ABYSS 42

GAMES AND THE IMAGINATION

Ragnarok Enterprises tried to publish Abyss at least quarterly and sometimes bi-monthly. Subscriptions are $7 for 6 issues, $13 for 12 issues and $18 for 18 issues. Many back issues are available. Send an SASE for a complete list. The suggested retail price for this issue of Abyss is $1.50. A sample copy is $2 by mail.

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We welcome submissions of any fantasy or gaming material. Payment is made at a variable rate up to 2 cents per word in credit or cash. Artwork is also needed, paid at a parallel rate. Send an SASE for writer/artist guidelines. We assume no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, but if you are lucky we'll at least return rejected work. It might be a good idea to query us first with your ideas. Nothing is returned without an SASE.
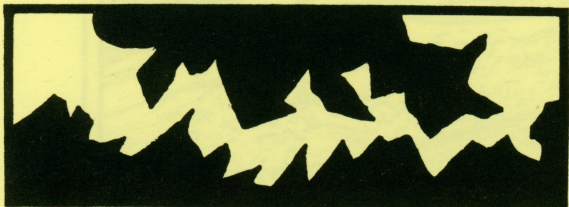
CONTENTS

CONJURINGS
FROM THE ABYSS

It's no surprise that this issue if **Abyss** is a little late. You should be used to that by now. Almost everything else about this issue is just right. We are still in our larger format and this issue should be entirely typeset, though that involved some unmentionable trials. With this issue you should have some idea where **Abyss** is going, and we hope to move on from being the most interesting magazine in gaming to being one of the best looking and best selling as well. There are a lot of new magazines cropping up in gaming these days, but we hope you'll stick with Abyss because of our tradition of unflinching honesty and uncompromising quality.

To put our general lateness in perspective, but without making excuses, a look at the past might be interesting. Abyss was originally introduced in 1979 as a quarterly publication. In fact, the title for our first couple of years was **Abyss Quarterly**, though we put out considerably more than four issues a year back then. Perhaps those who read **Abyss** today, as it is going through changes, are paying for the days when we were ahead of schedule. From August to December of 1979, this quarterly magazine put out six issues, that's about 6 issues in 5 months. The next few years saw us stick pretty close to 6 or 7 issues a year. Only in the last couple of years when so many other demands have been placed on the time and resources of the staff have we slowed down to below our professed schedule. Nonetheless, in those early days when few who are reading this issue actually subscribed, we built up a little credit. Yes, that's right, according to our original quarterly schedule, this issue of **Abyss** is due out in the Winter of 1989. That's right. You thought we were 6 or 8 months behind schedule. You were probably mad at us too. Aren't you embarassed to learn that we are actually a **year and a half ahead** of schedule? Wow, maybe we should have dated this issue Winter of '89. That would give it a great shelf life! I'm asking for a little tolerance. The abominations of our publishing schedule look a lot better if you have the right perspective. If you are disturbed with the gaps between issues, I urge you to fill them with all the back issues from our early days which are currently on sale at enormous discounts

Issue #41 was well received. Store sales were up, and we gained some new advertisers. We're hoping that the flash of this issue will continue that trend, and that increased sales and increased advertising will allow us to continuse our improvements without increasing the price. In addition to the regular features like *In the Speculum* and *Echoes from the Abyss*, you can look forward to some excellent articles in this issue, including *Just Awards* (a look at the awards system in the gaming industry), *License to Kill* (an examination of the economics, morality and value of licensed games), *The White Ape* (a new Victorian period adventure for **Call of Cthulhu** and **To Challenge Tomorrow**), and a look a at *Real Heroes* by Jon Schuller.

Next issue should be smashing as well. Most of the contents are ready to go as soon as this issue is put to bed, including a new Mazyrik story by A. Sadel and a special section of **Ysgarth** material. We may hold it a few weeks for advertisers, letter writers and reviewers, but as always, I have high hopes that it will be out sooner than you might have expected.

Dave Nalle

REAL HEROES
Jon Schuller

In most role-playing campaigns, the characters seem to be professional adventurers. A life of endless action and excitement would send most people to an early grave, but role-playing characters seem to thrive on it and even earn a living through repeatedly being thrust into extraordinary situations. Such a life is not only taxing, it is also extremely unlikely. Even in a medieval or fantasy society adventure is not around every corner and there is a point where adventure and excitement become intrusive and damage the believability of the world. No world is wall to wall, 24 hour thrills.

The heroes of legend and literature have adventures, but those adventures are exceptional moments in lives which are otherwise fairly mundane. Some of the greatest heroes had only one great adventure in their lives and spent the remaining years in contented obscurity. Even those heroes who seem to make adventure a habit have normal lives to return to. Even Odysseus, the archetypal adventurer, spent more of his life ruling Ithaca and raising a family than he did at war or lost at sea fighting gods and monsters. Only a small number of heroes who follow a career in the military or as personal champions to kings seem to lead lives of continual danger and excitement, and even men like Finn MacCool and Cyrano de Bergerac found time for a social life.

The idea of the professional adventurer carries a lot of negative connotations. If you seek riches through the risky course of adventure you are very likely to operate outside of the boundaries of morality and legality. The few great characters who live by their wits and deeds alone and choose to trade high risk for high gain are as much scoundrels as heroes. Conan, Sinbad, Rob Roy MacGregor and Harry Flashman are great adventuring characters, but also hard, devious men who traded personal integrity for fame, glory and riches. If your campaign is a world where every character is a pure adventurer, it is also a world of moral bankruptcy.

The greatest heroes are often those who have adventure thrust upon them. Ordinary men in unexpected situations are sometimes forced to do the extraordinary. This sort of hero really makes a much more interesting character with far greater depth of personality. In a sense, most characters should have two lives, a real life with a real job and responsibilities, which is interrupted or set aside when adventure intrudes. They may live the life of a hero for a brief time, but they should have another life to return to when that is done.

Some game systems make having a fully developed character very difficult. Restrictive systems like **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** and **Champions** are designed with an orientation towards adventuring situations and ignore the depth needed for a more complete presentation of the game world or more fully developed characters.

For role-playing characters to be more than cardboard cut-outs with bulging muscles, you need a game system with a fully detailed skill system, with the possibility of training and advancement and a place for those skills to be used in the game world. This means a wide range of skills, including craft and professional skills, which might not be all that useful in most adventuring situations, but which a real character might know better than he knew how to swing a sword or shoot a bow.

If you want to have a campaign which draws characters from realistic backgrounds you have a couple of choices. You can adjust the situations in which you play to fit the background of the characters or you can fit the characters to the situations in
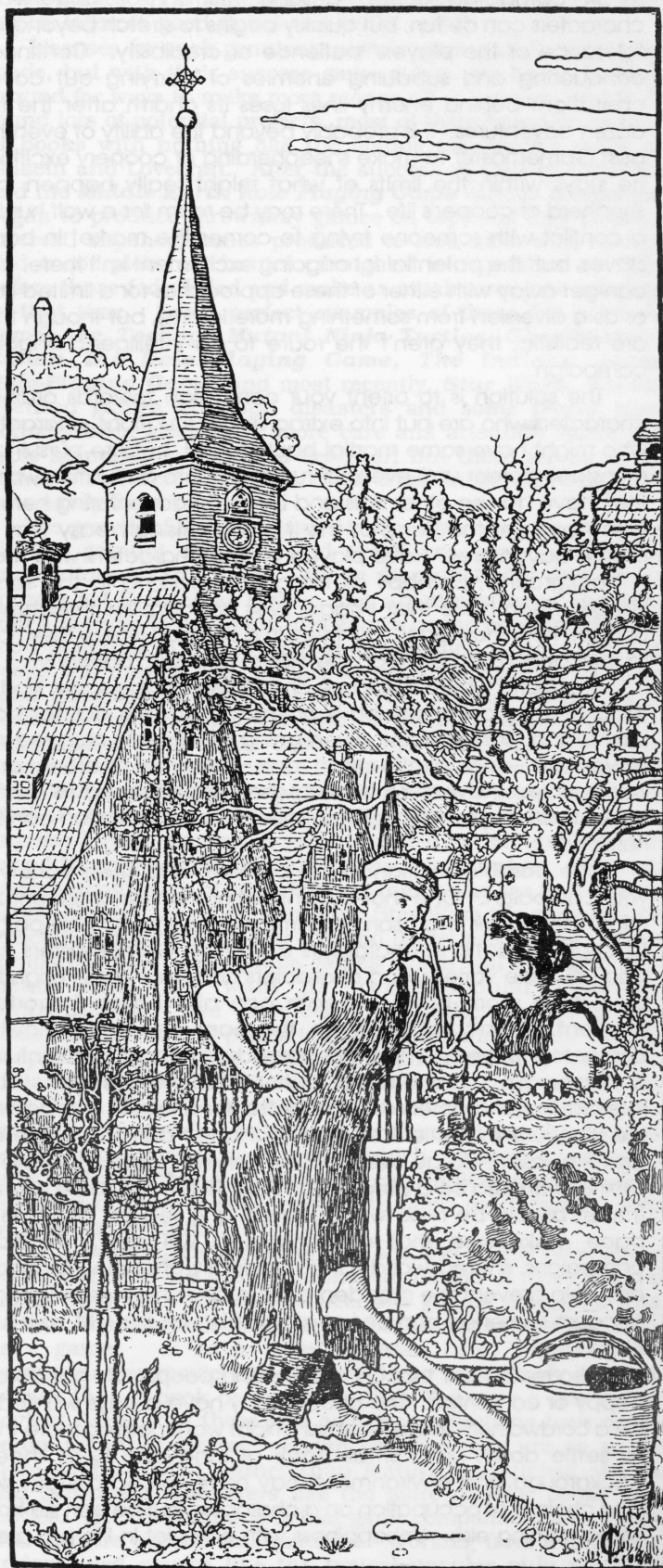
which you play. If you decide to limit the professions of characters to those which would realistically be involved in constant adventure you are going to have a world of mercenaries, thugs and thieves. If you adapt your situations to fit the realistic background of the characters you may end up with such exciting adventures as 'Quest for the Pregnant Ewe' and 'Building a Better Barrel'.

A campaign based around military or underworld characters can be fun, but quickly begins to stretch beyond the tolerance of the players' patience or credibility. Continually conquering and subduing enemies or carrying out covert operations behind enemy lines loses its charm after the first dozen adventures. It is probably beyond the ability of even the best Gamemaster to make sheepherding or coopery exciting if he stays within the limits of what might really happen in a shepherd or cooper's life. There may be room for a wolf hunt or a conflict with someone trying to corner the market in barrel staves, but the potential for ongoing excitement isn't there. You can get away with either of these approaches for a limited time or as a diversion from something more lasting, but though they are realistic, they aren't the route to an intelligent, ongoing campaign.

The solution is to orient your campaign towards ordinary characters who are put into extraordinary situations, characters who might have some martial background, but are pursuing a mundane career until events thrust them into a situation where they have to use other skills and become adventuring heroes. Once you get the hang of this it is a surprisingly easy way to create adventures. Have players create characters who share a background, perhaps all living and working in the same village. Then have their village, lives and families threatened and see how they react. Put them in a situation where they have to take action and develop the skills to deal with adversity.

Any world where the same characters do the same kind of thing every playing session is going to become dull for both player and Gamemaster. Even being repeatedly plunged into adventure and excitement can become tedious and implausible. Adventure is best when experienced in quality rather than in quantity, and too much of any sensation can be numbing.

