha the mine dog (brown, really good teeth)—and opposing them within the mazy levels of the mining station, an army of deadly robots and a mad computer with a crush on the prof's daughter. . . .

You get the idea. *Asteroid* takes every cliché you ever heard (I meant that about the crush on Nicholle; talk about fates worse than

death) and turns them into a tense, exciting game you can learn in half an hour and play in two—and since the station is arranged newly every time, and the team of valiant humans (and faithful dog) can be varied, the game plays differently every time. (“It’s my turn to be the deranged computer!”)

Several games have had a humorous intent; this is one of the few that is both really funny and really playable. All the great images of the Fifties B-pictures come to life: robots like laser-wielding shop-vacs trundle through the corridors; Lucky McGee kicks the disintegrator to fix it while his brother Muscles kicks in a door; Ms. Jones, the world-famous psychic, is solemnly dead wrong about the occupant of the next room; “Can’t you be *serious*?” grates steel-jawed Captain Hanson (as played by John Agar), “This is the end of the *world* we’re talking about!”

It sure is, and more fun that it ever was in those movies. Besides, this time the computer has a chance.



ASIMOV[®]

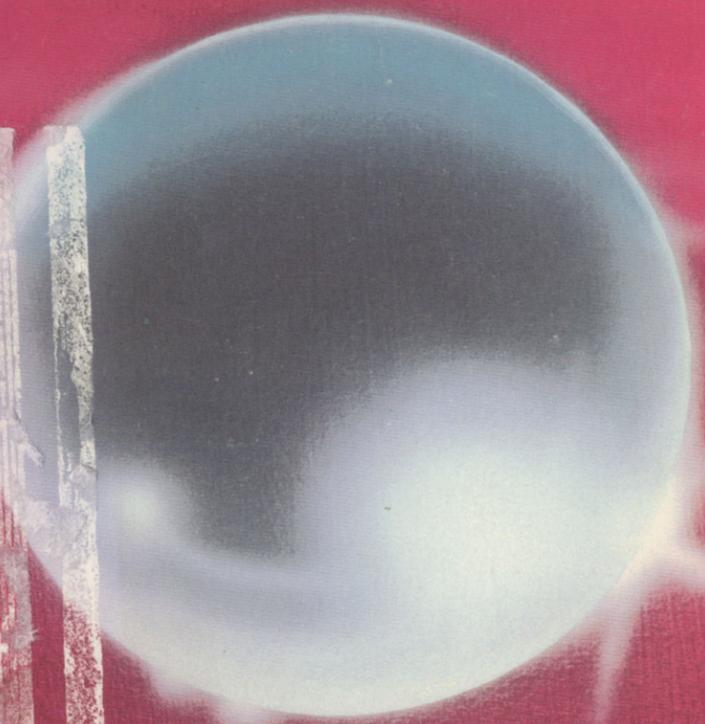
Isaac

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

©

SEPTEMBER 28, 1981 \$1.50

UK£1.00



JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

LARRY NIVEN

R. A. LAFFERTY

RON GOULART

LOOK FOR THE
PREMIERE ISSUE OF
**SCIENCE
FICTION DIGEST**
ON SALE SEPTEMBER 24.

DAVIS
DIGESTS



0

ON THE CONTINUING ADVENTURE:

THE FOURTH SALLY

by **John M. Ford**

art: **George Barr**





INTRODUCTION: Directions

This is the fifth article on fantasy and science fiction games, and the third set of rôle-play ruleset reviews, to appear in *Asimov's*. We wouldn't have gotten this far without your support; thanks for the letters of praise and criticism, and especially for the suggestions on what you'd like to see in these articles. Thanks also to the publishers who have made copies of their products available—I can't review what I don't have.

It's time to ask for some more response. Do you not care if you ever see another broadsword or blaster again? Please say so. If you enjoy and/or use the essays, how could they be improved, both as essays and as a buyer's guide? While rôle-playing rules by their nature call for examination at some length, would you like to see book-review type of coverage of other SF/fantasy games? (This would not be a regular monthly column, but would be added to "On Books" two or three times a year.)

To respond to a couple of the suggestions we have received: Most publishers do add shipping charges to products ordered from them by mail. Unfortunately, everyone seems to have a different rate structure—some charge per game, some per order, some offer two or more classes of postage. I'll try to list such charges, but remember that everything (including prices, of course) is Subject to Change Without Notice, and you'll be reading this several months or more after it's written. A stamped envelope to *the manufacturer* (not us) should bring current information. And when you write, it helps everyone if you mention that you read about it here.

I was also asked to list any items in addition to the ruleset itself that are necessary to play, specifically the sometimes peculiar sorts of dice required. I'll do this when possible, and when an item is both specific and necessary: *every* adventure game requires paper and pencils in large quantities, and while miniature figures are attractive and often helpful, they are not essential (in games where characters must be represented on a board, as *The Fantasy Trip* and *DragonQuest*, cardboard counters will suffice).

It should be pointed out that several publishers are given to pushing supplementary rulebooks and specific brands of miniatures. One can't object to honest advertising, but some of this isn't particularly honest. Most parties of adventurers consist of five or six players operating fifteen or twenty characters on the outside; what use will they get from a set of rules for army-sized battles? And the statement that the game will function properly *only* with Brand X metal mini-

atures is not only silly but an insult to the intelligence. (Given the ugly, sub-amateur art that adorns so many rules—would you take these persons' artistic advice about miniatures?)

I do not advise *against* your purchasing any of these items; only that you buy thoughtfully.

That, after all, is what these essays are all about.

PARADUCTION: What Do You Mean, Adventure? Games?

The Adventure, often called "rôle-playing" game, is a sort of cross between improvisational theatre and Cops and Robbers. The players assume parts, sometimes defined in great detail, in an adventure situation set in one of the imagined worlds of science fiction or fantasy (including the fantasies of Dumas's France, J.T. Edson's West, or Mark Hellinger's Roaring Twenties). The world is built, detailed, and kept turning by a game operator (my term—most people prefer to be Game Masters or World Lords; by way of consistent compromise, these critical essays use the term "GM"). This person is a scenarist and director, but *not* a scriptwriter: the characters write their own scripts, if the GM is wise enough to let them.

Depending on the players' temperaments, the action that results can be anything from a movie-serial shootout (slashout?) to a complex series of character interactions without a single violent act.

The foundation for all this is the ruleset—the "game" proper—a set of systems for describing characters' abilities and resolving their actions. Some rulesets are action-oriented, some philosophical; each has a more-or-less unique "feel" in play. The best will make the playing of a character and the operation of a world a simple, logical, believable process. With the worst you will be better off pointing your finger and yelling "Bang, you're dead!"

There will be missions to accomplish, honors to gain, victories to earn; but no one "wins" or "loses" in the end, because the adventure *has* no end; characters may "age" and "die" but their players go on. The object of playing is playing (pardon me, Mr. Orwell). The object of being a GM is *not* the outwitting or annihilation of the players but the keeping of their interest, a much harder and more rewarding task.

A few years back we saw a movement toward coöperative, rather than competitive, play. It was an interesting, maybe even noble, idea; but the *games* were pretty bland stuff.

Adventure gaming, however, rewards both team and individual

effort. (It can also reward backstabbing and deviousness, but so do *Parcheesi* and *Monopoly*.)

The rattling of curiously shaped dice and the rustling of maps and tables may be the sounds of the next social phenomenon.

SPACE OPERA: The Anvil Chorus

Fantasy Games Unlimited, Inc., Box 182, Roslyn NY 11576

Two 90-page books and pullout charts, boxed—\$18

(Requires 6- and 20-sided dice, not included)

Designed by Edward E. Simbalist, A. Mark Ratner, and Phil McGregor

The phrase *space opera* covers a lot of territory. Blasters and space-axes; crushing tyrannies, crashing planets, and colliding galaxies (and chaste romance); stellar knights, white and black, in shining powered armor; ships from X-wing fighters to the superdreadnaught *Chicago*; the infinite powers of the unleashed mind.

That's a lot to get into two rulebooks. Nonetheless, that was the authors' idea: cram it *all* in, from Doc Smith to George Lucas. (When publisher Scott Bizar handed me a copy of the ruleset, he said, "With these you can have Lensmen fighting Jedi Knights." A peculiar notion, that, but he quite meant it.)

Space Opera players begin creating their characters by rolling percentile (1-100) dice for not less than fourteen personal characteristics. (This may be a record.) These, however, are only raw scores, which, after modifications for planet of birth and chosen profession, are converted into weighted final values from 1 to 19. *Then* several more characteristics, such as Carrying Capacity and Stamina, are calculated from these values.

Characters need not be human, though they must first fit the parameters for a nonhuman race and *then* choose it. And most non-humans—*all* nonhuman player-characters—are canines, felines, ursines, saurians—you know, wolves, cats, bears, lizards, and the rest of the anthropomorphized Terrestrial zoo. That venerable absurdity, "parallel evolution," is implied though not directly invoked. There are provisions for insect cultures, intelligent plants and rocks, and frigid-blooded poison breathers—mostly on the combat tables. You can zap 'em but you can't join 'em.

