#45

Abyss
Magazine

$1.50

ABYSS
Magazine

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.

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Conjurings
from the Abyss

Hey, don't blame me. I tried and tried and tried to make this issue come in late. I struggled and delayed and assigned reviews to people I didn't even know, but I couldn't do it. Despite my best efforts, this issue is more or less on time. I suppose that after all this time lightning hat to strike at least once. So sue me!

And while we're at it, don't be surprised to see another issue somewhere close to on schedule. And, if we continue to get more advertisers, the page count will keep growing. We're up by four pages this issue and should grow at least four more next issue, so after a long dry period it looks like *Abyss* may be back on track (at least as much as it ever was). I credit much of this to our new MacIntosh computer and laserprinter, which give this editor the kind of instant gratification which he needs to keep his nose to the grindstone.

As far as what you should keep an eye out for this issue, don't miss the lead-off article, all the news that's fit to print on the shamefull assault on Steve Jackson Games by the real evil empire of our federal bureaucracy. Everything else is of the usual high quality, but note the return of adventures with a new cyberpunk adventure called 'Against the Evil Brains'. This issue is a little heavy on news and reviews, but don't miss Jon Schuller's short story which has wafted in on warm breezes from the orient.

Next issue we'll try to make up for all the hard factual material in the current issue by bringing you more topical articles, another adventure and some special features. Look for #46 around the middle of July.

By the way, mention *Abyss* to store owners in your local area and mention them to us. If you write us about a store in your area which you think should carry *Abyss* and they pick us up on a regular basis we'll add three issues to your subscription as a reward (ok, a pretty small one, but what do you want?).
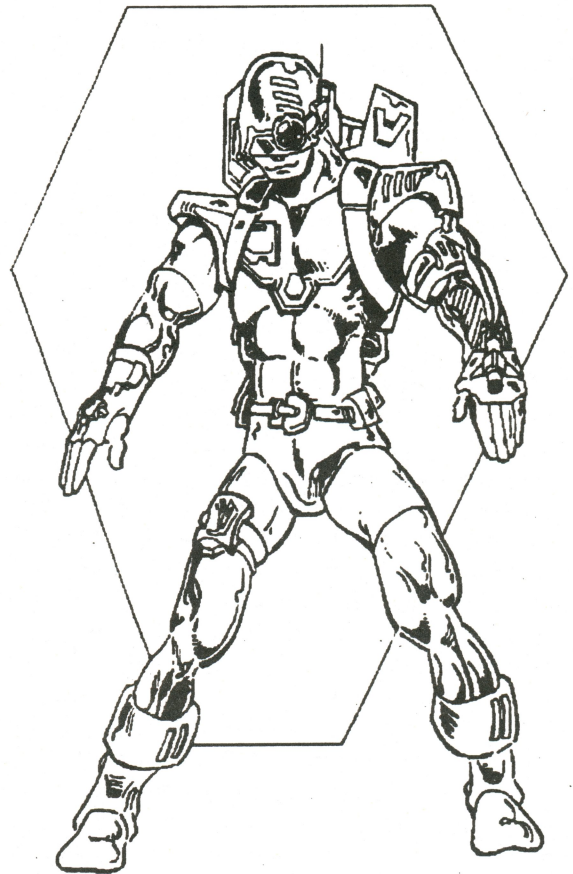
Until next issue...

DAVE NALLE

Take this as a Warning...

A role-playing game company expects to encounter some flack, be it from Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons, The National Coalition on Television Violence, a local minister or just outraged parents. In a free society where a publisher can produce any game which it wants the public and special interest groups have a right to protest that game and express their opinions about it. Our government was formed to protect these rights and they are what make creativity and innovation possible.

What a game company usually doesn't expect is for the government which exists to protect their rights to become the instigator of persecution which violates the spirit and letter of the constitution and the right of the company and its employees to free expression. Laws against sedition and attempts to restrict the free press died in the Jefferson administration, almost two hundred years ago, but apparently in some of the more Byzantine minds in Washington the repressive mentality against which our forefathers fought still clings to life.

Only a few weeks ago employees of Steve Jackson Games arrived at their offices here in Austin to find their door barred by gun-toting Secret Service agents while their confederates were going through the office, seemingly causing random destruction in search of evidence regarding suspected computer crimes only tenuously associated with anyone at Steve Jackson Games. At about the same time the homes of a SJG worker and an associate were being visited by Secret Service agents and the story is that one surprised sleeper awoke with his apartment already ransacked and a gun held to his head.

In the course of all this computer equipment, software and documentation was seized from homes and from SJG's offices, including the equipment on which they run their computer bulletin board, two laser printers, a bag of nuts and bolts, miscellaneous disassembled computer parts, a dumb terminal and all of the documents relating to their new **GURPS Cyberpunk** game. The agents also ate some candy off the desk of one SJG employee. According to Steve Jackson the warrant authorized the seizure of "computer hardware and software, and records relating to computer hardware and software." In pursuit of these things boxes were torn open, file cabinets damaged, locks broken and a variety of bewildered innocents were harassed in the course of this storm-trooper visit. As Steve Jackson said, "They cut or broke their way in to filing cabinets and boxes...we would have been happy to unlock things if they'd have let us in." There was little logic to what they seized, as laser printers, nuts and bolts, dumb terminals and candy are inherently incapable of holding data (at least with our current technological limitations), which speaks to the abysmal ignorance and lack of preparation of the agents involved.

Apparently all of this was part of a large-scale investigation of a group known as the Legion of Doom, a group which had helped provide research information for **GURPS Cyberpunk**, which apparently made its author Loyd Blankenship guilty by association of crimes which the LoD had not actually committed yet, but apparently had the capability to commit if it chose, but being guilty until being proven innocent, that was all it took. The Legion of Doom is a semi-secret club of computer hackers which specializes in cracking secure computer systems. Blankenship may also have been a member of the Legion of Doom prior to his employment at Steve Jackson Games, which may have put him on one of those lists of subversives which supposedly no longer exist (don't worry, I'm on one too). The Secret Service was involved because they are a branch of the Treasury Department, which has jurisdiction over data piracy. The only relationship between SJG and the LoD was that they had been used as a source of expert information on computer crime. The Secret Service concentrated its efforts on SJG's Illuminati Bulletin Board because some checklist somewhere associated BBSs with computer

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crime and they picked up on **GURPS Cyberpunk** because it was the work for which the research was being done.

This investigation has also led to two actual arrests in other parts of the country and the seizure of four computer systems from Legion of Doom members. The case involved the dissemination of information on Southern Bell's 911 number network which could potentially have been used to crash the 911 system throughout the south. Supposedly this information may not actually be particularly secret, and there is no evidence that any sort of conspiracy existed to make use of it for destructive purposes. Legion of Doom members made their actions public on an AT&T computer network called Jolnet and were using the information to prepare an article on security weaknesses in AT&T's computer system.

The strange part about all of this was the attention paid to **GURPS Cyberpunk**, which is a commentary on the ignorance of the average Secret Service agent. All of the **GURPS Cyberpunk** material was seized because the G-Men saw it as dangerous subversive material. The cyberpunk genre involves a certain amount of computer crime and espionage and that was skillfully detailed in a science fiction context in the text of the game. Clearly it was more than a game to the Secret Service. When Steve Jackson went to their offices to try to get some of his equipment back they showed him the draft of the game and said "this is just a handbook for computer crime," apparently incapable of telling reality from science fiction.

Before the day was out SJG was out thousands of dollars of computer equipment, a good bit of their dignity and everything they needed to publish their major spring release. Needless to say, this was a cause for considerable concern financially. The situation has become worse over the past weeks because they had to go through a time consuming and expensive reconstruction of the **GURPS Cyberpunk** book, which delayed its release and cut into profits, and they have still not gotten any of their equipment or software back. There is no clear indication that they will ever get it back. About a week ago Steve Jackson commented that he kept calling the Secret Serive and they kept saying " It's in the mail, Federal Express will have it to you within 24 hours," a claim which became far less convincing on the third or fourth repetition.