One possible solution to this problem is to stress variety in your campaign. One-shot adventures or short serial adventures might be better than some mammoth, on-going campaign. Changing situations, characters and even Gamemasters can add valuable variety, and characters can shine more brightly if they shine more briefly. Death can also be an important element. Don't fall back on the easy crutch of allowing characters to live to a ripe, old, unproductive age. Adventuring is dangerous. Have some guts. Real heroes die. Let role-playing characters die. It is better for a heroic character to die gloriously in battle like Herakles than to die in a feeble old age like Jason. To go even further, varying game systems and settings can also be a great help. For role-playing to be exciting it must always be new to the players and regular changes of pace make sure that such newness will exist. Multiple campaigns, shared worlds and constantly changing situations also help prevent the dreaded plague of Gamemaster Burnout, because sameness can be just as numbing for the GM as it is for his players.

Also remember that characters and people are not always happy or contented. The cooper may have always wanted to be a cordwainer. The swordsman might want nothing more than to settle down on a small track of land and herd sheep. Background and environment may have forced certain skills and choices of occupation on a character, but he can still hope for something else. Unhappiness with one's lot in life is a great

source of personal tension and that tension can be expressed in heroism and desperate deeds.

Keep these things in mind, that characters are real people, as real in their world as we are in ours, that they have hopes and dreams beyond fighting monsters and gathering treasure, and even if that is all they dream about, they should still have obligations and responsibilities which make those things only a dream until something happens to force change on their lives. Remember that no ones life is entirely devoted to a single interest or pursuit, and that most of the purely adventurous professions are somewhat disreputable if they are embarked on as a career. Even a professional adventurer may want to appear as something else to be more socially acceptable. Variety and the unexpected are the key to excitement, so keep situations varied and make sure that adventure doesn't always come from the quarter where it is sought after.

While I can't guarantee that following these suggestions will make every role-playing session as wonderful as your first, if you follow these guideliness experience has shown that your adventures and campaigns will have more depth and excitement and you will never become jaded.

LICENSED TO KILL?
DAVID F. NALLE

Game design is both an art and part of a business. Some games are designed out of love and inspiration, some are designed to fit specific needs and attract specific market audiences. Occasionally art and business work together, but while games based purely on inspiration are often characterized by quality and imagination, games motivated primarily by commercial interests often lack those qualities. This is not to say that all highly commercial games are poorly designed or that all labors of love are inevitably as good as their designers think they are. A designer can be inspired by the same spirit or interest which created an audience for a game and use his skills in the heat of the moment to design a good game to serve that shared interest. Sometimes a designer is even able to put so much of his own imagination and wit into a game that it makes the topic commercially popular, no matter how unlikely its success might have seemed.

Some games are still being produced because the designer was inspired and pushed to get his finest work published in the hopes that its quality would create a unique market. Unfortunately, it seems more true now than ever before that the larger companies are staying away from games with unproven market potential and games on risky topics to go with the sure bets, games they are sure will sell well, because their topics are already popular with a large audience. This means that game companies are playing it safe by producing games on topics which have already been tested in successful games from other companies or on topics which have been popular in some other area of publishing, usually fantasy or science fiction. As in so many other areas of business, the key to this sort of marketing is the 'license'. When a movie or book or even a comic book is popular, the author or owner of that product sells licensing rights for the characters, topics and other aspects of the story and setting to companies which hope to capitalize on the success of the original work through related products in their area. Traditionally the big area for such licenses has been the toy market, with successful movies resulting in floods of licensed products of questionable merit, like Ewok Dolls, E.T. Lunch Boxes and Superman T-Shirts. Because these movies were successful, the manufacturers of these other products correctly assume that people will by their trash as a spinoff of the movie.

Gaming is a much smaller industry than movies and toys, but it seems inevitable that licensing would appear here too. The desperate search for commercial success, epitomized in dreams of getting games into Walden Books, has led to a frightening rash of licensed games in the last couple of years. Because gaming is a smaller and slightly more intellectual industry than 'action figures', gaming licenses have come not only from movies but also from successful books, cartoons and comic books. While this speaks well for the ability of gamers to read, it only broadens the source of licenses, without improving the quality of the system. The result of all this licensing is a vast horde of games, many of very questionable quality, all designed to capitalize on the success of other products, often with more emphasis on packaging and appearance than on intelligent game design.

The first major licensed game was probably *Call of Cthulhu*, which sought to capitalize on the popularity of the works of H. P. Lovecraft. *Call of Cthulhu* was a trendsetter, and few licensed games published since then have been as successful or as well designed. Another early entry was the *Middle Earth Role Playing Game*, based on J. R. R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, and doing a fairly good job of presenting and expanding his world. Both of these games took extraordinarily popular works of fiction and realized them fairly well as games, and there is no question that those books had lasting merit and the games reflect the fascination of the

designers with the works they were presenting in game form. These games show that where genuine merit exists and can inspire interest, good games can be the result.

Licenses for such genuinely popular games really had to be made, but with their success game publishers began looking around for ways to make more money off of licenses, and they found lots of potential projects, most of them based on movies or books with nothing like the lasting imaginative merit of Tolkein and Lovecraft. After the success of *Call of Cthulhu* and the *Middle Earth Role Playing Game* various companies began to produce throwaway games on topics of only passing interest, slipshod games produced to look nice, with rushed and incomplete mechanics, designed to capitalize on fads before those fads faded and make as much money as possible in that time. Some perfect examples of these fad licensed games are *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Ghostbusters, Conan the Role Playing Game, The Indiana Jones Role-Playing Game,* and most recently, *Star Wars.* Not all licensed games are total disasters and some recent have actually been given a bit more care and attention where the topic managed to inspire a designer, but there are far more games which were published, made a fast buck, and were then fortunately forgotten.

The growth of licensed games is already leading to problems for the gaming industry and there are some interesting implications of this trend. While many fictional and media sources get licensed as games, they are almost never the ones which deserve to get made into games or the ones which have good potential to be playable and rewarding games. Certain books and movies have the depth and sophistication to make good games, but generally the most popular mass-media products are too superficial and formulaic to do much more than make a quick buck. Just as a movie like *Star Wars* was desgned to make fast money in the adolescent movie market, *Star Wars* the role-playing game is inevitably going to partake of that same character and really only serve the teenage, impulse-buying market. A game targetted at that audience will have little more value than the movie it is based on. The only lasting significance of *Star Wars* is that it was the first science fiction film to make lots of money. Star Wars the game will be remembered for is its marketing and flashy production. Game companies want to produce games which will sell, and that means that they want to license popular products. Unfortunately, the movie-going public and even to mass-market reading public is not as discerning as the smaller body of serious gamers, and while such games may have high initial sales they make no real contribution to gaming in the long term. The price of a license is based on the popularity of a product, so naturally the licenses for the most popular sources require companies to make games which are more a product of hype and advertising so that they can capitalize on the sales potential of their license, and quite often good game design gets lost in the shuffle.

It is particularly distressing to see that highly commercial licensed games are getting published instead of more original games and even instead of licensed games based on less popular topics which might be far better suited to adaptation as a game. A hack novel by Alan Dean Foster or an unimaginative movie like *Willow* is far more likely to get a license than a book or series by Jack Vance or a movie like Soylent Green, but those less popular productions have much better potential for role-playing because they are so much more sophisticated, rather than featuring pastiched stories and cardboard characters like the more popular books and movies. The result of this is that game companies consistently offer gamers second rate material. Working from a childish, undeveloped source like the typical popular pulp novel or

ECHOES...

Hey Dave,

ABYSS #41 looks great. My only major complaint with ABYSS is that it doesn't come out often enough, though I know you're doing your best.

I have to take issue, however, with Will Lomax's article about cyberpunk gaming. He seems to miss what I see as the central theme: what technology does to people. It's not just about technology, but about technology's effect on the human mind and soul. While his adventure 'Punch & Judy' offers lots of cyberpunk props, it does not prompt the characters to deal with moral and personal issues. The cyberpunk background offers lots of possibilities for people to explore our own technological world, but high-tech firefights do not. Still, I think he is right about the viability of the cyberpunk setting as a gaming milieu.

Jonathan Tweet
Northfield, MN

(The problems you mention in Will's adventure seem to me to be characteristics of a lot of recent cyberpunk fiction as well. As the genre expands, more people are using the trappings to make their fiction cyberpunk without providing some of the depth found in the classics. Even some of the established authors are sort of cruising on auto-pilot. However, I think that Will's article and adventure are a useful start for a campaign, and it is hard for an adventure which is only one page long to provide the kind of depth you are talking about. The material which Will is working on for **Cyberia** goes much further and does much better--DN)

Dave,

The new, larger format (with three columns of dense text) is much harder to read. Breaking up things a bit with more illustrations would help (though that would cut down on the amount of useful text). One other approach would be to use other typefaces--proportional fonts are a lot more readable. Either a Macintosh or a DOS machine with Windows (tm) would allow this (I assume your stuff is done on some sort of wordprocessor already). This approach would result in a much more professional-looking magazine (see some of the laser-printed zines in A&E), which would really help now that you've gone to full-size.

Peter Shapley
Los Angeles, CA

(As you can see, this issue is typeset on a Mac. I hope that makes all your dreams come true. It just took us a while to get it pulled together. It causes a lot of delays because we have to transmit the files over the modem and then reformat them, but I suspect it will end up being worth the effort--DN)

Dear Sir,

I have just received ABYSS #41. I am very impressed by this magazine. Despite the ragged production qualities, this magazine contains a lot more useful information in its 20 pages than DTI's SPACEGAMER/FANTASYGAMER does in its glossier, more expensive 48 pages.

I'm particularly impressed by the number and quality of the reviews. These are intelligently written--it is obvious that the reviewers are very experienced gamers. Keep up the good work!

Wayne A. Lee
Halifax, Nova Scotia

(Thanks for the comments. I'm glad someone likes our reviews. Many readers have commented that they should be reduced in number to make room for more general articles, but I made the editorial decision to keep them fairly numerous. I'm glad someone agrees with me--DN)

Dear Abyss,

I found Evan Skolnick's article, The Gaming Gender Gap in issue #41 to be full of error.

1: Rigid sex roles in the 19th century were not the result of sexism, but of the needs of the time and place. With about 1/4 of all women childless either from choice or medical limitations, a 20% infant mortality rate, and an utter lack of good birth control, a woman's life had to center on child rearing if the society were not to succumb to depopulation.

2: While job hunting, my role is that of house-husband and babysitter. Ask me how I feel about the importance of homemaking and child rearing.

3: Skolnick must not go to the same book stores that I do. I find

contemporary fantasy fiction dominated by women warriors.

4: As to the comments about more females being an added benefit for gaming and that they would expand the market. The average gamer is around 13. At that age, most males have more than enough female contact through school and other adult-sanctioned activities. What they mostly want is more male bonding activities.

5: There are two main reasons for the lack of female gamers. First, most adventures deal with male concerns, such as economic betterment, intergroup conflict, and hunting monsters. Female concerns tend to be with intra-group relationships. There is a parallell division between male and female oriented movies. Try to make a role-playing adventure out of Terms of Endearment. Second, in a realistic pre-industrial or early industrial society, the roles available to women are not appealing to most modern women. Women were either full-time mothers, prostitutes, or amazons. The only effective family planning strategy was to not have families at all.

For my part, the only effective female roles I've been able to offer as a GameMaster were in a society where magic offered the equivalent of technological birth and disease conrol. There, I have a matriarchy, the Gravettian Empire, based loosely on 18th century Russia. The men are sent off to the armed forces or merchant marine, an the women run the home front including the security police. The role of security policewoman is popular with many players.

My attempts to have women in realistic roles, for instance as widows with many mouths to feed, have not met with a very favorable reception.

I'm afraid the gaming gender gap is here to stay. Efforts to construct societies like my Gravettian Empire require more work

and logic than most GameMasters and designers are willing to put into a pastime.