When the calculating of characteristics is done, the character

takes employment with a civilian, military, or government service, including such choice opportunities as the StarForce Commandos, the Diplomatic Service, and the State Secret Police. During this period, which may use up from 4 to 30 years of "life," the character accumulates promotions, cash and equipment, and Skill Points, which represent what s/he is learning from experience.

At the conclusion of service things get very interesting. The character trades the accumulated Skill Points for levels of ability in several dozen fields. Though most of the points must be used in the character's specialty—physicians learn life sciences, soldiers get weapon and combat training—there is considerable freedom of choice as to what one does with one's life.

This is one of the very best compromises available between purely random and purely determined characters. And, since skills can be learned through study after the original creation process, one is not completely "stuck" if one's initial die rolls were less than spectacular.

There are some difficulties. The point costs of certain skills seem way out of line: it costs twice as much per ability level to learn pistol shooting as to learn bomb disposal. Huh? It is also hard to justify the ceilings placed on certain skills. The sciences extend only to Level 10. What, then, does a Level-10 physicist know? *Everything* about physics? *Everything known* about physics? "Everything" is a crucially vague phrase when the frammistats are overloading and the Id Monster's melting through the door.

Combat is resolved with percentile dice. A roll to hit the target, if successful, is followed by rolls to precisely locate the hit, determine if any armor was penetrated, and find the severity of the resulting wound.

This system is not especially difficult, but it is slow—four or more dice rolls per shot, each roll subject to modification for the shooter's status, the target's status, the environment, and the weapon's precise characteristics.

Of those there are plenty. Four pages of tables give statistics of range, load, rate of fire, penetration, and wound severity for 150 weapons, from blowguns to blasters. Close-combat weapons (which have their own modifiers) run for another page, similarly exhaustive—daggers, rapiers, katanas, Norman axes, protein coagulators, chairs, brass knucks, and several varieties of energy swords. *Another* page covers "natural weapons"—bare fists, claws, tentacles, pseudopoda, etc.

Did we miss anything? Well, the authors note that "heavy weap-

ons" have not been included—a "fusion machinegun" with a range of 3000 meters isn't *heavy*?—and the rules for hand grenades, which evidently *were* supposed to be present, are missing.

This looks like the very system for those who enjoy arguing about Quik-Point sights, Pachmayr grips, boat-tails vs. wadcutters, hesitation locking, and how many grains of Unique it takes to drop a Rigellian cateagle . . . it looks like it, but is it?

Experience with "exhaustive" weapons lists in other games has made me cautious. (So have gun arguments of the sort mentioned above.) So I looked very closely at these lists.

The idea behind having so many weapons is that each is just slightly different—a conventional and a snubnose .38 revolver, for example, both the .500 and .600 Express elephant guns, .22 caliber target pistols, and on and on until the author ran dry or got bored. Unless the GM simply delights in arming characters with odd, often inferior, firearms (black powder dueling pistols?) most of this list is deadweight. The tables are also based on the odd idea that to change weapon performance one must change weapons—there's no provision for different types of cartridges.

The combat system is overloaded with modifiers and mostly useless detail. (And some wrong detail: the listing for a ".10 slug," a round which would not annoy a Pekingese, actually refers to a *10-gauge* shotgun slug, which is another sort of thing entirely.) Is "realism" better served by twelve grades of armor, plus vehicle plating, force screens, and bare skin, than some more manageable number? Why is the hit-location table located five pages away from the wounds table, when they are always used together? Shooting from the hip is like solving a Diophantine equation.

The section on equipment makes the authors' intention quite apparent: they mean to list anything and everything in the imaginable universe that the well-equipped starfarer might need, want, or stumble over, and then detail the heck out of it with price, operating cost, technological level, weight, code abbreviation, and if possible several different models. There are four kinds of cold-weather clothing, five kinds of rope, seven pocket computers, eight infrared goggles. . . .

There are some fine ideas buried in this galactic Abercrombie & Fitch. The Breakdown Number system—fail to take care of your SS/VS-2 vacuum suit and it will fail to take care of you—is especially good. So is the classification of vehicles by ground transmission type—slow wheeled, fast wheeled, fast tracked, gravity, and so forth.

But, as seems inevitable in these rules, every good idea is followed

hard by two or three bad or incomprehensible ones. Vehicle fuel requirements are given as a cost to refuel (in the ubiquitous, unoriginal Credits) per 1000 kilometers—which may be great if your character is a fleet accountant, but nowhere is there an indication of how much that fuel weighs, or how much room it takes up. When a group of my players wanted to carry a spare load of fuel into the wilderness, I had to invent the details; the rules were of no assistance.

Starships are important to written space opera, not only as the stainless steel steeds of the cosmic cowboys, but because the gaudiest superscience—stardrives and space battles—centers upon them.

The *Space Opera* starship rules are pretty straightforward—less imaginative than the eight kinds of infrared goggles. To build a ship, one buys a standard hull of from 100 to 1,000,000 tons, and then stuffs it with standard equipment until all the tonnage is accounted for. This stuffing can take a long time, but there's nothing very creative about it. Design constraints consist mostly of having enough money. (And for some reason all the ship hulls are proportioned like airplanes, much longer than they are wide. DC-3s seven hundred meters long.)

The ship's sublight drive shoves it slightly out-of-phase with the universe, allowing it to race around at significant fractions of light-speed while ignoring Newtonian mechanics (and Einsteinian mechanics; a ship at .996 of the speed of light shows no time dilation or mass increase). Hyperdrive rotates the vessel completely out of reality, allowing it to cruise at a light-year an hour or so.

While in hyperspace, combat cannot occur, so the authors invoke a classic old rule: you can't cut in the warp engines until far out of a gravity well. So the Pirates and the Patrol can lurk within the orbit of Jupiter or so, each knowing the other can't flip a switch and escape.

Ship-to-ship combat is a great step backward. Everyone blasts away with "NovaGuns," trying to straddle the target, just like sinking the *Bismarck*. There's not a needle, cone, or rod of ravaging energy in sight, nor a single whiff of smoldering duodecaplylatomite.

Rules and formulas are given at some length for calculating profit and loss from starship operations. Unfortunately, the formulas don't work. When average values are inserted, a small (500-tonne) free trader shows an annual operating cost of 500,000 credits—and an income of 12,500,000! While a 2400% profit would swell Nick van Rijn's big heart to bursting, not even the Dutch East India Company

could earn that as a mere hauler of goods.

There is a process in the professional game business called "development." It consists of hitting the game hard and seeing which way it falls. Usually someone other than the designer does the hitting; some designers can develop the detachment to be their own developers—but that is clearly not the case here. A developer would have plugged dummy variables into those profit formulas and seen at once the improbable results. And recognized that fuel consumption should be measured in liters or kilograms, not dollars. And suggested that the combat tables either draw the line somewhere this side of playability or made the system truly flexible by allowing players to set their own weapon parameters (which through custom gunsmithing and cartridge loading is what most serious gunners do).

I cannot find much to praise in the physical format. The boxcover art is awful, and the interior art is not much better (including some recognizable swipes from comic books). Proofreading is very poor: whole lines of text are missing, words are absent that change the meanings of sentences (in the description of the Neuronic Whip weapon, a line which should read ". . . most beings would probably rather be hit by a blaster bolt . . ." comes out "would probably be hit by a blaster bolt."). There are references to characteristics modifiers that do not exist, and to ratings that cannot be achieved as the rules stand. The word "maintenance" appears a great many times, always misspelled "maintainance." Organizing the rulebooks in a logical, let alone convenient, fashion seems never to have occurred to anyone.

And still: you really can have Lensmen duke it out with Jedi Knights, psionically or with machine guns and lightsabers. But you are going to have to do a lot of puzzling and patching to get them there, and to keep the holes in the painted-muslin galaxy from showing. As an idea source *Space Opera* is valuable, if not exactly priceless (five kinds of *rope?*). As a *game* it is like the Imperial Death Star: impressive and ponderous, and not nearly so invulnerable as it looks.

BOXED RUNEQUEST: Everything but the Coleslaw

The Chaosium, Box 6302, Albany CA 94706

Boxed set—\$19.95 (+ \$1 p/h)

(Requires 4-, 6-, 8-, and 20-sided dice, included)

The central item in this slightly garish "bookshelf" box is the second-edition *RuneQuest* rulebook, as reviewed in the September 1980 *Asimov's*. I liked it then, and I still do.

But since a ruleset does not a universe make—and Glorantha, the *RQ* background, is more completely realized than most—the box also contains:

—a double scenario packet, *Apple Lane* (a revised version of a booklet published earlier)

—*Fangs*, a batch of precreated monsters

—character record sheets, designed by John T. Sapienza, complex but super-efficient

—two pages of errata, addenda, and clarifications to the rulebook

—dice: three 6-sided and one each 4-, 8-, and 20-sided (an absolute-minimum set).

The last thing in the box is a 16-page booklet titled *Basic Roleplaying*, by Greg Stafford (Glorantha's creator) and game designer Lynn Willis. This is a *really* ground-level (it explains how to throw the dice!) introduction to adventure games.