Steve Jackson considered suing the Secret Service, but his lawyers advised against it because outrageous though the offense was and even though it was clearly a violation of the 'unreasonable search and seizure' clause of the Fourth Amendment, the expense would be far too great and the results too unpredictable to justify the expense. This leaves them very little recourse but to suffer, rebuild and live on with some of their faith in our government destroyed.

Steve Jackson has estimated a rate of loss at around $10,000 per week and that the delay and cost was increased by waiting for hollow promises from the Secret Service to be fulfilled. The cost of legal services, replacing equipment and redoing lots work has been severe and hit SJG at a time when they were having "severe cash flow problems" and were depending on the success of **GURPS Cyberpunk** to pull them out. Steve Jackson reports that "the company has cut its staff in half and reduced its new-product schedule drastically." This sort of cut-back can seriously injure a growing company which works on the edge of a narrow profit margin. Last year, after a shake up in staff SJG also discovered that their finances had been mismanaged and suddenly they owed $30,000 in debts and $60,000 to the IRS, as well as having a customer with $70,000 in outstanding and slowly paid debt owed to them. The Secret Service raid came just as they hit the hump of finally paying off all that debt. After meeting with their accountants, SJG has let almost half of their staff go and has cut back their production schedule radically. Steve Jackson believes that these modifications and cut backs will keep the company going and pull it out of this period. They have been assisted by distributors who have made large pre-paid orders specifically to help them out and they are hoping that sales of **GURPS Cyberpunk** will improve their cash flow. There will be new **GURPS** releases this coming year, as well as a new edition of **Triplanetary** which they have acquired from GDW.

GURPS Cyberpunk is now out. It features a clever promotion on the cover as "the book that was seized by the U.S. Secret Service." It also includes credits to The Legion of Doom as 'Hacking Consultants' and the Secret Service for 'Unsolicited Comments'. All in all, despite the delays and reconstruction, it seems to be a pretty good work. There will be a review in *Abyss* which will deal with it apart from the controversy.

This is some scary business. It's easy to withstand attacks from extremists and the prejudice of the ignorant, but what we often forget is that our government is made up of human beings who are as fallible as we are, but whose stupid mistakes and insensitivity are magnified by the power which is given to them by government office. As Andrew Jackson said, because of their protected status, government officials are "apt to acquire a habit of looking with indifference upon the public interest and of tolerating conduct from which an unpracticed man would revolt." Andrew Jackson could solve the problem by throwing the lot of them out of office. Steve Jackson doesn't have that kind of power. Like the rest of us, he has to suffer through the excesses of government, the rule of blind zealots in some cases, and endeavor to carry on until such a time as increasingly overdue changes can be made in the system.

In the Speculum

Deathwish
by Loyd Blankenship
from Steve Jackson Games

Deathwish is one of a relatively small number of adventure modules published for use with Steve Jackson Games' **GURPS** rules. It is specifically designed for use with **GURPS Supers**, though it could easily be converted to most other popular superhero systems. **Deathwish** comes as a single booklet of 36 magazine size pages with excellent cover art and far inferior, even embarrassing interior art.

Deathwish offers a fairly interesting scenario for rather powerful characters, using a standard setting, but pushed a bit into the technological future. It centers around a concert, a riot and an attempt by a group of supervillain rock stars (*Deathwish*) to steal some ancient Egyptian relics. The basic plot of the adventure is pretty straightforward, to deal with the diversion, find the crime, stop it and/or hunt down the perpetrators. The villains are fairly standard, with a couple who bear a lot of resemblance to characters from other games and sources, though that is to be expected in the superhero genre. There are some quirky things about the organization, like cutting down on background in favor of 'what if' suggestions for the GameMaster, but on the whole **Deathwish** is a pretty good package.

There are really only two final comments to make, one good and one bad. First, the interior art is excruciatingly bad. It is quite a shock to go from the beautiful rendition of Demolition Man on the cover to the stick-figure version which goes with his character description. This is a small thing, but still sort of disconcerting, suggesting that more money was put into the art which would

sell the module than into the illustrations which would help make it work better. Second, unlike some other **GURPS** modules, this is nice and short. Previous **GURPS** modules have hovered in the 60 page range which is way too long for a module, but too short for a full fledged campaign or setting. **Deathwish** goes against this trend. It is just the right length to be plugged into an existing superhero campaign without introducing too much in the way of weird and foreign ideas.

Deathwish may not be perfect, but it isn't bad, and if you are playing superhero characters of extremely high power it could be a lot of fun to play. (Andrew Bighton)
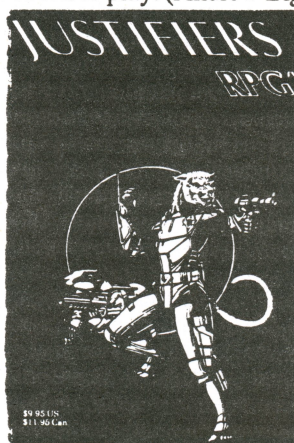
Justifiers
by Gideon
from StarChilde Publications

Justifiers is one of numerous small role-playing games that try to provide a basis for a campaign in a compact yet complete package at a reasonable price. Like too many of these well-intentioned efforts, it does not offer sufficient advantages over its larger competitors to be worthwhile. Although supplements and modifications can alleviate many of its flaws, standing along, these flaws negate the advantages of economy and convenience which such games are supposed to offer. Justifiers comes in a single digest-sized booklet of almost 100 pages, attractively laid out with some nice, appropriate illustrations and a two-color heavy stock cover.

The background is sketchy and somewhat derivative, adequate neither for role-playing nor for wargaming. It contains fairly standard science fiction fare: space travel monopolized by a single powerful corporation which, like its smaller colleagues, operates without legal restraint; and the use of human criminals and "beta-humanoids" (uplifted animals a la David Brin) to make new planets safe for colonization, in an organization known as the 'Justifiers'. And that's about it. No map of the universe, no real flavor to the material, not even an intro-

ductory adventure for a beginning Game-Master, though a short scenario was being given away free with (or without) the game at GenCon. These items might be provided in supplements, but as stated above, these add to the cost of what was to have been an inexpensive proposition.

Even if such expansions are provided, **Justifiers** also has other problems. The character generation system is seriously flawed. Things start off well enough, with seven personal attributes and some associated "statistics" (e.g. mental strength, resilience, base speed, etc.). There are some simple psionic powers which closely resemble those in **Advanced Dungeons and Dragons**. The variety of beta-humanoid races is staggering: there are forty species, including the Bighorn Sheep, the Komodo Dragon, and the Mantis. Many of the role-playing possibilities are cut dead by the class-based skill system. This is somewhat credible given the specialized nature of an organization like the Justifiers, but it tends to homogenize the characters from one game to the next and negates much of the racial differentiation. some cross-training is available to offer some variety between one mechanical engineer and another, but this is a very restricted option. Even the inclusion of a few elective skills is insufficient to provide the degree of freedom needed to create a well-rounded character.

The combat system is also unimpressive. Damage is based on a simplistic hit point system, with anatomical areas and side-effects overlooked completely. Firearm ranges are not credible, usually too long — a high-tech pistol has an awesome 500 yard range, a shotgun is effective out to 500 feet, and the assault rifle out to 600 yards — and there is no decrease in accuracy with range. Worst of all, glamorous hand-to-hand and super-modern weapons are granted damage out of realistic proportion to more familiar arms; an ominous-looking katana does 4D6+2 base damage, a laser pistol does a whopping 6D6, but a "mere" shotgun does only 3D6+4.