Jack R. Patterson
Daleville, VA

(I think both of you have valid points of view, and now they have both been expressed. I hope that Evan will have a chance to respond to these comments next issue. As I see it the fantasy environment, which is heavily based on medieval tradition would place severe limits on the role of women. It would not make women unproductive, but it might make them a lot less fun to play in an adventuring situation--DN)
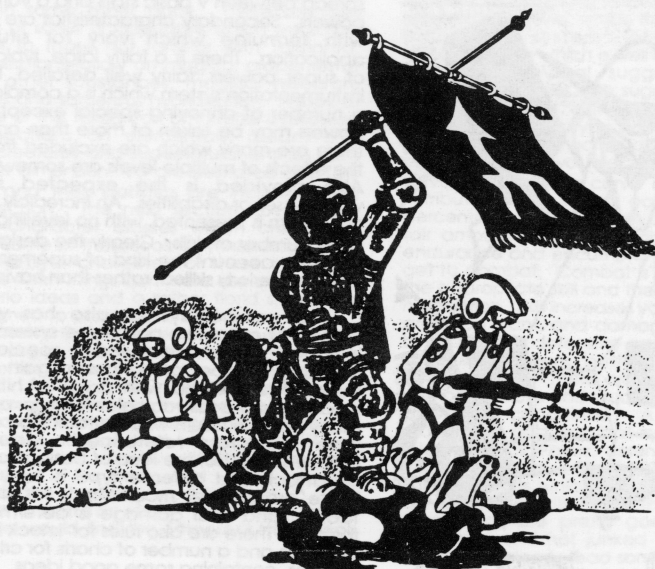
IN THE SPECULUM

LIONHEART
by Edwin King
from Columbia Games

This is an extremely strange and possibly useful historical aid from the publishers of the Harn series, who seem to be branching out into the production of historical aids. It is a nicely produced book, full-size with a heavy stock cover, clear print, maps and illustrations taken from old issues of the London Illustrated News. Lionheart is 112 pages long. There is also a large, color fold-out map and an out of date, but extensive bibliography.

This is a good idea, providing general historical information in detail for a period which could be excellent for role-playing or other forms of gaming. Some good basic research went into developing Lionheart. Early sections cover the background of English history from the Anglo-Saxon period to the time of Henry II, including brief, detailed sections on Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This introductory background takes up the first 20 or so pages. The reign of Richard the Lionheart is covered in the next two pages, hardly enough space to justify the title. The remainder of the book, about 88 pages, consists of an index of historical terms, places and people, presented in alphabetical order and in considerable detail. This index could be an excellent aid if you were reading a book on the period and came across an unfamiliar place or term. There is lots of good information, and while it doesn't cover every topic, it is fairly comprehensive within its limits.

The problem with Lionheart is that it misrepresents itself. It is not a historical aid suited for use by gamers. It is pretty clearly an adaptation of a glossary put together for some other purpose and packaged for the gaming market. What Lionheart should be is a detailed resource explaining and chronicling the period, with sections on events, people and economics. Two pages on the events of Richard's life is not what the gamers who buy this book are looking for, and if you don't have the historical background to know what terms to look for, an alphabetical index of terms is pretty useless. Lionheart doesn't provide the campaign background it could. Instead it provides answers to questions which might emerge in designing a campaign for the plantagenet period from other sources. Lionheart is well produced and could be useful to some, but it provides details and facts out of context and falls short of the needs of most gamers.

MEKTON
### by Pondsmith, Jones, et al
from R. Talsorian Games

This is a game of Japanese animation based robot role-playing from the makers of Teenagers from Outerspace. Mekton is a 100 page, full-size book, with simple illustrations in the style typical of Japanese cartoons. This is a popular genre, and Mekton is considerably more compact and practical as a game than many of the other entries, and it has a surprisingly high level of emphasis on role-playing over tactics, despite the fact that the characters are robots, though there are also some (very sparse) rules covering their human controllers.

You start by building your Mekton, purchasing arms, legs, weapons and special features, building a giant robot in which your hero rides into battle in the tradition of Japanese robot cartoons. A wide variety of features are available, kept track of fairly simply with a system of practical limits and specifications. There is a Mekton character sheet and several good sample Mektons for reference. Rules are also included for Mektons with multiple forms.

Mekton creation is fairly simple, but combat becomes more complex because of the attention to tactical minutiae. There is a simple action sequence system based on the Mekton Combat Skill of the Pilot and the size of the Mekton. Tactical movement is handled on a hex grid and there are rules for sighting and facing. Movement is kept pretty simple, but there are allowances for flying height, terrain and other conditions. Combat itself is resolved primarily through the application of situational modifiers, with a somewhat clunky targeting system which doesn't take aiming, target size or target shape into account, an effort at simplification which seriously damages the combat system. The effects of damage are well detailed and vary depending on the part of the Mekton which is hit. There are also some simple rules for dodging and parrying for defense. Several combat scenarios are suggested as well. This concludes the Mekton part of the book.

At this point, if Mekton ended, it would be a simple, fairly playable alternative to some of the cumbersome robot battle systems on the market with a few errors from too much simplifying zeal. However, what puts Mekton above a lot of other similar games is that the book doesn't end here and the remaining two thirds of the book concentrate on the role-playing aspects of the setting and on the characters who pilot the Mekton warriors. There are seven basic stats, all pretty heavily oriented towards the abilities needed to pilot a robot, plus a couple of dozen specialized skills, classified by the characteristic which applies to them. The skill system uses simple point allocation, and while some aspects are incredibly oversimplified and there is little depth to the skill selection, it is an adequate system for a combat-roiented game. Character background is handled with a lengthy flow-chart called the 'Lifepath', a series of random rolls to determine personality, experiences and
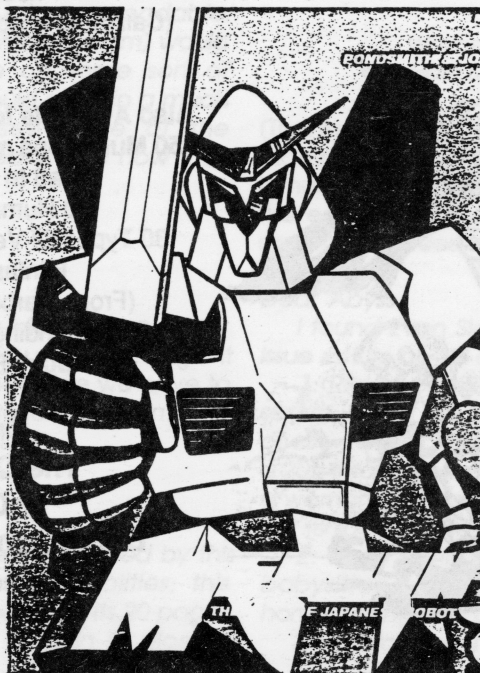
background. This sort of random background generation is a very negative factor in such a game, encouraging players not to think, but there are good ideas to be found in the charts and a sensible player could extract the good background ideas and come up with a good character despite the 'Lifepath'. Some professions are suggested, skills are detailed and there are large sections on personal weapons and equipment, from a tent to full body combat armor.

Character combat is somewhat more detailed than Mekton combat, but remains simple, and continues some of the problems, such as random hit location with no consideration for aiming or skill. There is also a very short system on vehicle combat. A barfight scenario demonstrates how combat works.

Several specialized sections round out the Mekton package. A section on 'Mecha Roleplaying Combat' provides sort of advanced combat rules for robots and characters, adds rules and discusses special situations. Algol: The Mekton Sourcebook is a short summary of a campaign background with maps, history, flora and fauna and some background characters. Finally, there is a very short scenario suited to using both robot warriors and human pilots. Also included are chart abstracts, counters and tactical maps.

Mekton is not a perfect game. In contrast with other robot games it tries very hard to be simple, and some refinements of combat and character development are lost as a result. Despite these flaws, Mekton captures much of the atmosphere and technology of its setting and provides the kind of easily learned, playable presentation of this genre which other better known games fall far short of. If you like Japanese robot cartoons and don't want to be bogged down in massive mechanics and inflated prices, Mekton may be the game for you.

ENFORCERS
by Gary Bernard, Charles Mann and Larry Troth
from 21st Century Games

Enforcers is a new superhero role-playing system from a new company called 21st Century Games. It comes in a full-size 116 page book, with clear, readable type, some nice graphics and some of the worst art ever published. The interior sketches are jarringly amateurish, and though color is used very well to enhance the cover, it doesn't cover up the inexperience of the artist.

New game companies usually start out with a project which reflects the strongest interests of the founders of the company. This sometimes leads to excellent and unusual games, but if the tastes of the designers are pedestrian, the results won't have the strength and style to propel that company to prominence. This seems to be the case with Enforcers, whose designers clearly have an affection for the superhero genre, but little awareness of how saturated the market is in that genre. For a superhero game to be a success today it would have to be truly original and creative, and Enforcers is just more of the same. Add to this reliance on unusually complex formulae in all areas of the mechanics and Enforcers becomes unplayable as well as uninspiring.

Characters in Enforcers are created on a standard point allocation system where points are spread between 9 basic stats and a variety of super powers. Secondary characteristics are determined with formulae which vary for situation and application. There is a fairly large, typical selection of super powers, fairly well detailed, but with an instrumentation system which is a complex mess and a number of annoying special exceptions. Some powers may be taken at more than one level, but there are many which are excluded from this, and the effects of multiple levels are somewhat unclear. Also provided is the expected section on weaknesses or disabilities. An incredibly rudimentary skill system is presented, with no levelling and a very limite number of skills. Clearly the designers did not take into account the kind of superhero character who is superiorly skilled, rather than having unnatural powers.

The combat system also has weaknesses. Instead of an action point type system there is an initiative system and some special rules for exchanging types of actions to gain advantage. Combat is resolved with a roll to hit with many modifiers and a fairly complex formula, and there are many possible results when attack type and defense type are cross referenced. The system is cumbersome, but the idea of basing combat results on attack and defense type is fairly interesting. There are special modifiations for situation and tactics, and final damage is determined with a formula. There are also rules for 'knock back' or stun damage and a number of charts for critical hits and fumbles, containing some good ideas.

From here the rules move into some specialized refinements, having taken care of the basics. Character advancement is based on Experience

THE WHITE APE
A Victorian Adventure
by Carl Jones

INTRODUCTION

This adventure is intended for use with the Dark Continents setting for To Challenge Tomorrow, or for adaptation to other systems. It is set in 1888, with the action taking place primarily in Central Africa, in the border area between South Africa, Portuguese West Africa and the Congo Free State. Characters should be suited to exploration, hunting, tracking, anthropology and other appropriate disciplines. Characters based out of London would be most appropriate, but their background beyond that can be varied.

THE SITUATION

In the first months of 1888 all the talk in London is of the Langston Expedition which recently returned from the highland regions of northern South Africa. They had been excavating the ruins of the ancient city of Khami, abandonned two centuries ago, the remnant of an ancient central African civilization. They brought back numerous artifacts of African culture, but also strange rumors, particularly tales of a great white ape, said to be a maneater, which lives on the Mambunda Plateau.

Most London scientists believe that the ape is either a new species of great ape or a rare albino gorilla. However, Sir Henry Stamson has a different theory. He believes that the so called 'White Ape' is actually a man, and he thinks it is a specific man, his son. Twenty years ago Sir Henry was in charge of a group of settlers near Salisbury. During his stay xthere, he and his young wife established a large ranch to the west of Salisbury. After they had been there for several months and were well established, he left his wife Miriam and his infant son Julius behind with a large number of black servants when he was called away to Durban on business. Although he was away for little more than a week, when he returned he discovered his partially built home deserted, his wife, his son and his servants gone, but no sign of a struggle. Investigation determined that most of the servants hired for the household and ranch were Matabelle tribesmen, and the conclusion was that they had just returned to their western highland homelands and taken Lady Stamson and young Julius with them.