This is a nice piece of work, but not perfect. Some of the descriptions of game mechanics (all simplified *RuneQuest*) are inferior to those in the regular *RQ* rulebook. This also applies to the examples of play, which follow the career of "an adolescent reaching adulthood"—but the person seems more like eleven years old. There is the uneasy sound of talking down . . . alongside phrases like "intangible properties" and "an elaborately shod . . . implement." (While I'm at it, why make this sample character an adolescent to begin with? Not only is the life of a medieval youth just as alien as that of a period adult, but young players are the *least* likely to want to play gawky squires and nervous apprentices. Who wants to be Robin when you can be Batman?)

However, I'm counseling perfection, and the fact is that all other attempts to write a booklet like this have resulted in witless advertising ("You have bought the very best adventure game in the whole wide world") or abstruse theses on the philosophy of rôle-play, one part Transactional Analysis, one part Stanislavsky Method ("Explore roles rooted in your id. Then your superego.") This one does the job.

If you're already an established adventurer, you might want the ruleset alone (\$11.95). But there's nothing in here that the oldest dungeon hand won't find a use for, even *Basic Roleplaying* (use it

to explain to your parents what you've been *doing* on Saturday night, for instance). Altogether one of the best values for your goldpiece going.

THE FANTASY TRIP: A Hex is not a Spell

Metagaming, Box 15346, Austin TX 78761

Melee and *Wizard*, boxed "Microgames," \$3.95 each

Advanced Melee and *Advanced Wizard*, 32- and 40-page books, \$4.95 each

In the Labyrinth (GM's guide), 80-page book, \$4.95 [add 50¢ per order]

(Requires 6-sided dice, not included)

Designed by Steve Jackson

This field sometimes seems determined to harden its flimsiest premises into tablets of stone, incant its clumsiest mechanisms into Laws of the Universe. A little heresy from time to time would be most welcome. Steve Jackson is no Galileo, but he did take a hard squint at the way things were—and he generally remembered he was writing game rules, not *Jane's All the World's Fantasy*.

The "world" of *The Fantasy Trip* is the planet Cidri, artificially constructed by a race of mutated humans with universe-hopping abilities. The planet is many times the size of Earth, though its gravity and atmosphere are Earth-normal, like Jack Vance's *Big Planet*. The "Mnoren" stocked Cidri with people, critters, and gadgets—and then exited stage left. Enter adventurers, stage right.

TFT characters have only three basic attributes: Strength, Dexterity, and Intelligence. (This is probably the record minimum for a complete adventure game, though the original *Melee* omitted Intelligence.) Instead of determining characteristics with dice, the player begins with minimum values (8 each for humans) and a few points to distribute by choice. Thus everyone starts out "equal," but with completely free choice of character type (and no effects of hot or cold dice).

Characters are defined primarily by their skills. Each skill, including magic spells, has a minimum necessary Intelligence and takes up one or more points of Intelligence . . . like a computer program taking up memory space. Characters are either Wizards or Heroes (defined as anyone who isn't a Wizard). Wizards require

twice the normal memory to learn non-magical skills, and Heroes need *triple* space for spells. It is quite possible to be a wizardly hero, or a tough-cookie sorcerer, but specialists get better use from their memories.

One racks up "experience points" for good play—and the author points out that "good play" is more than slaughtering monsters; it includes all aspects of playing a character rôle, including fleeing in panic if the character is supposed to be cowardly. (Such a person might *lose* points for bravery.)

When a certain amount of experience piles up, it is traded in for an additional attribute point of the player's choice. If Intelligence goes up, the character may learn a new skill or spell to fill the space. One may forget old skills to make room, through willpower, magic, or hypnosis by a dragon. (How far can you trust a dragon? As far as you can throw it? Just coming to that.)

To strike a blow in combat, three dice are rolled; if the total is less than or equal to the character's Dexterity, a hit is scored. This is subject to modification for the quantity of armor one is lugging around, and for some environmental factors: evasive movement, bad light, etc. These modifiers appear only as they are really needed, not in endless lists that attempt to exhaust every imaginable possibility. Their number is thus manageable, even memorizable (though a consolidated list would have been appreciated). An extremely low roll results in a critical (severely damaging) hit; very high rolls mean that the attack was fumbled, and the weapon may be dropped or broken.

If a hit occurs, dice are rolled to determine damage—the exact roll determined by weapon type. The value of the target's armor is subtracted from this roll, and the remainder gets through as damage. A character can absorb damage equal to her Strength before going to that big box of dice in the sky.

All characters (and beasts an' things that go boomp in th' caves) must be represented by counters or miniatures on a hexagonal grid, and all move in a strictly determined order. [For those new to these games: hexagons, not squares, because the center-to-center distance between touching hexes is always equal.] This requires a little effort to set up the props, but it absolutely resolves who can see what, move where, and hit whom, when.

Now, if you want to fight battles at quick tempo and get them over with, this is *the* system. It's clean, simple, and quick, without giving up things like critical hits and fumbles, which in most games

call for extra tables and dierolls. Tactical movement requires no tricky measurement; four hexes are four hexes, and the gargoyle's either blocking your path or it isn't.

The list of weapons is short by normal RPG standards, because it simply relates the damage done to the user's Strength, rather than listing every name the author could crib from Burton or Stone and inventing statistics to suit. (If you like that sort of fake erudition, there is a table of "equivalent weapons," including cinqueda, naginata, claidheamh mōr, and bicycle chains.) Since high Strength allows the use of a bigger weapon, no separate modifier for Strength was needed.

A few primitive gunpowder weapons are available. They are expensive, heavy, slow, and unreliable; and magic usually works better—but some people will try anything once. The chief component of gunpowder on Cidri turns out to be dragon . . . er, droppings. (Fresh ones only.) This provides another reason to go hunting dragons (or at least to follow them with a dustpan).

The ubiquitous "saving roll" shows up again in *TFT*, but in a form organic with the rest of the rules. The GM decides what attribute(s) the fell trap in question will test, and then assigns a number of dice to be rolled, in an attempt to roll no higher than the attributes total. The more dice, the harder the test. Two dice is easy. Three is average. Four is tough. Seven is positively grim.

And this system works without reference to a single chart. You can *remember* how it works. Isn't that terrific?

[All right, for those of you with long memories: I invented this system independently of Steve Jackson, and used it in my article in the July 1979 *Asimov's*. I am applauding a good idea, not *my* idea.]

TFT magic is very sharply defined—since you're either in a hexagon or not, there can't be any argument over being in range or radius of effect. Spell power is drawn from the Wizard's Strength (as fatigue, not wounds) and that of others, donated willingly or otherwise. Elderly, feeble Wizards are either vampirizing their acolytes or have Strength batteries tucked up their flapping sleeves.

(It should be apparent that no one can create a super-character by boosting one characteristic out of proportion to the others. A Wizard may know every spell in the book, but without Strength she can't power them and without Dexterity she can't hit anything with them.)

Most spells are point-and-shoot stuff, though the GM and players

are encouraged to make creative use of them. Some spells require so much Strength, 50 points or more, that casting them amounts to ritual magic; either a lone Wizard working for days or several persons pooling Strength. A reasonably complete system is given for creating the goodies some people are so fond of: scrolls, wands, amulets, Tieclips of Intermittent Claudication. . . .

There is supposed to be a theory of magic underlying the rules, but only bits of it are visible, and there seem to be as many exceptions presented as there are rules. Maybe that *is* authentic, come to think of it.

What do you need to play *TFT*? The GM requires *In the Labyrinth* and at least one version each of *Melee* and *Wizard*, the *Advanced* versions by choice. (The Microgame versions—sort of paperback bookshelf games—are a little simpler, but they contain nothing that is not in the *Advanced* books except playing boards and counters. Hexgrids suitable for copying are provided, and counters are easy to make. Or use miniatures.) Players may want their own copies of *Melee* and *Wizard* for reference. (Since many players habitually buy everything associated with a game, it is pleasant to note that *In the Labyrinth*, unlike some similar items, contains no information that should remain the GM's exclusive property.) You'll also need quite a few dice, but *The Fantasy Trip* uses only the common 6-sided variety.

The books are cleanly typeset and have been proofread, which is something you don't see every day in this business. The rules sections are somewhat organized, but not very well—certainly not well enough to make up for the lack of an index. Only *In the Labyrinth* has so much as a Contents page. The artwork is competent if bland (and as usual is only there for its limited decorative value; there are diagrams of play, but the pictures illustrate nothing)—but for some reason all three books have covers identical except for the overprinted title. In the normal sprawl of a GM's table, one cannot be distinguished from another. Differently colored overprints, or better yet different covers, would have saved accumulative hours of shuffling.

The broad generality of *The Fantasy Trip* is offset by a basic leanness of concept. The game background—giant Cidri and the eclectic Mnoren—is an excuse for the presence of whatever catches one's fancy, lizard men, and Thompson guns, not a foundation to be built upon. Because of this, the ruleset is less than ideal for the beginning GM. For the beginning *player*, however, the simplicity of

the combat and magic systems, and their high definition—*this* many hexes, *that* much effect, rules that can be grasped whole rather than deduced from vague hints—make it an excellent choice. Enough so that a GM who knows what he wants in a world and how to put it together might look at these the next time his present magic and combat systems won't start on a cold morning.

At \$15 for the complete rules, *TFT* is neither the least nor (by a long shot) the most expensive ruleset available; but everything you pay for is comprehensible, and everything you pay for works.