One additional feature of **Justifiers** which many gamers will not like is the "buy-back" rule. Beta-humanoids are the property of the corporation which spawned them, but they may save up their pay to purchase freedom. This is set as the main goal for the individual, and it makes for an uninteresting and depressing motivation as well as denying the players an open-ended campaign. Most games will probably turn into an accountant's nightmare.

All in all, **Justifiers** does not fill any established niche in the RPG market and is too underdeveloped to break new ground effectively. The lack of background and the shallow character development system make it inappropriate for a discerning roleplayer, the unrealistic mechanics make it a poor choice for a tactical wargame, and the crying need for so much supplementary material to improve it makes it ultimately uneconomical. those who want to save a few dollars on a game can simply adapt an existing system which they already own (**GURPS, After-**

math!, and the like) and write their own background to obtain a far more satisfying result. There is simply no reason to buy this game. (Charles Hardin)

It Came from the Late, Late, Late Show
by Bradley K. McDevitt
from Stellar Games

This role-playing game takes a light-hearted look at bad horror movies and has some interesting features, although ultimately it falls short of its mark. **Late Show** comes as a single magazine-size book with a glossy card-stock cover and 60 pages of text. There are illustrations of dubious quality, mostly depicting 'Demonna' a hostess for the game based rather obviously on Elvira.

The basic conceit of **Late Show** is that the players take the roles of actors in a horror movie, battling creatures of darkness with all of the silliness and mental murkiness of the heroes of the typical Roger Corman epic of the '50s. Throughout the text there is a continual confusion of the difference in function of actors and characters which makes the entire text jarringly self-conscious, a condition intensified by the 'cute' sections of commentary by Demonna.

There are six basic characteristics for each 'Actor'. These are rolled on 4D10. In addition they have Talents, which are roughly equivalent to skills. There are a good selection of these and each character rolls for them with 1D10, with essentially no choice, flexibility or imagination required, though he may distribute his rolls among his Talents as he chooses to create some sort of focus. As the game goes on additional opportunities to roll and increase chosen Talents are acquired. The selection of Talents is interesting, but not particularly comprehensive, and the system as far too much to chance for apparently arbitrary reasons, though it is moderately playable.

There are some interesting features to combat, like a table for surprise and terror and the introduction of special actions and Talents with weapons. Unfortunately, how Talents apply in combat is never actually explained, and in fact, combat itself is never explained. There is no indication what dice are rolled in combat or how attacks are resolved, although the example given at the end of the section gives a vague hint that damage is done to the character's Survival Points, but not how that is determined. Another rather annoying aspect of combat is that there are obtrusive attempts to impose the structure of the movie on the play of the game, with commercial breaks, make-up rules, film breakage and stunt doubles as ways of chopping up the action. These serve to remind players that they are playing actors and not characters, which fits in with the tone of the game but is rather off-putting for players, essentially removing them even farther from the action of the game than is the case in most other role-playing systems.

Some interesting guidelines are provided for the 'Director' or GameMaster, which include some relevant suggestions for designing and running adventures. Here the ideas for making the game more like a movie fit in much better because they are presented as design guidelines, rather than actual mechanics for play. There is also a special section with rules for Monster design under a pretty simple system similar to Actor generation, plus rules for special abilities and powers. There is also an extensive section of pre-designed monsters and background characters, all pretty well fleshed out.

Late Show shows a certain amount of promise, but there are also serious problems and more than a few things which are damned annoying. The fact that the combat mechanics basically don't exist is a vital flaw if the game is supposed to stand on its own. You basically have to bring in combat mechanics of your own to make the game work. The Talent system is illogical and clunky. The general problem which bothered me the most, however, is the intrusive nature of the superstructure of 'The Movie' when it intrudes into the actual mechanics of the game. If this were a game in which players took the role of characters in a bad movie, that would work, but the artifice of players taking the roles of actors who are playing characters in a bad movie is just too contrived to maintain player interest. My final annoying feature is that at some point the artist apparently decided that his depiction of Demonna wasn't sexy enough (though it fitted the tone of the game), so in several places he has kept her clothes but replaced her face and body with a scanned image of Traci Lords. Sure, Traci is cute, but is there some deeper meaning to this? Is Traci the actor and Demonna the role? Or was the editor just too lazy to control a careless artist? I'm mystified.

Basically, **Late Show** is a good idea which is very poorly executed. It's from a small company, so perhaps they did a limited print run and can put out a new edition with complete rules without burying themselves, which would at least make it playable. Failing that, I can't see any reason to recommend it as anything except a not particularly economical resource for a few ideas. (Jon Schuller)

— S. PETERSEN'S FIELD GUIDE —

Cthulhu Monsters
A Field Observer's Handbook Of Preternatural Entities
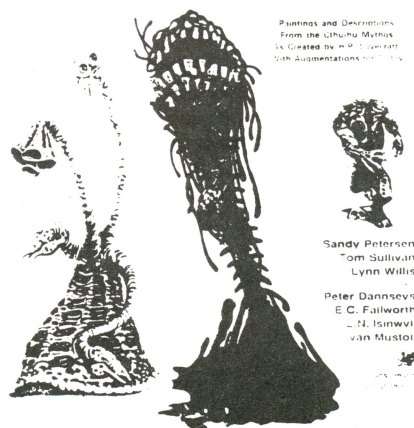
Paintings and Descriptions
From the Cthulhu Mythos
As Created by H.P. Lovecraft
with Augmentations by Others

Sandy Petersen
Tom Sullivan
Lynn Willis

Peter Dannseys
E.C. Failworth
N. Isinwvil
van Mustoll

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S. Peterson's Guides to Cthulhu Monsters & Creatures of the Dreamlands
### by Sandy Peterson and Others
from Chaosium

These are two of the most visually appealing gaming products I've seen in a long time. They continues the Chaosium tradition of using great art, but unlike more substantial products, the emphasis in both of these works is primarily on the art itself. Each book is 64 pages in British magazine-size format (I suspect they were printed in the U.K.), which is slightly larger than the American standard. The art throughout is in color, with each page of text accompanied by a full-size illustration, a scale chart, additional diagrams and a quote from Lovecraft.

There are so many good things to say about these books that I'm going to gloss over them and probably omit some. The art is phenomenal, the descriptions of the creatures are excellent. **Dreamlands** features a beautiful map of the Dreamlands. **Monsters** offers a composite picture with lots of the monsters (and the authors) displayed to show relative sizes. The text is intelligent and informative, and (most impressively), includes no game mechanics whatever, but enough information to adapt the creatures to any game system. Also included are bibliographies, mostly citing fictional works, which adds a certain feel of reality. The only element of the presentation which seemed sort of trivial and pointless was the flow chart for identifying the monsters. Working from the assumption that you just ran into Yog-Sothoth, you can go through the flow-chart, answering questions and thereby identify it (assuming you aren't melted to slag while tracing the chart). What really makes these books work is that they are presented, not as game aids, but as books which might exist if all of this were real. They aren't books for **Call of Cthulhu** players so much as guidebooks for the characters they play. Rather than being reference works for gamers, they are reference works from the imaginary world of the game. This is a charming conceit which makes them considerably more interesting.