Naturally, Sir Henry went west into the highlands, but he discovered nothing. No trace remained of his missing family. Tribal leaders he spoke with seemed genuinely distressed and expressed ignorance of the events at his ranch and the identity of the missing servants. The ritual facial scars of the servants were similar to those of the Matabelle, but there were distinct differences which Matabelle spokesmen were quick to point out. Sir Henry and his associates, assisted by Matabelle guides, carried out an extended search of the region, but there was just too much territory and eventually the search had to be abandonned. Disenchanted with Africa and his experiences there, Sir Henry returned to administer his family enterprises in London.

News of these White Ape legends has reawakened Sir Henry's interest and his hopes. The legends were of around when Sir Henry was in the region, and that makes him think that their may be a relationship between his vanished son and their recent emergence, though he realizes that there are many white men who could have gone native in that region. Sir Henry has considerable family wealth, and he is willing to expend a good bit of it to fund an expedition to find his son, though he himself is in failing health and has been advised by doctors that a return to the hot, unhealthy climate of Africa might be fatal. Thus, he wants to find a group of reliable adventurers who will go to South Africa and find the truth behind the White Ape legend.

MOUNTING THE EXPEDITION

Sir Henry Stamson will offer a total of £2500 for conclusive information on the nature of the White Ape, or its capture and delivery to England. In addition, if a reliable agent can be found to direct the expedition he will provide £500 up front to cover expenses for travel and outfitting. Passage can be obtained from London to Durban at £45/Person 1st Class or £30/Person 2nd Class one way and £75 or £50 round trip. First class passengers may take 3 bags for free. Second class passengers may take 2 bags for free. A variety of shipping lines run from London to Durban, including the Aberdeen Line, the Austrian Lloyd Line, the German East African Line, the Lunc's Blue Anchor Line and the White Star Line. Fares will have to come out of the front money, which means that a group of about 5 or 6 persons could be transported from London. More economical would be to send a couple of expedition leaders from London, people Stamson can trust, and pick up more in Durban, perhaps locals or colonists familiar

with the region. It should be noted that there are import duties on certain items. Cameras are assessed at 10% of their value. Guns are £1 plus 10% of their value. Revolvers are 5s each plus 10% of their value. British goods with certificate of origin are discounted 25% on these custom duties. If time is spent in Durban gathering the expedition, cab or riksha fare is 6d per person per mile. Short range transport cost will be lower in smaller towns. Costs of sophisticated manufactured goods will be somewhat inflated in Durban over European prices. Other prices will be similar, but prices will be higher in smaller towns. It is suggested that they stay at the Royal Hotel or the Marine Hotel while in Durban, at 15s/Night. From Durban, once the expedition is organized, they will have to travel on the Rhodesian Railway to Bulawayo. Tickets to Bulawayo are £9 for First Class and £6 for Second. The Grand Hotel in Bulawayo is 17s/Night. Beyond Bulawayo they wil have to go overland to Wankle, where there is no recommended hotel. From there a launch can take them up the Zambezi River into the Mambunda Highlands. The last town on the Zambezi, and the real launching point of their expedition is the village of Sesheke, a colonial settlement within Matabelle tribal territory. Passage by boat up the Zambezi will cost £5 or so per person for a 3 day journey, with additionnal expense for excess luggage. All told, internal travel expenses should run in the area of £10-£15 per person. After transport expenses are deducted the remainder of the £500 will be needed to purchase equipment, supplies and food, hire natives at from £1 to £2 per day, depending on their abilities, and cover any other necessary expenses.

PURSUIT OF THE WHITE APE

Investigation of the legend of the White Ape should probably begin in Bulawayo, near the ruined city of Khami where the Langston Expedition first heard the rumor. If members of the Langston Expedition were questioned in London, they will have mentioned an old black fellow named Bekonu, who is the unofficial caretaker of Khami, who lives near the ruins and seems to be a fount of local gossip. He would be a good first contact.

If they go to see Bekonu, they will find him in a small, neat cottage near the ruins of Khami. He will invite them in for tea if there are not too many of them, and when questioned, he will reveal some unexpected information about the white ape and the western lands where he was sighted. His description of the white ape seems very much like that of a large, naked white man, but it is a second hand report. However, he got the story from his son Nyunde, who knows a man in the Matabelle tribe who had an encounter with the ape. He also reports that the legend is as he heard it indicated that the white ape lives on the Mambunda Plateau, a largely inacessible highland plain. He reports that there have long been tales about the plateau, legends of a great ancient city located there, a tribe of cannibals who live on the plateau and strange creatures who dwell there.

Bekonu will offer his son Nyunde as a guide up the Zambezi to the village of Sesheke. Nyunde will also take them to the man they want to talk to there. His name is Bitotsu and he is the tribal historian of the Matabelle in the region, and a supposedly very knowledgable about the plateau and the white ape. Nyunde will guide them and introduce them to Bitotsu for the small fee of £20.

The trip overland to Wankle is uneventful, on a well travelled road, by ox-cart. Form there barge passage will be £5 per person up the Zambezi to Sesheke. As they travel up the Zambezi they see fewer and fewer signs of white men and European civilization and the land seems wilder and less hospitable. The trip by cart and by barge will get them to the dusty, disorganized town of Sesheke, where few white men are seen except for hunters, traders and explorers who pass through.

Nyunde leads them to Bitotsu, who lives in a small tribal settlement outside of the town. Bitotsu seems to be well respected in his community, and has many tales to tell. He explains that until a couple of years ago, before he married and settled down to take over from his uncle in running his small farm and maintaining tribal history, he did a lot of far-flung hunting and exploring. Following tales he had heard from his uncle he travelled for a week to the northwest and made the difficult climb into the Mambunda highlands. While he was there he had many strange experiences, including an encounter with the white ape.

While fleeing from a herd of strange iant birds which he describes as similar to ostriches, but larger and much more aggressive, he was captured by a group of people who he describes as giants with unusually dark skin, who were apparently hunting the giant birds. They took him through a huge, partially ruined city, which they seemed to treat with some reverence, possibly even as some sort of taboo. From there they took him to their own settlement, on the north end of the ruined city. He was held prisoner there for some time, and saw many marvels, including unusual weapons and items of great value, like man-size golden statues, gems and unusual jewelry. Eventually he was taken into the ruined city, which they called 'The Forbidden City of Ukhlari'. There he saw an offering being made to a huge, white ape, covered with long, sparse white hair

who walked erect like a man. The ape occupied what seemed to be a palace, and the tribesmen offered him two male prisoners who he fought with and killed with his bare hands, showing unusual strength, and whose flesh he then proceeded to eat raw. He was also given two captive women, who he did not kill, but kept with him in the palace, although they never returned. Realizing that this was to be his fate as well, and that he was only spared by the fact that there was a surplus of prisoners at the moment. Two days later Bitotsu escaped with three of the other prisoners, a man and two women. One of the women died during a fall while climbing down from the plateau. The other later became Bitotsu's wife. The man who escaped with him was named Omoke, and lives in Sesheke. He was in love with the girl who died, and for a long time had hopes of vengeance, but now he works in the cafe in Sesheke. Bitotsu also mentions that about three months ago Omoke took another group of Europeans to the plateau.

Both Bitotsu and Omoke know the language of the Mambunda tribesmen. Bitotsu has a nice life and is reluctant to guide them into the highland, except for a very high price, like £50 or more. Omoke is more eager to go at a reasonable price. He is somewhat of a drunk, a gambler and a wastrel, and earns a meagre living cleaning the floors of the cafe in Sesheke. Naturally, he will be less of an asset as a guide to the plateau, but he will probably go for less than £20. If he is questioned about the other group he guided, Omoke seems uneasy. The description he gives is vague, like he doesn't want to talk about them, and indicates that they might be German or Dutch. He explains that he took them to a route up the side of the plateau and led them to the top, but took them no further. This is the same service he will perform for others. It is clear that he is a weak and broken man, and his personal motivation for vengeance seems to have faded away in a haze of alcohol.

AT THE PLATEAU

Their guide will take them to the base of the Plateau and show them the route to go up. They may have also been able to get a vague map from Bitotsu to show them the general locations of the tribal settlement and of the ruined city of Ukhlari.

The route up the cliffs which form the sides of the plateau is difficult. No horses or beasts of burden will be able to make the climb, and packs or other items larger than 20lbs will have to be hauled up with ropes. To make the climb more difficult, if they stay there too long, from caves about half a mile further along the cliff will emerge flying creatures which their guide calls 'Zhin', which will attack and harass climbers. The Zhin appear to be long-extinct Archaeopteryx, sort of bird-snakes, and while they don't do much damage, they make climbing much more difficult. The Zhin will appear after 20 minutes of climbing. Climbing the face unassisted takes 15 minutes. Climbing while being hauled with a rope takes 5 minutes. Someone will have to make the unassisted climb first. Climbing unassisted one must make a climbing roll at a -20 on the percentage three times to succeed. Climbing with rope assistance requires 1 +20 climbing roll. However, if the Zhin attack the person managing the rope for a climber, that person must make a RATx3% roll to avoid dropping the rope, with his chance of success reduced by 10% for each Zhin attacking him. If he drops the rope the person on the other end must immediately make a -20 climbing roll, plus at least 1 more to reach the top. Once they reach the top they can haul up cargo, and cargo which is dropped because of Zhin attack could be seriously damaged. The Zhin will leave them alone once they are away from the edge of the plateau.

If they chose Bitotsu as their guide he will leave them at this point, no matter what. For a bribe of another £20 Omoke will carry on with them onto the plateau. He values his life somewhat less.

Grazing on the open plain at the top of the plateau is a herd of prehistoric, flightless birds, similar to Ostriches, but heavier boned and somewhat larger. They are brightly plumed in orange, red and brown. Not being too familiar with humans they will not flee from the intruders. If Omoke is with them he will refer to the birds as 'Timbea-Ndege'. If any of the 20 members of the flock (which includes young) is attacked, instead of fleeing, they will turn and charge the attackers, moving very fast on their long legs and pecking with sharp beaks. If they are observed and undisturbed, after a while an attack on the flock will be made by a pair of hunting Smilodons (sabre-toothed tigers), long thought to be extinct. When the Smilodons bring down one of the birds the rest will flee up the plateau as they feed.

From the grassland part of the Plateau where they arrive their course leads through areas lightly wooded with scrub and small trees, uphill towards a range of small mountains on the western end of the Plateau. As they travel through the scrub-woods they will see the ruins of stone buildings, pretty well broken down over the years, but indicating considerable engineering ability. The ruins are extensive, and they actually find the remains of a ruined stone-paved road which will take them to their destination.

If they choose to follow the road they are very likely to encounter a Mambunda patrol. If they

avoid the road they are likely to encounter a Mambunda hunting party. A patrol will have 12 Mambunda armed with throwing spears, large rectangular shields and ancient short swords in it. A hunting party will have 6 Mambunda with spears and shields. Any Mambunda they encounter will want to capture the party if it is less than half their numbers, or if it seems to be more practical they will offer to escort them back to their settlement. Their settlement/village is near the city of Ukhlari, though it would be taboo for them to live in the city itself. If there is a white woman with the party the Mambunda will get very excited. If they refuse to come with the Mambunda and the numbers don't look good, they will leave behind 2 men to keep track of the party and send the rest for reinforcements in the numbers that seem necessary. If reinforcements are sent for and the party goes directly for Ukhlari the Mambunda will catch up with them after they have had about 20 minutes to explore in Ukhlari.

IN UKHLARI

If they avoid being captured by the Mambunda they may have a brief period to explore Ukhlari. They will find a huge, ruined city, clearly the remnants of a great civilization, with large stone buildings, some pretty much intact, standing several stories high, with impressive carved murals and inscriptions. Someone skilled in architecture or engineering might identify the style of the buildings as sharing characteristics of Classical Roman architecture and ancient Near Eastern styles as well. The buildings toward the center of the city, which seem to mostly be temples, are the best preserved. The inscriptions are hard to read, but a good linguist could make them out. They are written in the Egyptian Demotic script, but the language is essentially Latin. Many of the inscriptions are civic in nature, building dedications, etc. Some, on what appear to be temples, are more complex. Someone who knows Demotic Script and Latin can probably read them right off, nonetheless. Time will be short, but temple inscriptions refer to some unusual Roman deities. Represented are Kore (goddess of death), Osarapis (a Roman/Egyptian solar deity), Druj (a Greek/Persian earth god), and Istrae (a Roman/Babylonian love goddess) who has the largest temple, in the very center of the city. The temple of Istrae seems to be in surprisingly good repair. In fact, parts which have degenerated have been repaired, possibly recently.