And if that's heresy . . . which way to the Inquisition?

EXTRODUCTION: Supplements, Play Aids, Etc. Etc.

[Due to the number of items mentioned here, and the variability of production costs, no prices are given. See your dealer or write for the publisher's literature.]

At the present writing, no supplements or play-aids are available for *Space Opera*. However, the *Guide to Ground and Air Equipment*, which will add heavy weapons and (mostly military) vehicles and aircraft, is in preparation. Also announced are the *Sector Star Atlases*—star maps and catalogues of planets. Preloaded adventures are in the works as well.

FGU also publishes a set of army-level combat rules titled *Space Marines*, by A. Mark Ratner. Despite the fact that rôle-players won't often get into full-scale battles, I have to recommend this book, because it clears up many of the omissions and holes in the *Space Opera* ruleset, including such things as the grenade rules, air-to-air combat system, the correct version of that Neuronic Whip description, and explanations of the funny-animal races (Rauwoofs, Klack-ons, etc.) that *Space Opera* mentions but never gets around to explaining.

Metagaming offers *Tollenkar's Lair*, a preloaded labyrinth (underground) adventure in book form. There are also "Microquests," adventures in the Microgame package, presented in programmed-text form. ("You see a shadowy figure. If you want to talk to it, go to paragraph 80; if you want to shoot at it, go to 14; if you want to rush it, go to 212.") Programmed texts require no GM, and are about the only reasonable way to play adventure games solitaire. The Microquests available now are *Death Test* (a civil-service exam for

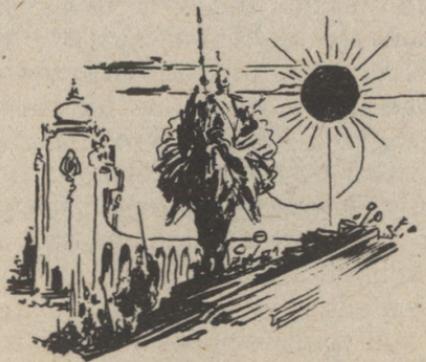
mercenaries), *Death Test 2* (more and worse), and *Grailquest* (on the road with Arthur's knights, looking for the you-know-what).

Finally, Steve Jackson (the designer of *The Fantasy Trip*) offers "Cardboard Heroes." These are sheets of coated cardboard printed with color front and back views of the usual (and some less usual) fantasy-adventure types. You cut them apart, fold them into little easels, and at once you have fully painted and detailed 25-mm figures—only without painting (or filing or mounting or fiddling around).

Well, they're not *quite* like metal miniatures, but they're easy to like. The artwork, by Denis Loubet, is very good; and the printing is perfectly registered. And the price is lovable: 40 figures, humans, elves, dwarves, and "halflings" (you know—short folk with furry feet) for \$3.

Also included are details of a distinctly unique contest: the winners will appear as future Cardboard Hero(ine)s. Now *that's* getting into your character.

Available at retailers or from Steve Jackson Games (how straightforward can you get?), Box 18957, Austin TX 78760 (add 25¢ each for 3rd Class, 50¢ for 1st Class postage, US and Canada only). Jackson is now also the publisher of *The Space Gamer* (formerly a Megagaming product) a monthly magazine with a heavy emphasis on game reviews. *The Space Gamer* is \$21 per year from TSG, Box 18805, Austin TX 78760.



K • \$1.50 November 1982 • 47734 • UK: 75p

AMAZING/FANTASTIC

AMAZINGTM

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

Combined with
FANTASTICTM Magazine

NOW
160
PAGES!

Jack
Williamson

Robert
Silverberg

Larry
Niven

Gene
Wolfe

John M.
Ford



Founded in 1926
by Hugo Gernsback

November 1982

THE INCOMPLEAT STRATEGIST

by John M. Ford

This will be, if the dice roll right, a regular column discussing games and game-related materials. Most will be new (or reasonably new) products, but there are no rules except that the game have a science-fiction or fantasy element.

The first point to be made is that criticism is critical, including pointing out flaws in a generally good product. You are welcome to disagree with anything I say, and please understand that a negative comment about a game you play is not an attack on your person.

Be further assured that the fact that this magazine is owned by a games publisher is not going to color my reviews of their products, and they in turn have no intention of trying to influence me. (Note, also, that this column has no connection with any other publication of Dragon Publishing or TSR Hobbies, Inc.; and a comment made to them may not reach me.)

If one of these reviews convinces you to buy a product — even to prove how wrong I was about something I criticized — tell the company where you read about it; that helps us all. (The same goes for products mentioned in our advertisements.) If you're a game publisher with a product you'd like reviewed, Editor Scithers can tell you where, and to whom, it should be sent.

And watch this space.

TOWARD A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY

Worlds of Wonder

The Chaosium, Inc., Box 6302,
Albany CA 94706-0302

Boxed set, \$16 (+\$2 postage/

handling)

Requires 4-, 6-, 8-, and 20-sided dice, included

Designers: see text

Back in the days, not altogether gone, when rôle-playing games were experimental and uncertain and rattled when you shook them, like breadboard circuits, I spent a lot of time and colored ink writing rules systems. It occurred to me more than once that, whether their setting is a sorcerous proto-Earth, the distant future, or mercenaries in a banana republic, at the core of all such rules are the same quantifications of people moving, acting, and fighting (and thinking, too, in a *good* ruleset). And the logical corollary to that idea is that if one designed a really functional system, it would apply equally well to any environment from Cro-Magnons with pointed sticks to *Nth-Stage* Lenspersons.

Now, this notion was implicit in several rulesets. *Traveller* from Game Designers' Workshop contains bows and swords and laser rifles, and rules for psionic powers that would make a fine magic system (in fact *better* than many explicitly fantasy games contain). Some of the "magic items" in the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game are direct analogues of high-tech artifacts (*pace* Dr. Clark's First Law). But no one has come out and done a ruleset specifically crossing the universal boundaries. Until now.

The Boxed *Worlds of Wonder* set contains four books, each of eighteen pages, with stiff covers: *Magic World*, *Future World*, and *Superworld*, which detail the rules specific to those envi-

ronments, and *Basic Role-Playing*, which is used with each of the others to form a complete ruleset. Characters from any "World" may travel to any other, after passing through a city called (appropriately enough) Wonder, which will change their currency and insure that not too much technology transfer takes place — no fair taking your +XXV Century laser tank into the Middle Ages. (The parallel with Michael Crichton's Delos or my own Alternities Corporation, before their respective system breakdowns, is interesting.) Presumably Wonder connects to other Worlds as well; the booklet format means that more environments, to suit many tastes, can be released at relatively low cost to publisher and buyer.

Basic Role-Playing (by Greg Stafford and Lynn Willis) is the same booklet included with the boxed *Runequest* game, and sold separately for \$4, now in its third edition. It establishes a movement-action system based on percentage probabilities of success, with those chances defined individually for each character in the game, rather than for characters by classes (5th-level Fighter, 8th-level Sewer Worker, etc.). *BRP* is actually a much stripped-down version of Chaosium's *Runequest*. It drops *RQ*'s elaborate system of locating weapons hits and distributing damage, and the Strike Rank system of sequencing actions; but it keeps the basic mechanics of attack and defense.

One party to the brawl attacks, using her skill percentage for the weapon she is using; the other person tries to parry the blow, with a shield, his weapon, or something improvised, such as a chair. It is quite possible to catch a blow on your sword — and have the sword snap in two. If the parry fails, some of the blow's force will be spent on the vic-

tim's armor — let's hope he's got some — and the rest gets through as physical damage.

It is possible to score a "critical hit" — defined as a blow that gets past armor protection. An "impaling hit" strikes deep into the body, for really awful damage — and the weapon is *stuck* there until extracted. And since luck is — forgive me, folks — a two-edged sword, there is the "fumble": drop weapon, hit friend, lose helmet, hit self, critical hit self, and other little mistakes that can ruin your whole day.

Now, one must note each character's attack and parry percentages with each weapon s/he has been trained with, and that can take quite a bit of note-keeping. But implementing the system is easy: one roll of the dice to attack, one for amount of damage (if any), one for parry chance. And the results are remarkably like the combats of swash-buckler movies (note I did *not* say "reality"!). The Musketeer can casually parry the Cardinal's Guardsman for whole minutes, the valiant sidekick can get an arrow stuck in his . . . er, flank, that requires the Quest be interrupted to find a healer, the mighty super-swordjock can trip and fall down, necessitating a daring escape from a real, chains-and-bars-type, dungeon.

This is, *I think*, the best system of hand-weapons combat available today. I did not say "most elaborate"; and I certainly did not say "most realistic" (which usually means "most complicated"). This is a value judgement, based on juggling dozens of combat tables over the years, and it will do no good to write nasty letters about how morally superior the "Gargoyles and Garderobes" combat system is.

Noncombat skills, such as climbing, jumping, and spotting concealed objects, are also assigned percentages — and one can also "critical" and "fum-

ble” a skill task such as leaping a crevasse; critical, and you land on your feet, ready for action — fumble, and . . . oh, you get the idea.