Now to pick some nits. There are basically two faults in what are otherwise excellent resources. The first is the price. At $15 these books are damned expensive. I understand that you are paying for the quality of the production and artworks, but that's a lot to pay for a relatively slim package. I also think that these books are so visually impressive that they would sell in the mass-market to non-gamers, but I think the price is prohibitive in that context, though I suspect that a larger mass-market print run would lower the price. Second, some serious liberties are taken with the Cthulian material. This is done creatively, but there is one aspect of it to which I object. Creatures from the works of Cthulian authors other than Lovecraft are used and no indication is given of their provenance nor are those authors cited even obliquely in the bibliography. The main reason I object to this is that it looks very

much as if they are trying to use Lovecraft's name to sell material that is not specifically by Lovecraft. They even use quotes from Lovecraft to introduce the creatures of other writers and those quotes are often inappropriate. In **Monsters** you find the Hounds of Tindalos and Ithaqua which did not originate in Lovecraft stories and you also find Dholes and Night Ghaunts, which rightfully should be in the **Dreamlands** book. In **Dreamlands** there are numerous non-Lovecraft creatures. I was particularly struck by Tsathogua, the Serpent People and Atlach Nacha, all of whom are from the work of Clark Ashton Smith, and properly belong in Hyperboria, not the Dreamlands. Smith was in many ways a better writer than Lovecraft and it irks me to see his work mis-used without any credit. There's enough material that they could have easily done a couple of Smith worldbooks and done better justice to everyone.

For the casual reader these things won't really detract from the overall impact, and for that reason I still give a high recommendation to both **Dreamlands** and **Monsters** if you can afford the price and like the idea of full-color illustrations of unearthly horrors beyond the scope of man's natural perceptive ability. (Dave Nalle)
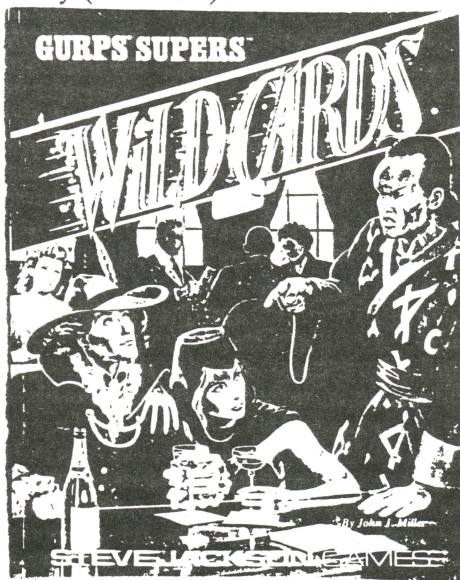
Wild Cards
for use with **GURPS Supers**
by John J. Miller
from Steve Jackson Games

I approached this review with some hesitancy because I have enjoyed the **Wild Cards** books so much that I found it hard to believe that any game could live up to the potential of the stories, even under the best circumstances. Well, **GURPS Wild Cards** was certainly produced under the best circumstances, and as a result it is relatively successful with the material. Not only was **GURPS Wild Cards** written by one of the original authors of the stories, but as I had always suspected, the stories themselves were based on a role-playing campaign run by George R. R. Martin, though the original campaign was run with Chaosium's **Super-**

world. This makes it a setting ideally suited to role-playing and one which was more than due for publication. Physically, **Wild Cards** follows the standard **GURPS** magazine-like format with a total of 132 pages.

There's no point in outlining the background of **Wild Cards**. If you've read the books you know it all, and if you haven't you've missed one of the best batches of original fiction in the last five years. One of the most interesting aspects of the book for me was the short history in the beginning of the original campaign and how it developed into a game. After that, **Wild Cards** continues to explore the background, following the same background as the books, with useful items like a timeline and detailed examinations of specific themes like the genetics of the wild card virus. What surprised me was how short this general background turned out to be, with the timeline ending in 1987 and generally pretty sketchy. Compared to the detail in the books themselves it was sort of a let down. I had sort of expected to discover new things. The vast majority of the book, as seems appropriate, is taken up with descriptions of characters. The unusual characters were the strongest aspect of the book series and they deserve the space they're given. And here there is some additional exploration of the background that I was looking for, with characters who were barely mentioned in the books examined in some real depth. After this there are some interesting little sections of specialized background, including a section on alternate 'Historical Biographies' for historical personages which I would have liked to have more than two pages of. There's also a nice section called 'On the Town' which gives a character's eye view of some of the settings, plus a set of excerpts from *Aces Magazine Supplement,* which is sort of like an entertainment guide to Jokertown. and wild card oriented entertainment. There are also good sections on organizations and on aliens, which included a lot of information that I know wasn't in the original books. The last section is a guide for the GameMaster called 'Wild Cards Gaming' which has the usual short selection of common-sense guidelines. Taken as a whole, there was one thing which really surprised me about **Wild Cards**. Considering that the campaign was originally designed for a game which was very different from **GURPS** it is amazing that there are no significant additional mechanics included to adapt it to **GURPS**, which may be a testimony to the thoroughness of **GURPS Supers**.

There are a few weaknesses here. I think that there could be more exploration of the timeline and the general background. A lot of that material is also covered in the more specialized sections at the end of the book, but that makes it sort of disjointed. To be honest, I think I got as much or more material for a role-playing campaign, except for some of the obscure character details just from reading the books. The other problem I see is one of marketing. While I think that doing background volumes to go with the basic rules of **GURPS** is generally a good thing, it

may not have been the right idea for **Wild Cards**. If **GURPS** were a simpler, more flexible system they could have included the basic mechanics as part of the **Wild Card** books which would make it a lot more appealing to the crossover audience which **Wild Cards** could really capitalize on, the Science Fiction and comics fans who are familiar with the books and not with **GURPS**. This would expose them to **GURPS** through a familiar background. But then, who am I to question the marketing strategy of Steve Jackson Games. These points aside, **GURPS Wild Cards** will definitely be a good buy not only for **GURPS** players but for any gamer who wants to see that background broken down into its indiviidual elements for campaign play. (Dave Nalle)

Omnigon
by Craig, Groves, Widtmann and Zaroski
from Omnigon Games

After reading through **Omnigon**, I honestly expected to turn to the front and see a copyright date around 1978. I was genuinely shocked to see that it was released last year. Which makes it a classic throwback to the days when role-playing was young and fresh and games were poorly designed and unrealistic. Physically, **Omnigon** looks pretty good. It is a magazine-size, 60 page, softbound book with a color cover and relatively appealing text and layout, though most of the art is sort of amateurish.

Beyond that, there's very little good to say about **Omnigon**. It's way past the days when I expected to see a game like this, a game which is essentially **Dungeons & Dragons** in space. They've added one characteristic to the basic six, but the plus and minus modifier charts are almost identical, the stats are rolled on the same range, the alignment system is straight **D&D**, and what game except **D&D** ever seriously considered such a thing, the character classes are straight out of **D&D**, both in concept and in specific orientations, the level and experience system is straight **D&D**, armor, combat and the ef-

Taking a Look at...
Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition

Ian Hense

Back in 1978, I bought a strange looking box at Universal Hobbies in Universal City, Texas. It had a haunted looking castle on the cover and was called **Dungeons and Dragons**.

At the time, I had no clue what I was letting myself in for. After reading the books over and over, absorbing the concepts, I started in my first role-playing campaign, and have basically been totally useless to society since.

I didn't pay attention to the hundreds of typos, bad art or the basically unworkable game mechanics. I wasn't the sophisticate I am now. I was simply awe-struck about the idea of playing another person in a fantasy world, straight out of Robert E. Howard or J.R.R. Tolkein's minds.

Those three simple books quickly expanded, as TSR, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson realized they they were trailblazers in what was very quiet territory. The simple saddle stapled books became the PH (**Player's Handbook**), the DMG (**Dungeon Master's Guide**, with its horrible demonic cover), and the **Monster Manual**.

For over four years, those were all I needed to play in the world of **Advanced** (!) **Dungeon and Dragon's**. I didn't even mind the $15.00 plus price tag per book. The game was definitely worth it.

But then, it started to happen. **The Fiend Folio, Deities and Demigods, Monster Manual II, Unearthed Arcana, Oriental Adventures,** ~~The Adventures Of Lady Marilyn and the Husky Guardsman,~~ ad infinitum ad nauseum. Where were all these other books come from, and did the folks at TSR really believe that I would pop almost $20 for something with cheesy art and a TSR logo??