Some exploration will reveal that the temple of Istrae is inhabited. The smell of rotting meat and bodily waste comes from within. It is logical and correct to assume that it is the dwelling place of the White Ape. If they make a lot of noise, the 'ape' will emerge, or they can go inside and greet him in his lair. It is likely that the Mambunda forces who are following them will catch up before they get into the temple, however.

CAPTURED BY THE MAMBUNDA

If they are captured by the Mambunda they will be taken to their village near the ruined city. They will be beaten with spear-butts if they resist or cause trouble. They will be put in large cages with hardened wood bars and guards. There are three cages which will hold up to 3 people each, and one guard for each cage. If they are particularly violent or resistant they will have their hands and feet tied. A very small person can slip through the bars at night if he is very careful and of SIZ 7 or less. A very strong person might be able to break or detach a bar, if he can roll within is STR on 1D100. This can be tried about once per hour, and may be noticed by the guards. Attempts to escape will earn beatings and possibly death. It should be noted that some of these Mambunda, especially their chief and shaman and their families, are unusually light skinned and have many caucasian features.

The Mambunda will keep them prisoner for at least a day and for no more than three days. They will feed them and allow them to clean themselves from a bucket of water once a day. When the Mambunda are ready to put them to use, they will hold a big afternoon feast, and then take the ones they want off to Ukhlari. Two of the prisoners will be taken per evening, starting at that point. They will be taken into Ukhlari, where men will be offered in sacrifice, by being allowed to fight the White Ape in unarmed combat, one on one. It should be noted that it is standard practice for the Mambunda to feed the sacrifices to the White Ape, in whom they have developed a taste for human flesh. They also feed him drugs derived from various local roots and berries which have made him more pliable, and have allowed the tribal shaman to develope a psychological dominance over him.

If there are any white-skinned women with them, at least one of them will be taken first. Any woman who is taken will be given a drugged liquor to drink. It will make her pliable, and the spirit of Istrae will enter into her body and she will be aken willingly as the mate of the white ape for a month, after which, if she is not pregnant, she will be sacrificed. If she becomes pregnant she will be kept possessed and semi-drugged until she delivers a child, at which point she will be killed. Any child thus born will

receive the spirit of Istrae and become her incarnation.

MAKING IT WORK

To make this adventure work it is necessary for some of the party to be captured, and equally necessary that some escape or evade capture. If the party seems to have people with the ability to escape that should be the option. If not, someone should be able to evade capture by hiding, or by being wounded and feigning death, or by whatever method works best. Someone needs to remain free, either to attempt a rescue, to go for help, or at least observe events and carry the tale back to civilization. If it can be justified it might be possible to win the White Ape over and use his help to escape.

THE WHITE APE

For most of the background characters you can use appropriate standardized statistics. There should be a few Mambunda who are superior fighters and a few who have or know how to use firearms. The White Ape, being rather unusual, requires special treatment.

The White Ape is actually a man. He is, in fact, the lost son of Sir Henry Stamson, though he remembers very little of that, except for the vocabulary and experiences of a 3 year old, filtered through the veil of madness and the passing years.

He does not look truly human, because his hair has grown to exceptional length and is very blond. He is also exceptionally large and strong. If someone calls him Julius it will trigger some of his memory and it may become possible for that person to reason with him, unless it happens in the midst of a sacrificial battle or ceremony where a woman possessed by Istrae is present.

Unless the characters are very lucky, it will be pretty clear fairly fast that they would be wiser to inform Sir Henry Stamson that his son is dead, assuming they can figure out that the White Ape is his son Julius.

No actual statistics are provided here, but it should be fairly easy to set-up the White Ape as a character for **Call of Cthulhu** or for **London by Night/To Challenge Tomorrow**. As a guideline, he should be large, the equivalent of around 7ft tall, and at least 3 times as strong as a normal man. He is not too bright, or at least his native intelligence has not been developed, but he is skilled and experienced at unarmed combat, particularly wrestling and throwing. He isalso highly resistent to damage, stun and pain effects. His relationship as the consort of the goddess Istrae also protects him fairly well from most PSI effects or spells, which should be at least halved. Beyond that, specific attributes should be up to the GameMaster.

One other note. If a member of the party is successfully possessed by Istrae, she will attempt to keep the White Ape with her as her chosen mate. She should have extensive, major PSI or spell powers, especially relating to death-magic and mental manipulation. She should also be able to use basic telekinesis and some elemental powers as well.

THE OTHER PARTY

As was mentioned briefly, Omoke had previously guided a group of Germans to the plateau. At the point when the party comes in search of the White Ape, those Germans, under the leadership of a man named Klaus Heinrich Staden, have set up camp on the northern end of Ukhlari and have made a deal witht the Mambunda, trading two white women who they had as prisoners for permission to explore Ukhlari so long as they did not violate the major temples. They are in the midst of negotiations witht he Mambunda to provide further women for the White Ape and also firearms, and they will not be pleased with the intrusive presence of the English party. Staden is a ruthless man and his group is made up of 15 men of very questionable character and of varied racial backgrounds. It is possible that they might come on the English party first, in which case they would certainly rob and abyse them before turning them over to the Mambunda.

RETURNING TO CIVILIZATION

Those characters who survive all of this may be able to capture the White Ape, and will at least have a story to bring back. They will have to decide how much they will tell Sir Henry Stamson. They might not want to mention little facts like that the sacrifices were generally eaten by the White Ape. If they get him out withdrawal from the drugs with which he has been kept sedate will cause him to become crazed and violent, and he might have to be tied up or they might need to acquire a supply of similar drugs. Once the drugs have worn off his mind will become sharper, but much of his memory of the last 20 years or so will have faded permanently. He will retain a taste for human flesh for a while, and has gotten used to being treated like a god, to being fed and housed and having women brough to him. He will remain morally and socially retarded even after his senses are restored to him. If the characters manage to make him drug free, train him and

educate him a bit during the trip back to England, that effort will make his reunion with Sir Henry much easier. If he ends up dying or being left behind, they would probably do best to fabricate some nice story of his death, since the truth would not be good for a man of Sir Henry's advancing years.

Points awarded on the basis of the Creation Points of the enemies the character has defeated, with no apparent interest in role-playing or character development as an element. A table is provided to show how many EP it takes to earn Characteristic Points. Rules are also provided for weapons, media standing, magical spells, and villain creation. There are also some rambling gamemaster guidelines, a short game world history which could have been expanded considerably to the benefit of the game. An interesting inclusion is a computer program for the Atari 1040ST for generating characters (a real necessity with all those formulae). Appendices of all the charts and tables are also provided.

Mechanically **Enforcers** is a mess. It is exceptionally complex, poorly organized, and screams for examples everywhere. There is no reason to pick **Enforcers** over more playable, more flexible superhero systems like **Champions** or **Challengers**. There are some good ideas here, in the powers and the short look at background, but these brief bright moments are lost in the mass of formulae. **Enforcers** just can't compete. If it had something new to offer or offered a fully developed, intriguing background it might be a useful addition to the superhero gamer's library, but as it is it just can't be recommended.

TALISLANTA SORCERER'S GUIDE
by Stephan M. Sechi
from Bard Games

This is a game aid to go with the **Talislanta** role-playing system, which I swear used to be called Atlantis until fairly recently. It is a very nicely presented book from a small company which has been growing steadily. The type is small but clear, with good art and very nice graphics. The cover is particularly nicely done. This book has 102 full-size pages.

This book is the part of the greater **Talislanta** system which deals with the various aspects of magic, though it doesn't actually present the basic magic mechanics, which must be in one of the other books in the series. The concentration here is on background and the environment of magical training and practice.

The **Sorcerer's Guide** begins with aqa look at the Lyceum Arcanum, a training school for mages, including courses, degrees, instructors and a map of the school buildings. It also includes some compact adventure ideas centered around the Lyceum. The second section gives historical and biographical background on great sorcerers of past ages, with a good selection of well detailed characters. This is followed by a listing of rare and ancient spells, presumably to supplement a basic spell list found in The Talislanta Handbook, which I believe contains all the magical mechanics not found here. Many of these are interesting, though some might be employed only rarely. No statistics or mechanixs are included for the spells. The next section looks at ancient magical tomes, with lots of interesting works included, this time with mechanical statistics which mean very little if you aren't familiar with the system. I'm not sure why books have levels and experience point values, for example. The section on enchanted items is a little less useful and approachable. It lists a number of items, with no descriptions except references to spells which are described in some other book. There are also descriptions of some unique items which would be more useful to those not familiar with Talislanta. Interesting sections follow on magical properties of herbs and other substances, magical research, magical skills and sorcerous hybridization. A look at the structure of the Talislantan omniverse is followed by good sections on elementals, dream and nightmare creatures and supernatural entities from several other dimension. All are illustrated and fully described, and their statistics are included in a separate section. The next section covers new races and character classes which are called 'Personae'. Some of these look very interesting, and sample non-player characters of these types are included. To finish things out, there are a few more short scenario ideas and a rather florid short story clearly designed to provide atmosphere.

The **Sorcerer's Guide** is a very well put together aid. The background information is interesting, the ideas are often original and the presentation is pretty good. From the few stats and mechanics which are provided it is clear that the rule system as a whole is a pretty simple **Dungeons & Dragons** derivative, close enough that I'm surprised TSR let them get away with it. However, the mechanics are not emphasized in this book, and while I wouldn't recommend the basic rules as found in **The Talislantian Handbook**, I think that many gamemasters would find the **Sorcerer's Handbook** quite useful.

TOP SECRET/S.I.
by Douglas Niles
from TSR Incorporated

This is the new version of TSR's popular espionage game **Top Secret**. This new edition is supposed to have been completely rewritten and redesigned so that it is a playable game, capable of surviving on its own merits, not just selling to munchkins on the TSR name and logo alone. The hefty boxed set includes four rule books and a variety of knicknacks.

Let's get the knicknacks out of the way first. There are two promotional flyers, one for **DRAGON** magazine and one for a newsletter for **Top Secret/S.I.** players. There are some dice. Real dice, not TSR's old gumbydice. There are blueprint-style maps of several settings for adventures, including hotels, restaurants, etc. There are cut-out counters of people and vehicle done to the same scale as the maps. There is the inevitable referee's screen, flashily done, with several charts for the modifiers in the combat and vehicle movement systems. Finally there is a pulp novel called **The Serpentine Assassin**, which appears to be the second book in the **Agent 13** series. It seems sort of strange that they are giving away a 1930s era novel with a modern-period espionage game. Evidently TSR can't sell enough of these mindless things so they have to give them away to make the game box heavier. All in all, these items are well produced, and while some, like the adventure book, may not be totally necessary, they give the feeling that you got your money's worth.

The game itself consists of three books, the **Players Guide** and **Administrators Guide** cover the mechanics and play of the game. The **Equipment Inventory** is a catalog of weapons and items with record sheets as well. The **Settings and Scenarios** booklet describes the maps included in the game, includes some record sheets for the referee, outlines NPC creation and includes a short adventure scenario. The record sheets are largely unnecessary, but they do take up space, and the **Settings and Scenarios** book could be of use to a novice gamemaster. The **Equipment Inventory** has nice illustrations, but could have more weapons, more variety of items, and fewer copies of identical character sheets which people are just going to xerox anyway.