As I said before, these subsystems are simplified versions of those in *Runequest*. As a result, *RQ* becomes a useful — but optional — “higher authority”; the game operator can, if desired, use its more elaborate tables of weapons, the Strike Rank system, and the assorted minutiae rules that some people cannot live without.

Unfortunately, the Third Edition of *Basic Role-Playing* also preserves the fault of the earlier editions: it talks down. Not ruinously or offensively so, but after two revisions this point could have been fixed.

Magic World (by Steve Perrin) takes the medieval mayhem mechanics of *BRP* and adds magic spells and a short list of animals and “monsters.” The spells list is thankfully short and practical, and contains nothing especially devastating; rules authors have begun to realize that super-wizards, who could incinerate armies with a gesture and a sneeze, did nothing for play balance. There are mentions, but no details, of more potent ritual magic (presumably another book is on the way); but ceremonial magic, with its props and chants, tends to be self-limiting. One can’t set up an altar and call a dozen acolytes together just any old time, and besides, dark magic rituals are always being interrupted by hero-types with swords.

A short adventure for beginners is included (with the other books as well): poking around in caves, oh well. (At least the cave described makes sense as a place that might really exist.) However, this is about all the guidance the game operator gets toward creating her own adventures.

I am ambivalent as to whether this

is enough. The best place to learn what heroic fantasy is about remains, and *will* remain, fiction. A well-written story will teach more about dramatic unity, background, and the other storytelling elements — and never forget that rôle-play is a storytelling form — than ten times the length of rules, charts, and tables (all too often written by people who can’t tell *Bash the Barbarian* from the *Odyssey*).

More simply put, it is the task of the ruleset to create possibilities, not exhaust them.

Future World (by Steve Perrin and Gordon Monson) moves the action to distant planets, adding ray guns, robots — but not spaceships; travel is by teleportation “gates” from world to world.

Characters gain beginning experience by entering one or a series of “career paths”: join the Army, study science, turn criminal, and so forth. The system is not as much fun as *Traveller’s* character sub-game, but it is easy to understand and quick to use.

Five nonhuman races are described, all balanced in abilities with humans, allowing a player to take the part of one without becoming suddenly superior or inferior to “its” human fellows. There are intelligent robots, and . . . here we go again . . . hive-mind insects, lizards, bears, and cats. Sure, it’s hard to create an alien race that isn’t just a Terrestrial animal with intelligence and tool use, but nobody said science fiction was an easy thing to write.

Characters can shoot at one another, with an assortment of projectile and energy weapons from hideout pistols to a shoulder-fired guided missile, toss grenades, and swing glowing energy swords. The list of weapons is manageable and rational, with some large and destructive weapons but no excesses

like pocket nukes.

There is also armor against all the weapons, in three types, each effective against one type of weapon (bullet, laser, or plasma), less so against the others. And there is the "tacpack," a computer-sensor-generator that can power one's weapons and put up defense screens against the other being's weapons. Screens come in three varieties too, plus electronic countermeasures to unguide missiles. Combat thus becomes a guessing game, as one tries to allocate limited energy to the right sort of protection. I'm not sure why it takes so long — six to twelve seconds — to switch screen type, or why the sensor technology postulated couldn't analyze incoming weapons and switch to suit, but the system *is* interesting and certainly adds tension to a battle.

The lack of spaceships may put some people off, but *Future World* functions well enough without them. (To be honest, teleportation is no more outrageous an assumption than faster-than-light drives.) Most adventure situations work as well in a city as aboard a spaceliner — cargo can be hijacked from trucks, too — and ship-to-ship combat, if presented in anything like a believable fashion, tends to get characters killed in numbers, or stranded a hundred miles up with no place to go. *More importantly*, the designers were not afraid to try something different, and that is an attitude I applaud.

But I do miss the spaceport bar.

Supeworld (by Steve Perrin and Steve Henderson) makes the characters into comic-book heroes. (This is the current boom area in rôle-play rule-sets; there are now five major ones on the market.) A point system allows the "purchase" of powers, such as super-strength, invisibility, and lightning bolts from the fingertips; bonus points are

obtained for limitations and weaknesses to the powers — the need to say a magic word before becoming super, vulnerability to meteoric minerals, and so on.

The list of abilities is quite comprehensive; just about any hero or villain from the comics can be duplicated (except, of course, for the fact that "real" comics heroes always have just enough power to survive and defeat the villains; in the game, what your numbers say is what you are, and there's no Comics Code to assure the good guys will win).

Character creation requires a larger than average amount of care, partly because of this wide choice of super-powers. It isn't enough to shoot energy from the eyes; one must define what kind of energy, and in what intensity. There is also the question of consistency; nothing keeps a character from being a martial-arts expert who also throws fireballs, or a 40-foot giant with a 95% chance of Moving Quietly. A little creative discretion in designing logical combinations of powers and weaknesses is necessary. (I admit that, in many years as a game designer and operator, one of the strangest things I've ever had to ask a player is "Okay, now what weaknesses do you want?")

Even with care and study of the rules, the balance of powers and counter-powers is such that a group will probably have to play through a scenario or two before understanding how the system functions: how much armor is necessary, how many levels of attack powers and how much energy to run them, appropriate and excessive weaknesses.

The effects do seem to be worth the trouble, if you have any taste for comic books at all. Special rules make combat spectacular, even by gaming standards: characters get punched for yards (and through walls), take pot-shots in mid-

air with lasers and cold rays, use telekinesis to slam one another into ceilings.

The sample character sheets provide line drawings of heroically posed figures, two male and two female, for the player to embellish with his or her flashy costume design; a very nice idea, but the artwork is terrible.

There are some typos, too. The chance for a hero to hit something with his powerbolts was omitted (Chaosium has since said it is equal to the hero's Throwing percentage). The text does not always agree with the quick-reference tables. Chaosium does back up its products with errata sheets; one for *WW* should be available by the time you read this.

I can't really imagine running an extended campaign with these rules — how many times can costumed villains threaten the entire world before credibility totally collapses? — but *Superworld* makes a lively change of pace from hacking basilisks.

I started out by talking about universal systems. The *WW* sub-rules are compatible; whether you *want* to have costumed superheroes meet swordsmen, or sorcerers take on blaster-armed explorers, is very much a matter of taste, and not to be discussed here. However, given *first* that the rules all work — which these do — I think having the ability to cross over is better than not having it.

The strengths of *WW* are its simplicity and breadth of coverage. Its weakness is the shallowness of that coverage. In the long term, players will probably be more satisfied with a more complete single-environment game (such as *Traveller* for science fiction, *Runequest* or a version of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game for fantasy). However, the “short term” can be many months of play — and

some persons never do develop a lasting interest. (Contrary to what some writers in the field have said, many intelligent and imaginative people do not care for the games, and conversely, being a rôle-player will not automatically make you a better human being.)

Worlds of Wonder best recommends itself to the game operator of some experience, whose players have little or none — novices who haven't decided what style of game suits them, and aren't ready for masses of rules and tables. Even where *WW* is sketchy, it is not completely void on important subjects; there is a framework for *ad hoc* rulings. I suspect that, as more booklets are released, this will be a game to watch.

So: as a rôle-playing system, *Worlds of Wonder* is clean and playable, but limited. As an introduction to what rôle-playing is and can be, it is a prize.

THE MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY PRACTICUM

Call of Cthulhu

The Chaosium, Inc. (see address above)

Boxed set, \$20 (+\$2 p/h)

Requires 4-, 6-, 8-, and 20-sided dice, included

Designed by Sandy Petersen

Call of Cthulhu (pronounced as “an aspirated spit”) is set in the strange and terrifying world of H. P. Lovecraft's fiction: hideous monsters, and the depraved human cults that worship them, lurk just below the racy, glittering surface of the Roaring Twenties.

CC is also based on *Basic Rôle-Playing*, and could be merged with the *WW* Worlds — but at heart it is a different sort of game. In *Call of Cthulhu* the characters (“Investigators”) head into dark, haunted places, but in search of knowledge and the answers to myster-

ies, not loot; and they will encounter monsters — but Lovecraft's creatures are not dumb scaly animals waiting for adventures to come and kill them. They are partly squamous, partly rugose, and completely *bad news*. CC characters have a characteristic in addition to the basic descriptive numbers; this number is Sanity, and every encounter with The Unknown erodes it a little more, until one's character completely flips out (and the author provides a description of the state of psychotherapy in the period, which is not reassuring).

I can think of few unkind things to do to the typical confident fantasy-adventuring team (Have Chainmail, Will Travel) than to throw a shoggoth or Lesser Old One at them. Great Cthulhu Himself is in the book, but He would be a fair match for an armored division.

However, there is more to adventure than killing monsters and grabbing treasure. Solving puzzles, piecing together clues, can (if the operator and players are good at it) be a far bigger mental kick than rolling a handful of dice and announcing "We killed it" can ever be.

Character creation is complete — down to geographical origin, by actual population distribution in Twenties America — logical, and not overly complex, but requiring conscientious players who will select skills in a logical background pattern, not just take the most immediately useful ones. (Any game with the character profession of Dilettante has its heart in the right place.)