So I drifted away from **AD&D**, which was getting too bulky and ponderous for my hobbies. More intriguing and better designed games usurped the Ancestor's place on my game shelf.

Finally, TSR realized that a virtual avalanche and tidal wave of dinky scenarios and supplemental guides would not rescue the drowning behemoth of a game. So they decided, with their market share dwindling, that it was time to give the old man a facelift. Little did they know it would require pulling his kneecaps over his forehead. Using the benefit of hindsight, they decided to put out a new edition of **AD&D**, with all of the old problems corrected and fresh new ideas to liven up the tired old game.

Well I'm here to tell you that it just ain't so.

The powers that be placed the monumental task over overhauling arguably the oldest fantasy role-playing game into the hands of David "Zeb" Cook. David, in what has to be a soap operatic forward, talks of his loving devotion to the game he has been asked to overhaul (but nothing about his loving devotion to his paycheck). I must admit, he probably does have a great deal of affection for the old **AD&D**, because the 2nd Edition is barely distinguishable from its predecessor, except in its omissions.

The 2nd Edition of **AD&D** takes pains to eliminate many of the problems that popped up through the exhaustive playtesting of **AD&D** by millions of munchkins around the world. Many of the spells have been revised to eliminate problems in the past, and questions that were continually popping up. In this respect, the 2nd Edition succeeds. Many of the small mechanical errors that cropped up over the years have been isolated and surgically removed.

But the 2nd Edition fails in two aspects, in my humble (and loud) opinion.

The first is that it really isn't all that different from the original game. There are several cosmetic changes, such as spell caster specializations, and secondary skills and proficiencies, but it is still a limited class based system, with very fundamental character mechanics and limited design and role-playing potential. The 2nd Edition still tries to make the character for you, rather than allowing you to create and mold your own character. This is one of the main reasons why I stopped playing **AD&D** in the first place.

Many of its devotee's have a slavering fascination with the rules. To these hordes, the rules are set in stone, and thus unbendable. To some extent, TSR likes to encourage this way of thought. The more gamers who feel that every rule issued from Lake Geneva is from on high, the more customers that will belly up and fork over $22.00 for **Oriental Adventures in the North with Fiends and Demigods**, when it is released.

The second failure, and by far the most nauseating in my opinion, is the removal of most, if not all, possibilities for an *evil* character. The Assassin and Half-Orc class and race have been removed, and the emphasis is on good or neutral alignments. They have even removed the Demon section from the **Monstrous Compendium**, so as not to offend the hordes of outraged mothers, whose child gets heady on three or four hours of **AD&D** play and then go out and drive a car through a wall of nuns.

This offends me to the core, because part of the mystique and charm of role-playing is playing characters that are different from ourselves. The vast majority of us are good or neutral people in real life (with the exception of a few editors and baseball players I know). I have absolutely no desire to play a neutral, to amoral, slightly sarcastic graduate student. I do that for about 18 hours a day anyway. I want to play what ever I want to play. If that happens to be a half-orc assassin that likes to use his halberd to gig hobbits, so be it. Not that afterwards, I'm gonna go out an buy a forked bill and run around goosing old ladies with it.

It is decidely psychologically unhealthy to deny a desire to commit a"not so nice" act once every in awhile. Role-playing such characters allow people to get it out in a positive fashion, with no real danger, but a tad more involvement. I find TSR's cave in to the minor majority as repulsive, and a really weenie thing to do (nyaaahhh!).

But let us not say that this is an entirely bad upgrade. I have let my personal views get in the way of a.....um...biased review. Well anyway, the 2nd Edition is by far better organized, researched and thought out than the original seventeen books (or is it twenty five now?). The historical background behind character classes (Druids) and the organization of information is good and thorough. I think that a person interested in playing a limited, bland, non-evil role-playing game will love the **AD&D** 2nd Edition. It will also be a good purchase for those already devoted millions of Dungeoneers out there, if they can get past the idea that anything that effects their reason for living is bad, and accept the new rules.

Me, I'd rather go buy a jigsaw and chase nuns.

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"How could we have forgotten that Hitler was elected?"

Janosz Skrivkin
Chancellor of Croatia
1999

Against the Evil Brains

a *Cyberia* Adventure

by Dave Nalle

The Background

This adventure is set in the background of **Cyberia**, the just-released Cyberpunk Role-Playing Game from Ragnarok. As presented here it is not mechanics-dependent and should be easy to use with any role-playing game using that sort of setting, such as R. Talsorian's **Cyberpunk** or Steve Jackson Games' **GURPS Cyberpunk**. **Cyberia** is part of a trilogy of games, coming chronologically between **EsperAgents** (psychic espionage) and **Challengers** (science-fiction/superheroes).

The basic premise of **Cyberia** is that by the year 2010 technology has advanced to the point where Optical Sensory Imaging Systems have made it possible for computer users to interract with their computers on a three dimensional, interractive level. This includes mentally exploring the vast computer network as if it were part of an alternate physical world. Some computer users have begun to live most of their lives online, even become addicted to the strange thrills the network has to offer, and some have staked out territory within the network and made it their own. The most organized and clearly defined development in this electronic world is the land of Cyberia, a loosely defined region within the North American section of the network which has developed its own political identity and a certain degree of autonomy. Cyberia is populated by Wireheads (computer simstim addicts), Jocks (computer operators), Netlords (system operators), Drones (autonomous interractive programs), Zombies (non-OSIS users), Wraiths (electronically preserved intelligences, also known as Ghosts and Evil Brains) and Frankies or as they prefer to be called Promethians (self aware and artificially intelligent computer programs). Remember that when characters are in Cyberia or other parts of the network, the OSIS system will cause them to see everything happening around them through analogous visual images, but these images, even when augmented by imagination, will parallell events and interractions which are actually taking place. For example, when two knights fight in the Cyberian area known as the Realm of Cumbria, if a sword strikes, it probably represents an attack on the security defenses of the opponents computer system, and if a knight falls, his security has probably been breached, forcing a shut down and disconnecting the Jock whose form was that knight from the network. In some cases, depending on the software involved worse things can also happen, including permanent hardware or software damage, and even flatlining (killing) a person through his OSIS link.

While Netlords are building their fantastic kingdoms in Cyberia and Jocks are adventuring through the net, in the real world things are getting grimmer and grimmer. The ecology has been destroyed, new diseases are running wild, limited nuclear strikes damaged a number of areas during the 'Hot Half-Hour', governments are crumbling, giant corporations are expanding their power, the world economy is a collapsing, and hope seems to be fading everywhere. It's not a pretty future, a time of urban violence and institutionalized crime on a grand scale, where the old capitalist powers of the west struggle desparately against the rising giants of the east. With a real world of so many unpleasant possibilities it isn't surprising that young technophiles prefer to build their dreams in the malleable stuff of an interractive computer environment.

The Situation

For this adventure it is assumed that the characters are active on the computer network and familiar with Cyberia itself. Ideally they should be part of a youth gang/group from the eastern seaboard of the United States from one of the giant urban 'plexes', like the Philadelphia-New York-Boston Plex or the smaller Baltimore-DC-Richmond Plex, although in the age of instant telecommunications physical distance is relatively insignificant. Family background and economic background are flexible. Gangs with appropriate characters and interests exist for youths in every segment of society so the possibilities are wide open. Note that the adventure consists mostly of background and setting, and it may be necessary for the GM to fill in some of the technical details.