The **Players Guide** covers the mechanics of the system. It is clear from the start that this is a game for beginners, when they take three pages explaining what a role-playing game is and how to roll dice. What I found most interesting in this beginning section is that they suggest just choosing someone to be the 'Administrator' or referee and then having him run the introductory scenario. It is painfully clear that they don't want people creating their own campaigns and would prefer inexperienced players to buy lots of TSR modules instead of using their imaginations. Characters have five typical basic stats. Most of the mechanics are based directly on the attributes without any secondary stats, a good idea in an introductory system. Attribute rolls are explained, as well as a critical and fumble system referred to as 'bad and lucky breaks'. Mixed in with he rules are special sections called 'Reality Rules', ideas to make the game more realistic. These are highlighted in red. Some of the ones included in the character creation section are interesting, including the special rules on age, and some of the suggestions for giving characters personality by the old cruch of quirks, which they call 'tags'. There is a balanced system of advantages and disadvantages which is well done, if not very flexible. There are several suggested careers (reed character classes) with suggested skill distributions. Skills are levelled, but your career choice can set limits of how much you can spend in certain areas. There is a good selection of well described skills and costs change as you get better with the skill, so that advancement is a curve rather than a flat line. Attributes count in and each skill level adds to a percentage roll against an appropriate attribute. A fair amount of space is given to the movement, endurance and encumbrance system, but then we get to combat. Combat is simple. You roll against the appropriate skill and then check for a nine-point hit location. Skill increases your chance of hitting the area you want, and damage does different things by type. The defensive system is a little awkward, and would work better if there were actual defensive skills. There are rules provided for special combat options and situations and modifications for prevailing conditions. A fairly simple vehicle movement and combat system is provided, plus rules for Luck Points, essentially identical to Hero Points from **James Bond 007**, and finally Fame and Fortune Points which are essentially experience to be spent on skills. On the whole, these basic mechanics are pretty good. They are simple, intelligent and not junked up unnecessarily. The author has clearly read some contemporary games and used some of their ideas wisely. This is the first

truly playable game I've seen from TSR and as such is a great step forward for them.

The **Administrators Guide** expands on those areas of the system which the referee needs to be aware of. It is aimed at the beginner and tells him how to run a campaign, and includes some good suggestions on preparation and design of adventures. Most of the ideas covered are common sense and would be old hat to the experienced gamemaster, but for the beginner they form a pretty good guideline. Also provided is some background on secret organizations and the campaign world in which the game system and its supporting modules are set. On the whole, this is a potentially useful book for beginning gamemasters, but not essential for those experienced with other systems.

Top Secret/S.I. is unquestionably the best role-playing game TSR has published to date. While it may not be entirely state of the art in mechanics and design, it is nicely produced and intelligently designed as a playable, realistic system which a beginner can handle. The mechanics are good, the presentation is good, and while there are a few flaws and areas which could be strengthened, it is certainly the best introductory espionage system on the market. This is a TSR game worth buying. Experienced players may be happier with **Esplonage** or **To Challenge Tomorrow**, but if you know a beginner who likes spy adventure, recommend **Top Secret/S.I.**.

LIVING STEEL
by Barry Nakazono et al
from Leading Edge Games

Like earlier games from Leading Edge, Living Steel is very nicely produced, with excellent graphics, smashing art and a great visual feel. Like their earlier games, it is also a frighteningly militaristic game, with a heavy emphasis on complex combat mechanics and shooting everything in sight as thoroughly as possible. There are three books in the Living Steel box, the basic mechanics, a Weapon Data Supplement and a book of Data Tables. The fact that you need a separate 24 page book to list and describe weapons and another 24 page book primarily for combat tables tells you what this game is all about. The detail is great, but you have to have a strong stomach and a lot of patience to play Living Steel.

The mechanics of Living Steel are found in a single book of over 100 pages. This spiral-bound volume includes all the character creation, combat and playing systems. The basic system is similar to the rules found in Leading Edge's earlier system **Phoenix Command**. There is a brief section of background and a sort of scene-setting vignette, which leads into character creation. The setting is very structured, and characters are expected to be part of combat teams, though other options are possible, if not emphasized. There are five primary characteristics, six secondary characteristics, and six tertiary characteristics. Characteristics are on a 3-18 range. Clearly they were once rolled on 3D6, but to keep the system up to date you now assign stats from a fund of 6D6+48, still rather random, with a complex system for adjusting real characteristic values relative to points spent for more than normal stats. The secondary characteristics are still rolled on 3D6 and the tertiary characteristics are calculated from the other stats. There are a few too many stats on the whole, a lot of randomness, but there is a small element of selection which is partially redeeming.

There is a system for rolling background and this dictates what skills the character hasand how good he is with them, a rigid system, reminiscent of **Traveller** and essentially destructive to role-playing. Skill level advancement is limited to 15 levels and skills are grouped within related classifications. Advancement is based on time spent training and if a learning roll can be made the character advances with that skill. The only areas in which there is much choice or flexibility in the skill system is in the area of professional skills, where players get to distribute points between a selection of professional skills of his choosing, and in the experience system where further freely allocated Learning Points are acquired. Skills are used with the Action/Reaction table and various special modifiers which determine chance of success. The flexibility of the system and the amount which skills and stats come into play is limited severely by the fact that Success Rolls are made on 3D6, which means that there is very little difference between 10 and 15 Skill Levels or a characteristic of 10 and one of 15. The rigid Success Roll system and the very small selection of skills really hold the skill system back, and all this mechanical complexity seems wasted when virtually no skills not related to combat or covert or military operations are included. The weaknesses of the skill system

9

make it inevitable that characters in **Living Steel** will be the most two-dimensional I've seen in a game system published within the last few years, although a good player could rise above these constraints.

There is a lengthy section on equipment, which in **Living Steel** means combat hardware, though there is an entire book which covers all of this in greater detail also included in the book. A section on role-playing in the Rhand world background explains why this is such a combat-oriented game. Rhand is certainly a violent world with a dehumanizing society. There is also a section on setting up a campaign, with some good ideas and lots of information on how to mount military missions. Further background is provided for play in the post-invasion period, a more chaotic alternative setting. The background section concludes with a timeline and broader imperial history. The book ends with the combat system, strangely placed after the background material, rather than right after the character creation section where one might expect it. There isn't room here to break down combat. It is explained quickly and efficiently in the rules, and it becomes very clea that while combat gives the appearance of realism, it is virtually unplayable in its complexity. The authors attempted to make a truly simultaneous combat system which fits a lot into a small time-frame. This means an Action Count (Action Point) system. Combining this with a 'to hit' system based on all manner of modifiers instead of some simple, basic charts makes the combat rather hard to pick up, and until players are very experienced they will find it to be extremely slow. There is a location system. Where an attack hits depends on situation far more than it does on aim, and is really pretty much random. Different degrees of damage have different effects, though this element is kept pretty simple, the most significant division being between fatal and disabling damage. To get an idea of how complex combat can be, in the example they give the attacker adds 5 modifiers, consults 5 tables and rolls a miss. If he had hit two more rolls and three more calculations would have been required. Things get more complex with all of the special rules included for more unusual weapon types. This is not simple. It might be realistic if you can divorce yourself from realtime. For me it just isn't playable. You can achieve just as much believability in most other systems with two tables and two or three rolls.

A lot of the sections in this basic book refer to tables found elsewhere, and most of the other volumes included in the boxed set exist to present these tables and charts. The 24 page book of 'Data Tables' has all the tables omitted from the basic rules to make them look a little more digestable. The 'High Tech Weapon Data Supplement' gives all the essential stats and detail on the weapons appropriate to the high tech setting. The detail is excellent, and is the sort of thing which will make Living Steel attractive to its target audience. It is sort of convenient to have to refer to a separate book for all these things when going through the rules, but once you have the basics down you can throw away the rule book and concentrate on the charts and tables, which will take much, much longer to commit to memory.

Living Steel could be offensive to some players, but I got over my initial squeemishness while studying it. The background and setting is grim and oppressive, but it is well detailed and interesting for what it is, and the excellent art and descriptions bring the background out skillfully. A game of high-tech armored warriors in a violent and chaotic future definitely has an audience, and I hear that it is selling well. The kind of people who will be attracted by the topic are probably the same sorts who think complexity is the true route to realism, so they will be pleased with **Living Steel**. For those gamers who prefer imagination, **Living Steel** is just too complex and too restrictive. The role-playing elements are very weak and the mechanics will prove to be an undesirable burden for most players. There are those who will positively love **Living Steel** and will be offended by this review, but I think that most mature gamers can find better value elsewhere.

ZOMBIETOWN USA
by Barry Link
### from Steve Jackson Games

This is a very strange adventure for use with **GURPS**. It is intended to be used with the Horror or Autoduel backgrounds, and there is a fair bit of **Illuminati** style conspiracy thrown in. The 68 page book includes all the background on Black Lake, a quiet little resort which we will come to know as 'Zombietown USA'. The setting and scenarios combine elements of all sorts of things, from **Night of the Living Dead** to **The Wild Bunch** for a fun, exciting and somewhat chaotic adventure.

Most of the book consists of description of the strange people and scenes in the town f Black Lake, a resort apparently populated with all of the lunatic fringe of America, either today or in the near future.

There is a fundamentalist church, a zen temple, a health food restaurant, and all the standard small town shops. The background is good, a lot of the local characters are interesting, the sorts of people players might like to have as PCs. On the whole, a nice backdrop for adventure.

With the background out of the way, special information and detail for play with **Autoduel** is included. This section is very brief, and not particularly interesting. Essentially a scenario in which crazed Autoduellists besiege and harass the town and have to be dealt with. Pretty predictable. Much more attention is given to setting up the Horror possibilities of the general background, about 5 times as much space, in fact. This part reads like a real adventure, with a villainous mad scientist and various curious sub-plots and suspicious side characters. To some degree it is left open ended, with the resolution of where the Zombies come from and why left up to the GM, though many possibilities are explored. Of course, the great potential of the adventure is in the combination of the two genres. Both the Horror and Autoduel scenarios are pretty trite, but their flaws vanish in the potential of a town taken over by Autoduellists on the verge of the emergence of the Zombie menace. The three way tension between Autoduelists, Citizens and Zombies offers a lot of adventure potential for a fairly extended campaign.

On the whole **Zombietown USA** shows that you can make a good adventure with a silly topic if you set a goal of making the very unlikely believable and flesh out the setting well. I'd recommend this adventure to **GURPS** players and to others as well, since it is not enormously dependent on mechanics and could easily be adapted to other game systems.
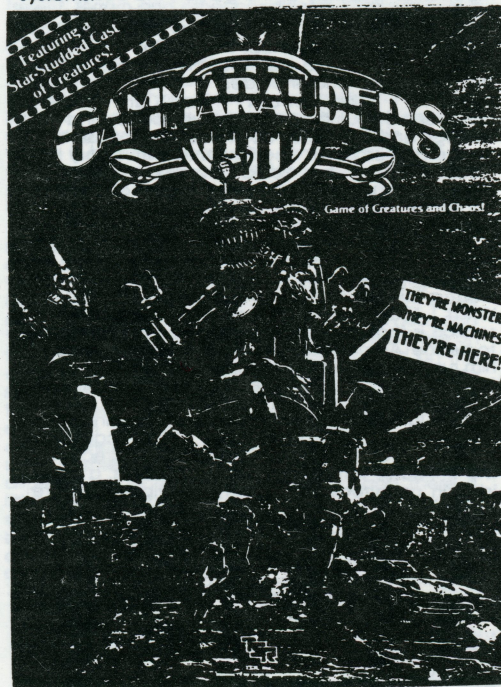
GAMMARAUDERS
by Allen Varney
from TSR

Gammarauders is TSR's attempt to make a Games Workshop style game, but I'm afraid that this immitation comes far short of the originality or production quality of any of the models. The box contains a 12 page rule book, a 20 page world book, 12 terrain hexes, 6 character record sheets with a different character on each side, a sheet of standard size counters, 12 illustrated character counters with stands, and a deck of cards. The box contains an awful lot of stuff with which surprisingly little is achieved.