There are guns, of course, naturally including the Thompson SMG, and some even heavier artillery (and bullwhips, if chasing after lost arks is your thing). The designer repeatedly warns against excessive gunplay; in the first

place, bullets have little effect on intelligent fungi from Yuggoth, and in the second, unlike most medieval-fantasy environments, this one contains police and FBI and courts and jails. While *being* High Priest of the Starry Wisdom sect may not be against the law, shooting him dead assuredly is.

The set comes with "A Sourcebook for the 1920s," which is a pleasant introduction — though no more than an introduction — to a fascinating period, a large world map locating real and Lovecraftian sites, and some papercut-out figures that illustrate relative sizes of people and Things. (I love the heavily armed flappers. Miniature people of the Twenties may be obtained from model railroad suppliers, such as Walthers of Milwaukee.)

Call of Cthulhu has my strong, but qualified, recommendation. It is mystery-adventure, not combat-adventure (though there's plenty of room for action, with pursuits by roadster, railroad, aeroplane, and Zep-pelin). Provided this suits the players' tastes and the operator's skills — and provided that all are fairly familiar with Lovecraft's work, lest they be lost from the start — the rules work well and deliver the eldritch goods.

In a field where "nameless horror" usually refers to the designer's grammar, that's a fine performance.

ROAD & FLAK

Car Wars

Steve Jackson Games, Box 18957,
Austin TX 78760

Boxed, \$5 (+.50 p/h)

Requires 6-sided dice, not included

Designed by Steve Jackson and Chad Irby

... You smile at one another, driver to driver, because a little courtesy

never hurts and besides, it looks good to the folks watching at home. Then the bullet-resistant power windows roll up, the gun-muzzles extend from behind the parking lights, the Sports-TwentyFour chopper rises to a safe camera distance, and the hell with chivalry; this is the highway, this is war. . . .

I am not going to analyze the fantasy of equipping one's automobile with weapons and armor and going forth upon the blacktop to duel with one's fellow roadhogs; I note only that it is a very popular fantasy, especially right after some joker in a Dodge pickup has just done his best to sideswipe one into flaming wreckage on the shoulder of I-80.

Well, for those of you who would like to expend a little of that fuel-injected tension, there is *Car Wars*. Drive the armed Detroit iron of your dreams down the highways of the Not Too Distant Future, blasting bikers, tailgaters, and **SPEED LIMIT 55** signs.

The rules for maneuvering vehicles are straightforward and comprehensive — really very good, considering what complexities might have been written in. One can throw cars into rubber-scrubbing esses and do the famous bootlegger reverse (where my people come from it ain't no legend), but the authors have saved themselves and the players a lot of trouble by not trying to design in every stunt Rémy Julienne has ever pulled in a movie. But the system is open-ended, and autoacrobatics can be added as players think of them.

The combat rules are similarly clean, unencumbered with lists of special cases and modifiers. The list of weapons includes machineguns, rocket launchers, lasers (?!), and such spy-movie favorites as oil sprayers and tire

spikes — plus an assortment of hand weapons so the pedestrians can shoot back.

Car Wars also comes equipped with a set of "campaign" rules — provisions for drivers to progress from one combat to the next, earning fame, glory, and devalued dollars; this sort of thing is almost obligatory in these days of rôle-playing games, whether or not a long-haul campaign makes any sense or not. Drivers have such a low survival rate in this game that a championship "autoduelling" season would likely last about three hours (or 165 miles, whichever comes first).

Which is hardly a flaw in the game. *Car Wars* is good silly fun in the same violent-bloodless fashion as a James Bond movie, and costs about the same as one movie ticket. Its movement system could be easily applied to any adventure game of the automotive era — Thirties-gangster car chases, for instance, or black sedans pursuing Commander Bond's Aston Martin DB5. The counters are four-color and gorgeous, even if you do have to cut them apart yourself; and the game comes in Steve Jackson's new flat plastic box, sized for pocket, purse, or glove compartment.

All for five dollars (plus taxes, delivery, and dealer prep). That's a Volkswagen price for a Porsche-class game.

TWO-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTERS

Cardboard Heroes

Steve Jackson Games (Address, see above)

\$3 per set (+.50 p/h)

The Cardboard Hero is a strip of coated board printed with front and back views of a figure — human, animal, monster, whatever. You cut the

sheet apart, fold them up (or stick them into bases — see below) and hey presto, they're miniature figures, in full color, with all of the detail that has ever been cast into an inch-high figure — and some details that can't be practically cast, like thin-boned skeletons in rags of clothing, and rapiers fine as a hair.

There are now nine sets of Heroes: seven fantasy sets painted by Denis Loubet (including monsters and a splendid set of Undead), a set of 15mm tall *Traveller* figures by Paul Jaquays (less cartoony than much of his work has been, though the color registration in my set is slightly fuzzy), and a set of superheroes by Jeff Dee. The costumed heroes deserve special attention, because while there are legions of metal fantasy miniatures and many nice sets for *Traveller*, one just can't find figures for the people in capes and tights.

The price is still unbeatable: three sheets, about forty figures (more in the

Traveller set) for \$3 and a few minutes with cutting tools.

I have two suggestions: sets of standard sword-fodder types, the sort you need a bunch of, like uniformed security guards . . . and a superheroes set with plain black line sketches that could be colored in, for those of us (like me) who can think of costumes but can't draw the human figure in action. (If you like these ideas, or have some of your own, write Steve Jackson. Tell him who sent you.)

Also available are plastic bases for the Heroes. These are lengths of something rather like automobile trim strip, with a groove to hold the cutout. They must be cut to length, and do tend to cover the figure's feet, but they are more stable than the plain easel and can also be used to support cutouts of your own devising — wall sections, for instance. \$3 (+.50 p/h) buys four 7" strips, in black or white.



ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION (The Editors Strike Back!)

by George Scithers, John M. Ford, & Darrell Schweitzer

"This book is a golden opportunity to see behind the editorial office doors and find out why some stories make it and most others are given printed rejection slips." ... Tom Staicar in *Amazing SF Stories*

"If you have ambitions toward selling professionally, you ought to have a copy." ... Don D'Amassa in *SF Chronicle*

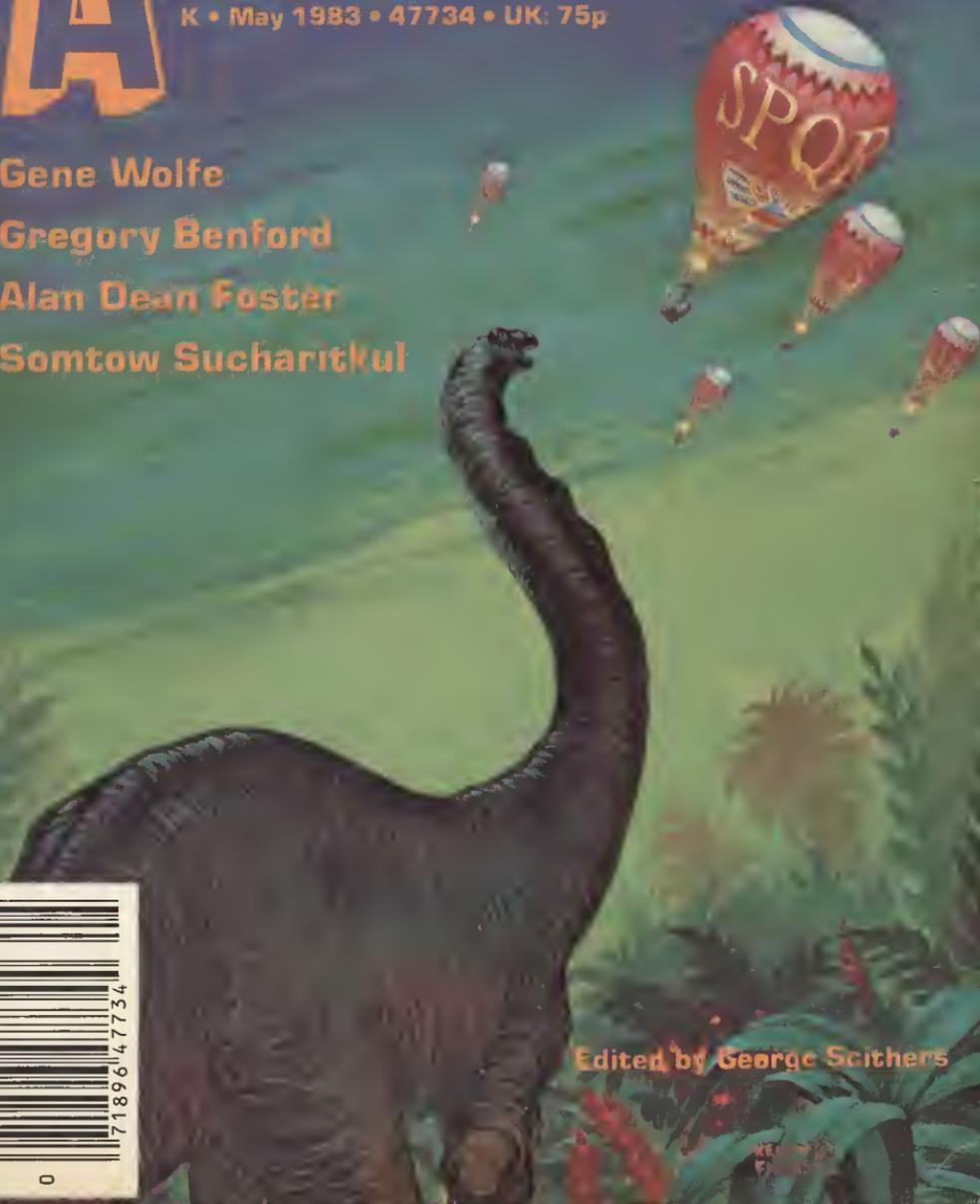
This book is available in bookstores or directly from the publisher, Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243 at \$17.50 (which includes shipping).

still
just
\$1.50 U.S.