One evening the characters should be having a gang meeting. It's awfully hard to keep track of these meetings because they are held in Cyberia. Each of the characters is jacked in wherever he lives, but their Somas or Interactive Video Images are all gathered together in a popular spot in Cyberia called *Harlequin's Arcade*, the Cyberian equivalent of a bar, where psychostims are offered to simulate a variety of effects on the user from alcohol to sex to some of the most popular drugs. Psychostims stimulating the appropriate areas of the person's brain while his Soma participates in activities traditionally associated with that sort of simulation, though for the more twisted this sort of technology allows the mixing of images and effects, such as sexually stimulating drinks, hallucinatory food and the like. Some mild entertainment is going on. A couple of the regulars have gotten hold of a Drone belonging to the Isaki corporation of Japan, a not particularly clever Drone which looks a great deal like a winged, mechanical pig (no one really understands the choices of the conceptual artists who design Drone images), which they have pinned to a table by its wings. They are attempting to reprogram it through the use of an Icicle (security hacking program which looks like its namesake under OSIS).

As they chat and try to ignore the rather immature abuse to which the Drone is being subjected, they are among the first to notice a new arrival. This visitor stands out even in a room where many of the occupants have adopted elaborate personae, because its appearance is so unnatural that it is clearly not human. Its body is entirely black and sexually ambiguous. The arms and legs are disproportionately long and not particularly muscular, while the head is a narrow cylinder, the same color as its body, bearing no markings or features whatever. It walks through the door with easy self-assurance and swivels its head to survey the room (presumably). Without hesitation it takes a few loping strides towards the table where our heroes are seated, only to be intercepted by a bar regular who goes by the handle Meathook.

Meathook appears as a huge, muscular man, rather stocky, with arms which end in sharp-looking implements instead of hands. His right hand is a meathook, his left is an icepick. Both are more than images, as they are supported by crude but powerful software which alows them to do considerable damage to other software and systems working through the OSIS network.

Meathook is known for having a real disliking of Frankies, and the stranger is clearly the Soma of some flashy Artificial Intelligence. The reaction is swift when Meathook approaches and tries to get his hooks (literally) into the Frankie. Almost too fast for anyone to see (even with augmented senses), the Frankie's hands become something like vibrating blades (nothing like the somas for any of the standard offensive programs) and in an instant the very surprised Meathook is trisected, and a few moments later the remnants of his soma blink out of existence. The Frankie turns towards our heroes and comments, "Shimmerblade, beta-test version. I can get you a copy, but we need to talk a bit first." He sits at an empty chair. Everyone is impressed.

The Frankie identifies himself as Ace Mojo (AMJ-2/23) and tells them that he has a problem. He wants some information, but doesn't have the time or the liberty to do the leg-work himself. He belongs to an unnamed corporation, but wants some information for himself about the man who programmed him. He will pay them well, in C$ or in pirated software (not from his company, but from their industrial espionage library). What he specifically needs them to do is worth a pretty high price. He wants them to go into New Providence and try to contact the man who designed him, a Wraith named Lars Tormund. Once they find him, all Ace Mojo wants them to do is ask him three questions. He refuses to divulge the nature of the questions, but if they accept the job he will give them a packet with the questions contained as a compact drone program which will actually ask the questions for them. The job is merely to get the drone there. The soma of the sealed drone is an old-style express mail envelope.

The catch in this relatively simple mission is that New Providence, also known as the Cemetery, is one of the most unpleasant and most secure areas in the net. It is a giant databank maintained off the coast of New England on a Bahamian island called New Providence. It is the repository for an international foundation called Eternal Resource Limited, which has preserved the minds of great thinkers of the past by reading their memories and personalities into a databank where each of them has a discreet identity and can carry on the thoughts that they had when alive, but at the service of ERL's customers. ERL makes money on both ends, from fees paid before the death of their 'Clients' (or as others call them, wraiths) and also from a commission on consulting fees charged by the Wraiths. Note that many wraiths, like Tormund, are there under the sponsorship of the company which employed them in life, and not necessarily willing participants. The problem with New Providence is that it is an oligarchy run by the wealthiest and oldest wraiths, some of whom are on the board of directors of ERL, and all of whom are paranoid and obsessed with security. New Providence does offer a form of immortality, but at the price of eternal bondage. Note that if allowed, wraiths can operate within the net almost exactly like living people. New Providence has been breached before, and some trade is carried on between New Providence and Cyberia, but relations are by no means congenial.

The Mission

Ace Mojo wants to know as little as possible about how they get the information he needs, but he wants results relatively fast. He will show up for half an hour every night at *Harlequin's Arcade* for the next week. After that he'll assume they gave up.

The best strategy for this mission is probably to get together a small, well equipped group and

approach New Providence through Cyberia. This will require passing through several unusual Cyberian domains, but will allow them to approach relatively well concealed from New Providence's scouts and defenses. It will also assure that if their somas are captured they cannot be traced to their origin. Those who make the attempt should be armed with the best equipment they can get, in the form of the most deadly and subtle interactive software to breach the defenses and eliminate any guardians. In preparation they can check around for rumors about New Providence, and will learn that there are both standard security defenses and relatively powerful drone guards as well.

There are only a limited number of links to New Providence. This will require that they pass through several regions of Cyberia which may not be totally supportive of their mission, some of them even satellite states of New Providence. Access to New Providence is possible through either Junkyard Baltimore (a region controlled by a gang from Baltimore which specializes in hardware salvage and fencing), Chateau Descartes (a university controlled clearinghouse for data and software) or Wally's Waremart (a discount software trading cooperative). To get to these it will be necessary to pass through at least one other domain, most likely the Nuzulu Nation (run by a Philadelphia street gang), Pandemonium Palace (run by a pirate programmer on a hellish theme, though not as elaborate as the Seven Circles located elsewhere in Cyberia), the Black Forest (a medieval style environment), the Gates of Tuat (based on the twelve regions of the Egyptian afterlife) or the Realm of Faerie (an extended interactive game for soma players with all sorts of fantastic creatures and magic). All of these are strange, but relatively open, although not without their dangers.

Chances are that they will run into some interference, in the form of concrete obstacles or people who are curious about what they are doing or where they are going. The specifics of these encounters are up to the individual GMs, but some suggestions can be offered. The Nuzulu Nation is guided by lion-headed giants armed with huge, hooked swords. The Black Forest abounds with robber knights looking for a joust. The Realm of Faerie is known for its evil wizards, somas of jocks who specialize in virus-like 'magic' which will effect nasty alterations in other somas. The Gates of Tuat are inhabited by all sorts of supernatural creatures, the most fearsome of which is Sebek, a gigantic crocodile which devours everything it encounters. Note that the Gates of Tuat is divided into twelve separate realms, each ruled over by an Egyptian god, all connected together by an endless circular river, which is the only means of transportation between the realms. Pandemonium Palace is a recreation of the inner circle of hell, guarded by all manner of devils and demons, under the guidance of the Head Torturer, the demon Malebroche. They should be able to get through these areas by intimidation, bribery or conning. Remember that behind every soma is a nerdy little jock with something on his mind, and remember that fearsome though some of the drones are, they are inherently predictable and ultimately responsible to whoever created or manages them.

Once they get through these outer realms they will have to deal with at least one of the satellites of New Providence, all of which are a lot more businesslike and less recreational or creative. The management of Junkyard Baltimore are the least under the control of New Providence, but have a healthy respect for the power of the Wraiths. Wally's Waremart is closely linked to New Providence, but Wally can be bribed. Unfortunately he is also totally unscrupulous and is likely to sell

them out. Chateau Descartes is run by the cold intellects of the Demosthenes Foundation and North Delaware University, but it's day to day management is in the hands of graduate assistants who are often bored, frustrated jocks in their own right, and might be willing to help in a covert jab at New Providence. As far as interactive appearance, Junkyard Baltimore seems like an endless terrain of rusted computers centered around a boxy iron 'club-house'. Wally's Waremart resembles a giant shopping mall and Wally himself is a huge man dressed in clashing patterns of polyester plaid. Chateau Descartes is a huge, gothic castle which is filled wall to wall with books. If they try to break through by violence each of these realms is well defended with some of the latest drone programming.