The rules are simple. Each player plays a 'Bioborg', a strange creature part giant animal and part machine, including all your favorites, like cyborg rats, penguins and kangaroos. The goal is to destroy enemy fortresses and keep yours intact. Players do this with the weapons installed in their Bioborg and also with support forces gained from the deck of cards. There are several types of ground support units, including Soldiers, Hovertanks and Gammajets. Each has its own abilities. Each of the Bioborgs also has different weapons and powers which it uses up, but can get restored or rearranged at its fortress. Combat is simple, with modifiers for the weapons and defenses used added to a simple roll of 1 or 2 die depending on circumstances. Play goes fairly

quickly and there are a nice variety of cards and weapons. A few of the cards are somewhat overpowered and arbitrary in there effects, but **Gammarauders** is basically a playable game.

The problem with **Gammarauders** is that it is attempting to compete with some very good games in this growing genre of silly, fun games. What makes games like **Judge Dredd, Rogue Warrior and Blood Bowl** work so well is the quality if the production and the originality of the setting and concept, and more than anything else, twisted humor and great art. **Gammarauders** can't compete in either of these areas. The art is poor, the map graphics are dull and unattractive, and the background material is derivative and dull. The author is widely known for a strange and possibly absent sense of humor, and when humor is attempted it falls flat, and there are just too many ripped off elements from other, better games, like **Judge Dredd, Swords and Sorcery, Cosmic Encounters and Car Wars. Gammarauders** isn't a bad game. The design is basically sound. Unfortunately, this is the sort of game which needs more than reliable design to work, and Gammarauders doesn't have the 'bells and whistles' we've come to expect in this sort of game.

THE GURPS BESTIARY
by Steffan O'Sullivan
from Steve Jackson Games

This is essentially a generic supplement for Steve Jackson's **GURPS**. A bestiary of some sort is a necessary element of any complete game system, and with over 200 creatures described, this one does a fairly good job. All told it is 112 pages, with a nice color and lots of appropriate interior illustrations. Not every creature comes with a picture, but an effort has been made to make sure that the less familiar ones are illustrated.

The **GURPS Bestiary** features descriptions of a very large selection of natural, fictional and mythological creatures, drawn from standard sources and also from the world backgrounds which are licensed to Steve Jackson Games. All of the descriptions are well detailed and complete, with stats, text and sometimes interesting background notes. There are a few flaws in the contents. Some of the mythological creatures are described somewhat incorrectly, and there are a number of omissions. The most striking omissions are in the section of Otherworldly Creatures, which is extremely short, and includes no elementals, daevas, djinni or demons, making it rather weak for many fantasy backgrounds. I suppose the authors felt that this lack was made up for by the many minor elemental type creatures which are included drawn from the mythologies of the native societies of Africa and the Americas. Creatures are grouped together based on their natural habitat, and some habitats and creatures have special descriptive sections on their characteristics. One problem with this format is that many creatures live in more than one environment, and so have to be listed in each section which applies, with a reference to the section which holds their primary description. This wastes a lot of space, but I suppose it makes the **Bestiary** a bit more convenient. It seems like every **GURPS** supplement has to have a section of additional rules, and in the section on game mastering animals there are some combat modifications, a hit location system, some added movement rules, etc. There are also sections on 'Hunting and Trapping', 'Animal Companions' and Creating Animals'. The first two of these are useful, but the third is too sketchy to really be of much help. The book closes out with an abbreviated alphabetical list of all the creatures, with their basic stats and a page reference, an essential inclusion.

On the whole, the **GURPS Bestiary** is an essential ingredient of the system as a whole, something that GameMasters can live without, but will certainly find plenty of use for. While there are minor errors and omissions here and there this **Bestiary** is not bad, especially in its presentation of natural creatures and obscure mythological beasts. The **GURPS Bestiary** isn't complete, but material in the various supplements fills in many of the gaps and another bestiary is always a possibility.

JUST AWARDS

Jon Schuller

Gaming is an industry and game design is an art or at least a craft. It is fitting that Gaming should have awards to recognize good game design and outstanding publications. In the past there have been a number of awards sponsored by organizations and companies, and none of them have been totally satisfactory to the gaming public or to elements of the gaming industry which have special interests or agendas. The organizations which run the various awards have made efforts to change and improve, but these have not always been steps forward. As things stand today, every award seems to fit the specifications of what the sponsor thinks makes a good award, and none of the awards really achieve a complete, fair or impartial recognition of excellence in gaming.

The best known gaming awards are certainly the 'Charles Roberts Awards' or the 'Origins Awards'. These awards are given by the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Designs and currently cover 20 categories with an equal balancing between Role-Playing, Boardgames and Miniatures, plus a couple of awards for Computer Games, Magazines and Play-by-Mail. Up until this year nomination for these awards was done by public balloting through forms printed in most gaming magazines, and a very large number of gamers put in their suggestions for the three best products in each category for the past year. The 500+ members of the AAGAD would then vote between the top five or so items in each category to determine the final winner. This system was open to some degree of ballot stuffing, though this was limited by the huge number of votes involved, and there was some fear that the general gaming public did not know enough about the products or the categories involved. This year the Executive Committee of the AAGAD has made some changes to put an end to these perceived abuses.

Vying with the Origins Awards as the oldest awards are the Strategist Club Awards which are administered by DRAGON magazine for TSR. In a recent shift of image, these awards have now been cynically retitled as The Gamers Choice Awards. These awards have only half a dozen categories, and they are voted by open ballot of the readers of DRAGON, with the results determined entirely from that vote. The Gamers Choice Awards are almost always given out to TSR products because of the specific audience which does the voting, and aren't really much more than a customer survey for TSR, though other companies and other products have won from time to time, proving that even DRAGON readers have varied tastes and occassionally look beyond horizon formed by the mountains of TSR games.

Another set of awards which arose out of the problems with these two older awards is the Game Designers Guild Awards. These are given out specifically to the designers of the best games of the past year, as voted by the members of the Game Designers Guild, a loose-knit organization of Game Designers which exists to promote the interests of designers as a group and provides the awards as a way of recognizing excellence in game design. The numbers voting on the GDG Awards are very limited, but they almost always manage to pick out some of the best games in the categories which they honor, though popular participation is not, and is not intended to be, an element in the GDG Awards.

The latest entry into the awards competition is the SIGMA Awards, set up last year by the Society of Independent Game Manufacturers as an alternative to the ORIGINS Awards. These awards cover 8 major categories, a pared down version of those addressed by the ORIGINS Awards, and voting is handled through public balloting with ballots published in magazines, with final balloting done by SIGMA members plus all those who voted on the original nominating ballot. SIGMA is an organization for small game companies, and the SIGMA Awards were created to address a supposed need for awards which were not dominated by larger companies and block

voting. With the SIGMA Awards the hope was to provide a broad-based award which was not dominated by any special interests.

Unless the SIGMA Awards become better known, the ORIGINS Awards are and will remain the best known, most publicized awards in gaming. The Game Designers Guild Awards and the Strategist Club Awards appeal to a limited audience, and the ORIGINS Awards are the oldest and most accepted awards. Unfortunately, the ORIGINS Awards have traditionally been beset by mismanagement, conflict and controversy, and it is largely because of this that the other three awards were originally established.

The ORIGINS Awards have long been the only major awards not sponsored or controlled by a particular company, being under the direction of an industry organization instead. Despite the problems that the ORIGINS Awards have had, they have traditionally deserved the recognition which they have been given, because they covered more of the industry than any other award and represented the widest voting base, and generally rewarded deserving products. I wouldn't be writing this article if that were still the case or if problems with the ORIGINS Awards had not overcome the various benefits which these widely-recognized awards offer. The committee which manages the ORIGINS Awards has always had a genuine desire to improve the awards and the awards process. This has been demonstrated in their efforts to update the categories and topics covered to reflect the major trends in contemporary gaming, though special interests have kept in a surprisingly large number of miniatures awards. As with anything run by committee, progress in updating the awards is slow, and sometimes mistakes are made with the best of intentions. A committee is a beast with many heads and no brain, and the latest well-intentioned change in the awards process may ring the death knell for the ORIGINS Awards.

Traditionally the ORIGINS Awards have been awarded by allowing anyone who can get hold of a ballot from one of the many magazines it appeared in to vote for three products in each category. From that vote a list of the top five or so products in each category would be put together and this would then be voted on by the 500 some members of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Design, a group fairly representative of the most knowledgable elements in gaming, though it is fairly heavily dominated by the employees of large companies whose memberships are sponsored by their company. This final vote would determine the winner in each category. Having the initial ballot open to the public meant that sometimes strange selections were made and a certain amount of skew was created depending on the magazines which chose to run the ballot. Of course, since most magazines represent the interest of a particular company, it was to their benefit to run the ballot, but since the ballot often came out way past publications deadlines many magazines were often unable to get it into print. This version of the awards process also made a certain amount of block voting possible if a game club or company employees decided to work together to get a particular game nominated, though one can argue that no one would be inspired to that sort of organizational effort unless the game nominated was deserving. Block voting was usually only the bane of certain categories, particularly the 'Best Gaming Fanzine' and various miniatures awards, where fewer legitimate votes were received so the block votes had more impact. The one benefit of block voting was that it sometimes brought attention to products which were not familiar to the gaming elite in the AAGAD, but which had strong, vocal support among pockets of active gamers, games which inspired loyalty by their quality, but had not yet achieved widespread distribution or recognition. The open nominating process made it possible for popular and well designed games from small companies to have a chance at being nominated, even if they might not win. This helped add to the appeal of the awards and was a great benefit in helping good games get some recognition they might otherwise have missed. After all, awards are supposed to recognize quality and not the size of

the company publishing the game.

Unfortunately, in their effort to improve the awards, the AAGAD finally acted on a rather dangerous proposal which had been kicking around in their discussions for several years. It seems that academy members who represented some of the larger companies felt they had been cheated out of awards by surprise surges of popular support for virtually unknown games. In order to place more control over the nominating process they influenced the academy to reverse its traditional awards process so that starting this year the ORIGINS Awards are nominated by the members of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Design and the final vote on their nominations is made by the public. This preserves the semblance of popular involvement in the awards, but it effectively restricts the public participation to voting on those games which the academy elite feel are worthy of the publics attention. It lets the members of the academy, mostly game company employees and game designers, determine what the public is allowed to like, leaving the public to choose between the various products the largest game companies campaigned for as their potential winners. Just looking at the system as it was reformed, it is clear that the result would be a more elite, more controlled award, that there would be almost no chance of an upset victory, and that unless there was some sort of write-in campaign, the winners would basically be limited to games from the top three or four publishers, regardless of quality.