AMAZING™ SCIENCE FICTION Stories

Combined with FANTASTIC™ Magazine
K • May 1983 • 47734 • UK: 75p

Gene Wolfe
Gregory Benford
Alan Dean Foster
Somtow Sucharitkul



Edited by **George Scithers**

0.5



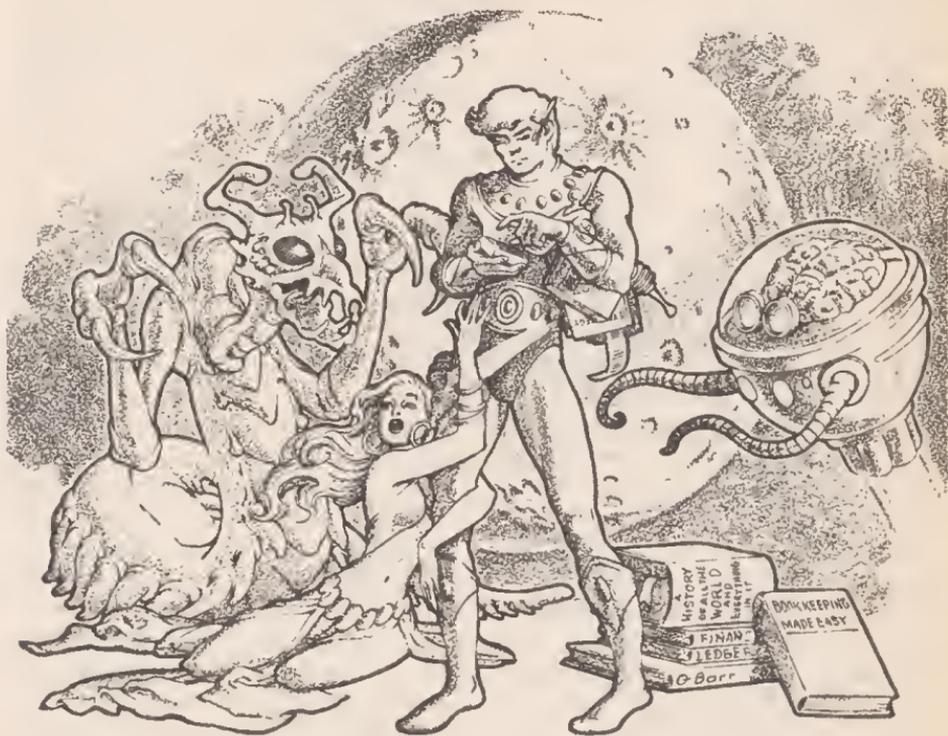
71896 47734

0

THE INCOMPLEAT STRATEGIST: 2

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr



NICE TRY . . .

TRIAL BY PYLON™

Bar Sinister, Inc.

9156 Green Meadows Way,

Palm Beach Gardens FL 33410

4 decks of cards, boxed, \$19.95

Designed by Vincent Miranda

There is an elegant ideal in game design: the game whose rules require only a few minutes to learn, but which offers so many possible strategies that a lifetime cannot exhaust them. Chess comes immediately to mind, and Poker. In modern game design there is *DIPLOMACY™* (Avalon Hill), which

derives its cold-blooded fascination from its very *lack* of ethical rules, and *COSMIC ENCOUNTER™* (Eon Products) (though lately its system has been loaded to breaking with “expansion” options).

TRIAL BY PYLON™ is an attempt at this sort of simple-yet-complex design. The game equipment consists of four decks of cards: Weapons, Treasures, Locations, and Perils. There are also six cards showing characters, one of which will represent the player.

The sequence of play is simple: the player turns over a Location and a Peril. S/he must then use Weapon

cards in hand to defeat the Peril, by matching or exceeding a printed point total (there are no dice). If successful, the player may draw a new Weapon and a Treasure. The game can be played solitaire, or by several players turning cards in rotation.

The next more advanced version of the game establishes relationships between the Peril drawn and the Location in which it appears: for instance, winged Perils are strengthened in outdoor Locations, weakened indoors. This makes some of the powerful Perils virtually invincible — but certain Treasures can be used to bribe the Peril, without combat. In a multiplayer game, players may trade or bargain for each other's Treasures. The most advanced version of TRIAL BY PYLON™ is a quest to recover four specific Treasures, and play the card that ends the game.

So far, so good. The artwork on the cards is attractive — not beautiful (I wouldn't want it on my wall, or on a book cover) but pleasing, sometimes Tarot-like. There are some jokes: the Alchemist's Laboratory contains a glowing oscilloscope, and the spines of books carry recognizable names. An archway bears the inscription SUCHARITKUL.

Unfortunately, PYLON needed one more trip through the development process. The rules, while clearly written, constantly gloss over basic play mechanics; most of the answers can be inferred, but not all (i.e., when a character dies and must give up "half" his treasures, does this mean half the cards, or half their point value?) The type of a Peril (Magic, Myth, Monster, or Warrior) is supposed to be given by the shape of its label, but several of the labels disagree with the master list in the rule book — not a trivial error, because certain characters receive bonuses against specific Peril types.

There are not a lot of play options in TRIAL BY PYLON™; the only tactical choice is whether to use Weapon cards against a Peril or bribe it with a Treasure (assuming the correct Treasure is available), and even this decision is usually clear-cut. To be fair, there are a few more options than in most playing-card Solitaires, but the controlling factor is still the luck of the shuffle.

The multiplayer versions add the possibility of making deals, but since the sequence of Locations and Perils is purely random, there is not much basis for strategic choice. The kind of interaction that makes Poker more than just matching combinations of cards is absent.

Gamers are, however, an inventive lot; and as we all know, there are a host of games one can play with a deck of cards. I can think of several possibilities; maybe designing a new game is enough reason for you to purchase the set. But that's a rather large maybe.

Bar Sinister, Inc. (whose emblem shows a *bend* sinister, to be heraldically picky) proved they were interested in new ideas by publishing this game; perhaps before long they will publish a set of rules to match the quality of the components.

ONE IS THE LONELIEST NUMBER

STAR SMUGGLER™

Heritage USA

14001 Distribution Way,
Dallas TX 75234

Boxed, \$4.95

Designed by B. Dennis Sustare

STAR SMUGGLER™ is a solitaire science fiction adventure game: you, the player, are Duke Springer, interstellar pilot and all-around hotshot, possessor of a starship, a gun, and some sharp wits,

trying to turn them into a lot of money while staying one step ahead of the starport cops and the finance company.

The game consists of a rulebook, explaining how the game world operates; a book of numbered "event paragraphs"; and a set of cardboard tiles, attractively printed in four colors. Each tile shows one hemisphere of a planet, with locations such as starports, cities, prisons, agricultural areas, and so forth, with connecting lines showing travel time from location to location. Two tiles placed together form a complete world map, with all lines connected. (And don't throw away the box too soon; the "four full-color counters" the back copy mentions have to be cut out of its flaps.)

The usual "Programmed adventure" involves numbered pages or paragraphs, each of which offers a set of options: each option — attack, run away, read the spell, etc. — directs the reader to another paragraph, which gives the results of the last choice and a new set of options.

While it has the numbered paragraphs, STAR SMUGGLER™ uses them in a rather different way. Duke Springer ("you") travels from planet to planet, and from location to location on the planetary surfaces, more or less freely. Once inside a location, dice are rolled on a table keyed to that location: the result is an event paragraph, which may be an offer to buy or sell goods, legal or otherwise; a chance to hire crew; or a more unusual encounter. Everything — travel, die rolls in search of a deal, deals themselves — takes time; and just to keep matters moving along, every ten game-days Springer's loansharks demand the interest on his starship loan.

There are a lot of options in this game, and not a few rules — transport modes from shank's mare to shuttle-

craft, combat, robots, stasis boxes, and on and on: practically a complete rôle-playing ruleset. A good bit of record-keeping is required, for the status of all Duke's possessions, his hirelings (and their possessions), what Duke knows about the planets of the Pavonis Sector (and what their authorities know about him). . . .

All of a sudden this sounds less like adventure than like work. And, alas, work is what it gets to be: repetitive work, because the encounter tables tend to throw the same events at you over and over (I got to see the same two starport thugs so often, I wanted to ask their childrens' names), and frustrating work, because *every* possible purchase requires a specific die roll — even buying fuel and oxygen for the starship. Understand, I don't argue with the principle behind this system; it's not hard to imagine poor Duke plodding from spaceport bar to seedy shopfront, looking for a used spacesuit in his size at the right distress price . . . for a while. But as the rolls required mount into the dozens, then the hundreds, one's suspension of disbelief begins to wear out its tires and shocks.