With help or by stealth they will presumably get through one of these realms. It is quite possible that New Providence will be warned and that will make their way much more difficult once they get there. New Providence itself is a forbidding area, surrounded by a 100ft high, extremely smoothe wall. Within the wall there are constant storms and lightning. The nature of the interior terrain is invisible from outside the wall. There is a single gate, very heavily guarded, both by several very advanced security drones and also by at least one Wraith commander at all times. The only ways in are over the wall or through the gate. To get through the gate they will almost have to have the assistance of someone from one of the adjacent areas. Going over the wall is more difficult, unless they are equipped for it, but less likely to excite attention. If they go over the wall they will discover that the clouds over the walls are actually very simple drones which will fire powerful blasts of lightning at anyone trying to climb or breach the walls. But they are relatively slow, though anyone hit will almost certainly lose connection with his soma and will have to make a resistence roll to keep from being flatlined (killed).

Once inside the wall they only have to worry about random patrols of individual, very powerful drones, equipped with capture devices which look like hooks, but which will immobilize a soma and allow it to be dragged in for questioning. These security drones look like huge, overly muscular men with little, bullet-like heads. The terrain inside the walls is bleak, no vegetation, just a single, huge, multi-tiered building with no windows. This building is more or less circular, with 12 levels of 360 rooms each and six entrances on the bottom level. All of these rooms are identical. Everything is gray. They are numbered 1-1 through 12-360, for a total of 4320 rooms. There's no way to tell them apart. This makes finding Lars Tormund extremely difficult, as there is no directory or any way to locate him. Each of the rooms seems like a small apartment, considerably larger and nicer on the inside than on the outside, each equipped with the analog of a console/computer for receiving news and entering the net. Remember that each of the Wraiths essentially lives his entire existence as a soma, so none of this stuff is real, except the computer interface equipment, which is only real in the sense that the master computer of New Providence maintains it itself.

If they can get into a room and access the master computer, which will require some sort of spike program if they don't have the right access codes, they can find Lars Tormund's room (he is in 8-233). Of course, since all of the Wraiths are essentially somas, if they break into a room the Wraith there can instantly warn the New Providence master computer. However, some Wraiths may not do this, depending on how unhappy they are with their situation or how bored they are. There are also about 80 empty rooms on the 12th floor, so if this is where they choose to break in,

they can have free access to a computer console if they get lucky (23% chance).

If they manage to locate Tormund without being intercepted he will seem disoriented and not very happy, living a spartan existence in a room which seems to have been laid out as a three dimensional representation of a tesseract. He will let them stick around while he answers the questions. Basically they come down to asking what Tormund's original intention was in designing Ace Mojo who wants to know whether the current intentions of his owners fit within the spirit as well as the letter of what Tormund designed him for. Clearly Ace Mojo has moral problems with what his owners are doing and as an artificial intelligence he has the liberty to seek a legitimate way out, and feels that Tormund can justify his disobedience.

After getting the authorization they need from Tormund, they need to get out. Tormund will give them the answer Ace Mojo is looking for, that he should deny the orders his owners are giving him. The problem they face after this is getting the message out to Ace Mojo. You might think that they could leave instantly by just disconnecting from the network, but things are not that easy in Cyberia. The nature of OSIS is such that the mind of the user is intimately linked through his soma with whatever environment he interracts with, so the soma must physically leave the environment in order for him to return home and disconnect.

This means that they have to escape New Providence and face all the security they faced on the way in, but what they may not be prepared for is that most of these security measures exist primarily to keep the Wraiths from leaving without permission, so on the way out there will be more patrols and more security to deal with. To make matters worse, as they are getting ready to make their escape, Tormund declares that he wants to escape with them, and if they don't like the idea, he threatens to tell the Oligarchs and have them arrested before they can leave. He seems pretty desperate. There is an ultimate technical problem with this. It will require even more care in escaping, because the New Providence authorities could terminate Tormund at any point remotely until they can get him somewhere and, using his soma as a link, leech his file out of the New Providence computer and set it up somewhere else. Having Tormund with them, if his disappearance is noted, will also allow New Providence to send their best drones and even some killer Wraiths after them to hunt them down. This could add a nice little aftermath to the adventure.

Conclusion

There are lots of possible outcomes for this adventure. Probably the best is to have the characters escape, either with or without Tormund, after which they will be on a list of people wanted by New Providence, which may result in pursuit by some bounty-hunter types in Cyberia and even in the real world. Alternatively, if you want to get them in even deeper, you can have them captured and then develop another adventure to get them rescued or for them to effect their own escape. In such an escape they could probably get hold of lots of useful and valuable information or wares from New Providence which might set them up rather well if peddled in the marketplaces of Cyberia.

Here you have the basics of an adventure, and a pretty good introduction to the world of Cyberia. There are many directions in which you can take this basic situation and lots of fun detail that you can develop. Go with it, and remember that grim though the setting may be, it should still be exciting and sometimes even fun.

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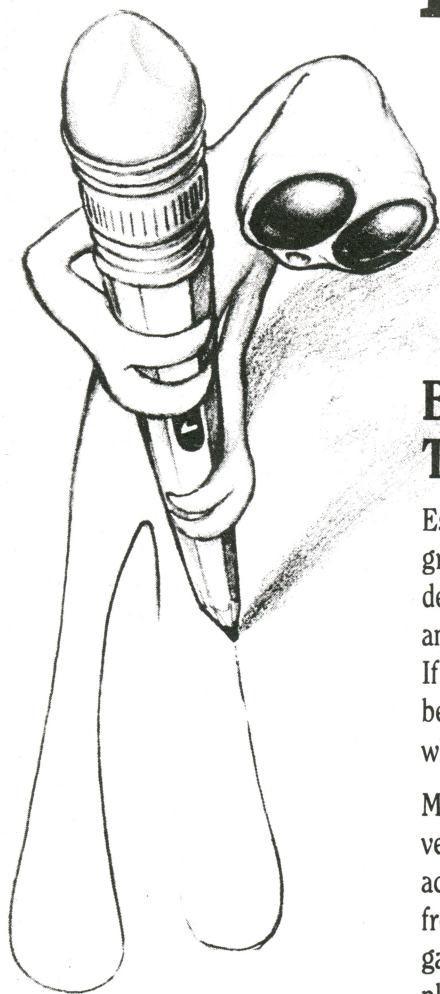
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The Unbeliever

An Arabian Tale by John Schuller

Baktanus, lord of the desert Djinn frowned at the slight form of the Zefir genuflecting at his feet.

"Zefir, I send you out as my spy to bring me news of the world of men and this is the best you can bring me? How can there be a mortal boy in the city of Zarmizegethusa who does not believe in us?"

"Yes, my master, the boy Ramal, son of Kabir the Weaver does not believe."

"How can this be? Do his parents teach him nothing? Can't he see our power in the wind and the fire and the storm? What of his his friends, his neighbors, don't they tell him to tremble at our passing in the night and to make offerings at our shrines?"

"Master, his father is a good man, an honest weaver, if overly devoted to blues and greens in his rugs. A portion of his bread and fruit are always set aside for us. His mother is yet young and fair, and when she goes to market she will often stop in the shrine and leave a copper coin for its upkeep. Their neighbors make signs of blessing and mark their lintels with the blood of the ram. His friends play in the alleys and chant protective rhymes as they play. In all other ways Ramal is a handsome lad, well mannered in all other things, but he shows us great discourtesy. He remains silent, does not offer, does not fear, does not believe." Zefir grovelled and seemed to be trying to clean the tiles with his wings.