To make matters worse, this year, the first under this new policy, there was considerable mismanagement of the initial balloting of the AAGAD, and a number of academy members, mostly game designers or employees of small or mid-sized never got their initial ballot, and though some realized that they were missing out and contacted the award management, others reacted too slowly and were essentially disenfranchized. The results of the new system and this ballotting problem are clear in the nominees for this years awards. Setting aside the miniatures awards and the magazine awards for the moment, some very interesting figures present themselves. Out of 46 nominations, 15 went to TSR, the largest company in gaming. 9 went to West End Games, also one of the top companies, 5 went to Game Designers Workshop, and 4 each were won by Avalon Hill/Victory Games and Chaosium. Milton Bradley garnered 2 nominations, so that leaves 11 out of 46 nominations for companies which are not in the top 5 in gaming. Not surprisingly, medium sized companies took these nominations, with Steve Jackson Games the only one to get 2 nominations. The smallest company to get a role-playing or boardgame nomination was R. Talsorian Games, and while it is not a huge company, I can think of half-a-dozen game releases from smaller companies which were as deserving as **Teenagers from Outer Space.**

What is particularly striking when looking at these nominations is that products from certain companies, like TSR and West End Games, seem to have been nominated with no regard to merit or quality of design. If these awards are supposed to recognize the best in gaming, what is the second edition of **Paranoia** doing with a nomination? The first edition had its chance. **Star Wars** has several nominations, and while it may deserve an award for its graphics, it is far from state of the art game design. TSR's **Forgotten Realms** and **Gazetteer Series** are nominated, based, presumably on the number of employees TSR has, not on the quality of the products, since both are widely regarded as nothing but further attempts to drain cash from the wallets of TSR junkies. In the board games, Chaosium's attractive, but unplayable **Arkham Horror** has a nomination, as does TSR's largely unknown and undistributed disaster, **Gammarauders.** This is not to say that good products did not get nominations. Milton Bradley's **Shogun** was nominated for two awards, and genuinely deserves to win 'Best Graphic Presentation of a Boardgame'. Games Workshop's **Blood Royale** deserves its nomination as the boardgame with which Games Workshop really came of age. Chaosium's **Tournament of Dreams** is a unique and

creative adventure. Avalon Hill's **Brittania** is the first decent boardgame they've produced in years and deserves an award just for that. It is true. The large companies still produce some good games. However, they are not the only people producing good games, and it seems wrong that second string products from TSR should get nominations when truly first rate games from other, smaller companies are passed over. Market-oriented products like Star Wars and Forgotten Realms should be nominated for the awards for 'Graphics Presentation', but games with original and creative designs should not be excluded from nomination in favor of these vapid beauties.

The ORIGINS Awards are in trouble. They have to decide whether the awards represent quality of game design or the number of company employees you have who can sign their name to a nominating ballot. Let's be honest. The new awards system makes it much less likely that a game from Ragnarok will get a nomination again, although we've gotten an even dozen in the last 7 years. This is bad for us, but it is symptomatic of the new nature of the awards. No small company will get a nomination unless it somehow becomes successful commercially before it is successful creatively. Commercial success usually follows creative success, and one way that this should happen is through good games being recognized, regardless of the size and influence of the company publishing them. A game is not automatically a good game because the publisher pulls in over a million dollars a year, or

because it is fancily produced, or has a big advertising budget. The fact that people buy and know about a game doesn't make it a good game either. By the same reasoning, virtually unknown games from small companies are not necessarily bad. The creative atmosphere in small companies is often a breeding ground for brilliance, but that creativity is likely not to be recognized until sales match quality or the company has vanished.

Admittedly, designing a good game should be reward enough, but everyone wants and deserves recognition. Everyone tends to automatically discount awards as meaningless, but they don't have to be. If we want gaming awards which represent all aspects of gaming fairly and give recognition where it is truly deserved, we have only a couple of choices. We can either try to reform and improve the most significant major awards, the ORIGINS Awards, or we can turn to an alternative award and try to make it as well known as they are.

Vote in the SIGMA Awards and promote your favorite games. Vote in the ORIGINS Awards, and we urge you, where a game you like is not nominated, **write it in!** You don't have to abide by the slate of losers the game industry has given you. Vote for the ones you see and like, add the the products that really deserve to have been nominated, and even if the write-ins don't win, if there are enough of them you might send a significant message of protest to the industry and the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Design.
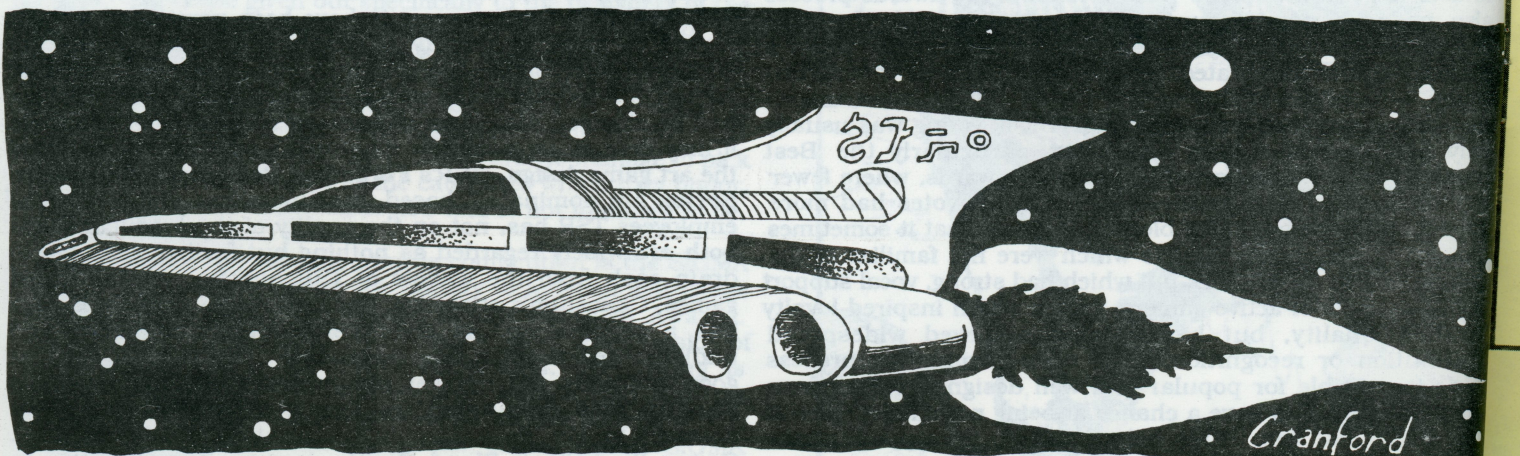
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movie even the best game designer is going to be at a loss to come up with a good game unless he takes enormous liberties, and even then his work will be cut out for him. The licensed games which have truly succeeded are those with topics which are not only popular, but also highly sophisticated, those books or movies which surpass their genres to achieve both excellence and success, such as **Star Trek** and the works of H. P. Lovecraft. Ironically, it seems that the authors of good books and the producers of good movies are aware of the flaws of licensing, and generally make it very difficult for their work to be subject to this sort of debasement.

Another problem emerges with the fact that licensed games get the best distribution. Because of their tie-ins, these are the games that hit the mass market, in B. Dalton or Walden Books. Gamers who encounter these games first may be more likely to be drawn in and actually buy one, but after they find the experience to be hollow and unrewarding, these games may have the effect of souring potential gamers permanently because they will assume that the flaws of a ill-concieved licensed game are characteristic of role-playing in general, not

of that game in specific. This is similar to the problems created by the flaws in **AD&D** and its popularity which often makes it the first and last game new players attempt.

Licensed games are born of marketing, and marketing weasels are characteristically a very short sighted breed. They create licensed games with an eye on the quick profits which are dangled in front of their faces, and fail to see the long-term damage which they do to the industry as a whole and to their own reputation. When a company like Palladium or West End Games gets a reputation for knocking off trashy games for a quick buck, it may never recover. The impulse buy market may remain theirs, but they will lose the interest and support of the fairly large body of serious gamers. This is not to say that licensed games are the great bane of the industry. Some licenses deserve to be made, if they are produced with a care which does justice to the topic. In many ways, licensing is like a succubus, with deadly attributes clothed in seductive flesh. Unfortunately, a lot of the damage which these companies bring on themselves ends up being shared by gamers and more judicious companies as well. Buy your games wisely, buy them on their merit, not their packaging, and you will do yourself and the gaming community as a whole a big favor.
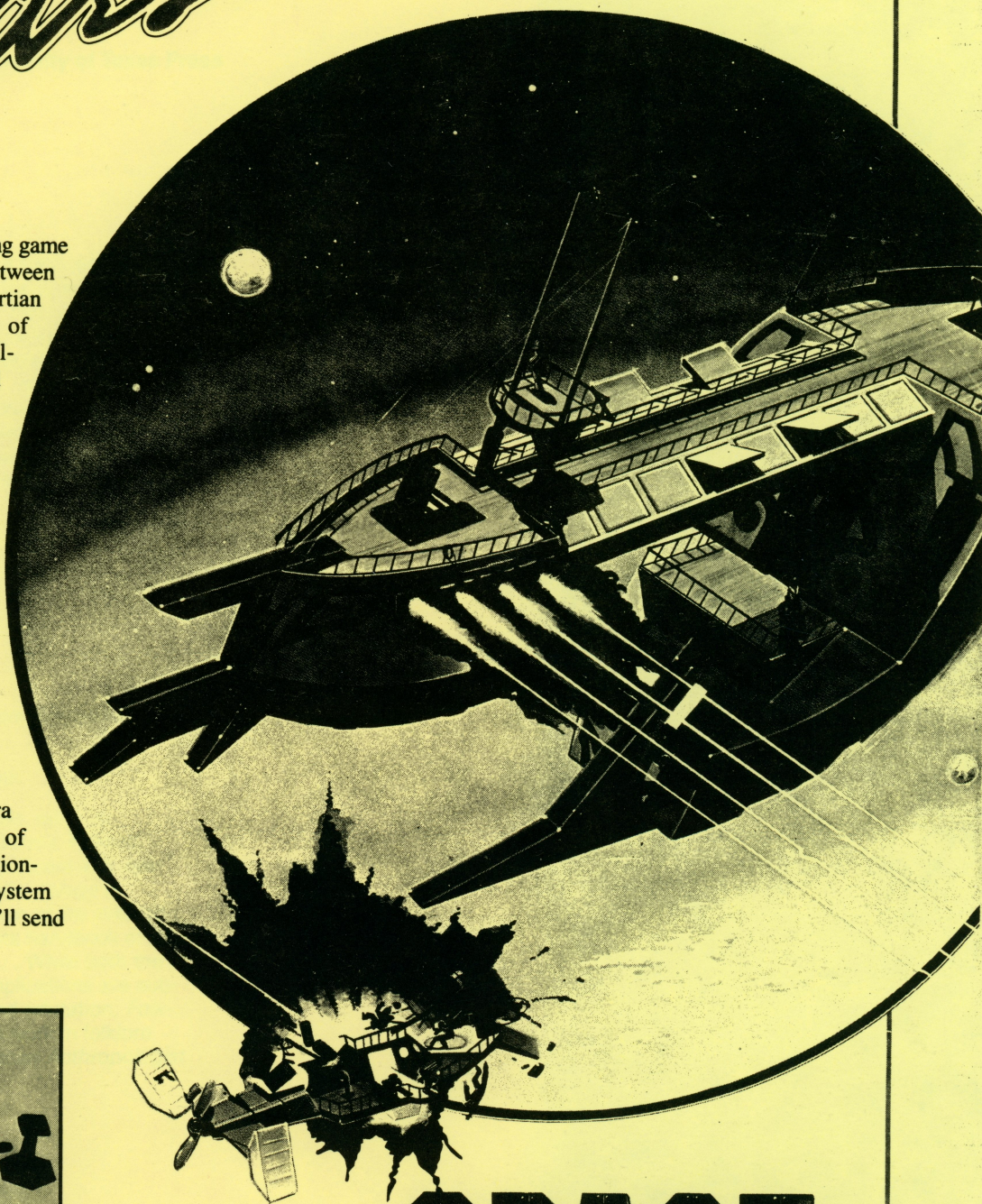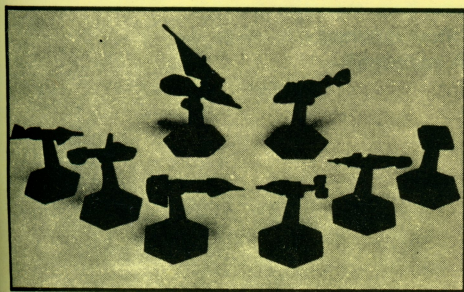

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15