This is a fault of the solitaire, programmed mechanism. In a conventional rôle-playing session, the game operator would explain the reason it was taking thirty hours to get a bus to the starport. ("Well, see, there's a championship zero-gee soccer game today.") and both the delay and its cause would have relevance to the unfolding plot ("Before he dies, the government agent tells you the secret defense plans are hidden in a soccer ball. What now?"). The solitaire text can only produce what was written into it.

Which is not so much a criticism of STAR SMUGGLER™ as of the idea behind it. The solitaire programmed-adventure

is an unsolved problem, and short of computers with artificial intelligence it may be insoluble (but don't bet on it). The author has done an excellent job within the constraints of the form — in fact, has pushed those constraints to the limit — but has not broken through them. The innovative rules and systems in *STAR SMUGGLER™*, such as the planetary tiles and movement-area system, are curiously irrelevant to the actual functioning of the game.

Do I have the answer? No. If I did, I'd sell it to a game publisher and make money — lots of money, because the potential market for really good, exciting solitaire games is enormous.

And for that reason, *STAR SMUGGLER™* may be a success despite my mixed feelings. I like business-management games, even complex ones, but *STAR SMUGGLER™* promises swashbuckling and delivers accounting.

Still, like a book, a game that tries too much is better, or at least more

interesting, than one that tries too little. The rules suggest using the game as a packaged adventure with your favorite SF adventure ruleset, and in fact having a game operator to reduce the number of die rolls and moderate the encounter situations would eliminate most of the difficulties now present.

A completely intangible and unpredictable plus: if you are interested in operating ("Game-mastering") SF adventures, but aren't sure what the game operator does, this game will show you, in principle. (Don't try to follow its *practice*, however, or you'll create the same tedium and repetitiousness I've complained about.)

\$5 is a reasonable price in today's market for a packaged adventure. If you're not put off by the prospect of long hours riffling pages, rolling dice, and writing notes to yourself, it's a very reasonable price for a complete game. Just the thing for those long mid-watches between planetfalls. ❁



ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION (The Editors Strike Back!)

by George Scithers, John M. Ford, & Darrell Schweitzer

"This book is a golden opportunity to see behind the editorial office doors and find out why some stories make it and most others are given printed rejection slips." . . . Tom Staicar in *Amazing SF Stories*

"If you have ambitions toward selling professionally, you ought to have a copy." . . . Don D'Amassa in *SF Chronicle*

This book is available in bookstores or directly from the publisher, Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243 at \$17.50 (which includes shipping).

\$2.25 cover

From the producers of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game



AMAZING/FANTASTIC

MARCH 1984

AMAZING™ STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION

Combined with FANTASTIC™ Stories
K • 47734 • UK: £1.20 • MAR 1984

**Frederik Pohl's
"Where the Heechee
Feared to Go"**



Alan Dean Foster
Dozois, Bain, & Swanwick
Algis Budrys on JEDI

edited by George Scithers



Rochelle

IF YOU BELIEVE IN FOREVER . . .

THE STRATEGIC VIEW

by John M. Ford

The Forever War

Designed by James Griffin, from the novel by Joe W. Haldeman
Mayfair Games Inc.

PO Box 5987, Chicago, IL 60680
Boxed boardgame, \$17.00

In an essay that accompanies this game based on his work, Joe Haldeman says that if you want to read *The Forever War* (the novel) as no more than a slam-bang combat yarn, that's perfectly all right; there are many valid ways of reading any story. As if to take him at his word, Mayfair has provided two titles for the essay; it's called "A Million Wars" on the box cover, and "A Million Stories" inside. Take your choice.

Joe having said this — and I certainly agree with him, having myself written some books that the reader may take as sociopolitical satire or adventure, at discretion — it becomes a bit harder to review THE FOREVER WAR (hereafter, *italics* will mean the book, SMALL CAPS the game). First, one must determine how the designer interpreted the book; then, within that framework, decide how well he achieved his adaptation.

His interpretation: "a slam-bang combat yarn." If you're looking for the philosophical aspects of the novel — about war, communication, free will and taking orders — go back to the book; you will not find them in this box.

The box contains a mapboard of the surface of a "portal planet" — a little bit of space debris, of no use whatsoever except that it orbits a collapsed star, thereby "controlling the straits" of interstellar travel. Portal planets are

dull and ugly. So is the mapboard, crudely painted in shades of purple.

The counters, illustrated with equally unattractive sketches, represent fireteams of Human and Tauran infantry, support weapons, and bunkers. With only minor variations, the objective of every game is essentially the same: secure the portal planet for Our Side by exterminating Their Side.

Yeah, that's all. The green counters run over the barren surface of the portal planet, shooting at the orange counters; the orange counters shoot back. Sometimes a spacecraft swoops over, blasting any opposite-color counters dumb enough to line up for it.

What happened to all that hardware detail I remember so vividly from the stories? Heat-exchanger malfunctions and hypnoconditioning and cryocomponent critical temperatures and microton grenades and . . .

This is a good time to introduce a term of game-designer jargon: the word "chrome" refers to all those game rules and components that add atmosphere, flavor — the feeling that these particular counters and board represent power-armored grunts on a frozen planetoid, instead of German and Russian grunts on a frozen steppe, or Americans and Koreans on a frozen hill. Chrome, is, as with cars, a somewhat pejorative word; too much chrome sometimes covers a lack of structural strength. But without atmosphere, the game becomes a null experience: a matter of shoving cardboard chips and rolling dice against arbitrary numerical ratios. The gamespeak for *that* is "pushing wood."

In this game, nothing ever malfunctions. A unit is either OK, “pinned” (disorganized by enemy fire), or dead. A unit pinned while on hydrogen ice dies instead, a nod to the effects of heat-radiator fins against frozen gas. That’s a little drastic, but it works. Troops may move at double speed on the ice patches . . . well, in the book, one could belly-slide across, but that required some preparation and care; here, the armor apparently is equipped with skates.

There are no rules to represent the Human hypnotic conditioning that turned the high-IQ UNEF soliders into laser-happy berserkers. The conditioning is mentioned once, in a scenario in which some troops mutiny in spite of it. Oddly, there *are* morale effects after a fashion, since pinning is at least as much a moral effect as it is physical dispersal; officers can unpin units, and this is called “rallying.” So there *could* have been rules covering hypnoconditioning. But there aren’t. As for the significant fact that the Taurans have a group mind . . . they may rally one another, instead of needing officers to do it for them. Period.

The effects of cultural and technological lag through time dilation, which in the novel became a powerful symbol of alienation, here translate into a column shift on the combat results table.

At the highest level of technology, the “stasis field” becomes available: a kinetic-energy-limiting field that forces the warriors of the distant future to fight with swords and bows. Not the subtlest irony in literature, but logically worked out, and leading to some surprising twists.

The system the designer has created to represent stasis-field combat works, but at the expense of logic. Several

rules exist only to make the system work. Once a side retreats into its field, they must remain there until the bitter end: why? The opposing side is forbidden from entering the field until all the defenders are inside: *why?* The field generator, besides having no **off** switch, is immobile — but in the novel, two men pick up a working generator and move it.

Here is one reason the game fails to capture the spirit of the book: *The Forever War* is full of “field expedients,” desperate measures to handle situations not in the Army Field Manual. As Haldeman says in “A Million (Whatever),” real commanders often win battles by first determining what the enemy expects, and then doing something quite different.

THE FOREVER WAR is too limited in scope, details, and options to allow that. All the units are on the board at all times (unless they’re hiding in a single “headquarters” bunker); no surprise movements are possible. (What happened to the armor suits’ camouflage ability?) An enemy force a century more advanced than yourself merely gets better dice odds.

The box cover says “One to Six Players.” Actually this is a two-player game, Humans vs. Taurans. There is a solitaire scenario, in which a Human force charges a cluster of Tauran automatic weapons (the artilleryists must be on lunch break, or something); the action consists of hoping the die rolls for the robot side are worse than your own. The six-player scenario is a free-for-all attempt to steal an unidentified “alien artifact” from the board center; why group-mind Taurans and Humans (the scenario is set after the War) are killing each other for this — since when one side has it, the others will know anyway — is never explained.

So much for interpretation:

THE FOREVER WAR fails as an adaptation of the novel, even on the level of pure battle-action; and it makes not the least attempt to be anything more.

Maybe the game would have had more interest, more play value, if it had covered the strategic aspects of the War, provided some connective tissue between the slugfests, some *reason*; or, conversely, if it had brought us to the level of the individual trooper with his laser finger and internal-relief tube, given us people (or Taurans) to identify with. As it stands, there is no personality (even though there's a

counter that says "Mandella" on it), no meaning. Only green counters and orange counters on a piece of purple board.

I'm hard on this game because it attempts to do a major thing, adapt an important science fiction novel to game format, and it fails in a major way, as adaptation and game. It would certainly be considered a failure if it were *not* tied to a well-known book.

How oddly ironic it is that this game, from a novel about the dehumanizations of war, should itself be so dehumanized. 

CARTOON



William Rotsler

CARTOON

PICASSO LEFT AN ESTATE WORTH A BILLION DOLLARS!



Alexis Gilliland