Baktanus put a golden finger to his ruddy lips. "Hush now, Zefir, not so loud. Our king Malik Asman can hear much from his throne in Nihas Asfar and if he heard this he too might doubt our power. The boy will have to be shown. Show him. You say he is a handsome boy?" A nod from Zefir. "Then, even when you have made him believe, don't harm him, but do not fail me either. Return and tell me how you have made him fear us and the penance he has made. Go!"

* * *

Catching a desert wind Zefir flew, fast as a thought, invisible to the eyes of men, across the sands to Zarmizegethusa, a jewel of a town clasped between the bosom of the sea and the all encompassing cloak of the desert.

Zefir ruffled the flaps of dragoman tents outside the town, slammed the shutters of stalls in the market and settled rustling among the strands of wool on he loom of Kabir the weaver.

From the top bar of the loom he watched out the window as Ramal spread whitewash from a large pot on the wall of the inner court of the house. The boy hummed to himself as he worked, his sun-browned limbs sheened with a light sweat in the heat of the day.

Invisible, Zefir approached the boy. He ruffled the Ramal's hair, played with the pebbles around his toes, sent ripples across the surface of the whitewash. Still Ramal hummed and painted on.

Turning to rougher games, Zefir blew dust from the top of the wall in Ramal's eyes, but after a little rubbing and a few tears the lad went back to work.

In frustration Zefir summoned all his strength and hurled himself at the pot of whitewash, tipping it over to spill in the garden. Quickly Ramal righted the pot. He studied the mess for a moment, but instead of making a sign of protection or a small prayer, he shrugged his shoulders and went inside to refill his pot.

Zefir fled into the street in fury, blowing dust up the noses of the donkeys of passing merchants as he rushed out into the desert to look for help. Clearly his powers were too puny to bring the foolish lad to his senses.

* * *

In a narrow desert wadi Zefir found his uncle the old Sammum having some sport terrorizing a small caravan with great gusts and whirlwinds which hurled rocks and buried the sitting camels in sand.

Zefir cringed at the thought of disturbing Sammum

when he was clearly enjoying himself, but he feared failing his master more so he cried out to get his uncle's attention.

Zefir was almost smashed against the side of the wadi by a stray gust as his uncle approached. Sammum's power was enormous, but his great age and size and his laziness in controlling his power kept him exiled to the desert most of the time.

Sammum blew his greeting hot and fetid, shaking Zefir's body and forcing him to alight on a rock. "Little nephew! Are you lost here in the desert where there are no young girl's skirts to blow up? Are you bored with the city then? Ready to learn the rougher games which I can teach you?"

"You know I enjoy the solitude and beauty of your desert, mighty uncle," Zefir knew how susceptible the querulous old wind was to flatery, "but today I've no time for shaking down dates on the heads of dragomans or catching fat merchants in a flooded wadi. I'm on a mission from our master Baktanus and I appeal to you for aid in his name."

"What, does he have an army for me to blow to its knees? A tower to bring down? An oasis to dry up? I'm read? little nephew. My winds are hot and swift and my sands can flay the skin from a camel and leave nought but bones."

Zefir shuddered a bit at the thought. "I fear I can offer nothing tha challenging, uncle. It's just that there is this boy in Zarmizegethusa who refuses to believe in us."

"Bah, just a boy? I'll blow the hair from his head and sand down his eyeballs until they are white. Then he will believe!"

"Now wait, Lord Baktanus said not to harm him. You may do your worst to strike terror in his heart, but he's a fair child and not to be damaged."

Sammum shrugged and sighed. "So be it. Let's be off to town, and perhaps when we've left the boy shaking in his soiled breeches we'll find some girls and blow their skirts right off!"

Zefir clung desperately to the tail of Sammum's great wind as they flew into the setting sun, their passage leaving a crimson sunset in their wake. Well after nightfall Sammum came to ground in the city, settling desert dust in a cloud over the house of Kibir, waking the servants choking in their beds, though Kibir and his wife wisely slept with their heads beneath the bedclothes to keep spirits and sand from entering their mouths.

The sand bothered Ramal, but he slept on while Sammum went to work. With Zefir's guidance his mighty wind and sand stripped the inner walls of the courtyard bare of their recent whitewash. He dried up the fountain and left the fish to die on the once brightly colored mosaic which he had stripped down to white porcelain. Sammum left hanging rugs in tatters and blew tiles from the roof to crash in the street. As dawn approached he perched on the roof with Zefir struggling desperately to stay aloft in Sammum's wake.

With the first red light of dawn Ramal emerged into the ravaged courtyard. He surveyed the scene, picked up the dead fish in a cloth and returned indoors. When he emerged with his pot of whitewash and a brush Sammum blew a howling gust of frustration, disloding several tiles from the roof which fell to earth near the boy. Shaking his head Ramal ran to the kitchen and soon returned with a tray to hold over his head and proceeded to whitewash the wall once again.

Leaping from the roof, Sammum screamed down into the courtyard, shouting to Zefir, "I will have no more of this insolence, I will be respected." The force of his passing sucked the whitewash from the pot, splatering the wall and the boy.

Ramal looked at the splashes on the wall and on his clothes as if mystified. Then he picked up the pot and splashed the remaining whitewash on the wall, covering a large patch. Smiling at the results he headed inside for more,

oblivioius to the howling winds and shaking of timbers as Sammum fled screaming into the desert to spend his rage rearranging dunes and burying oases.

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When Zefir had recovered from the tumbling and battering of Sammum's departure he sat on the roof and looked down glumly at the boy splashing whitewash on the walls. Gazing out across the city the bright water in the harbor caught his eye and he saw the swirling patterns of his cousin the Marid dancing in the wake of a departing ship.

Marshalling what energy he had left, Zefir headed out to sea to recruit more assistance.

Marid was glad to see his small cousin. All the fishing boats had departed at dawn and would not be back until evening, and unless he wanted to spend futile hours trying to catch the legs of diving gulls it was shaping up to be a boring day.

Zefir perched on a rock and told his story, while Marid pulled up ugly, misshapen fish from the ocean depths and cast them on the beach to frighten children playing there.

Marid's awful visage hovered just below the waves and bubbles from his scaly lips floated to the surface where they burst to form words. "I'll gladly help you cousin. It isn't often that I get to go into the city. Fly swiftly and I will meet you at the house of Kabir."

Through narrow underground chambers and streams Marid made his way beneath the city, seeking carefully until he emerged in the well in the center of Kabir's house, just as a servant girl was drawing water. In a bubbling whirlpool Marid snatched the bucket from her hand and sent it dancing around the well.

The girl ran inside screaming invocations against the spirits. Kabir turned from surveying the remnants of his rugs and sent Ramal out to fetch the water and the bucket for the distraught girl.

When Ramal reached the well all seemed normal. As he drew his water something caught his eye in the bottom of the bucket. It looked almost like a weird and hideous face. Glancing beyond the well he saw that his brushes were still there by the finished wall. Always responsible, Ramal picked up the dirty brushes and dipped them in the strangely swirling water, shaking the whitewash off against the sides of the bucket.

To his surprise, the bucket flew from his hand and the water splashed back into the well. Quietly cursing his clumsiness he refilled the bucket, ignoring the increasingly violent gyrations of the water.

As he reentered the house Ramal looked behind him and noticed with surprise that a sudden rainstorm seemed to have drenched the courtyard. He shook his head in wonder at the unpredictability of the weather, glad that he had been out of the freak shower.

From his vantage on the roof Zefir could just hear the indignant curses of Marid as he bubbled out of the house and down to the harbor along the course of the open sewer. Zefir just threw up his hands at the accusations that he had been party to a conspiracy to humiliate Marid.

"Upstart breeze! Whitewash! Bah!" Marid's voice faded as he merged once again with the waters of the bay.

Zefir looked around the city hoping for inspiration. By now his heart was no longer in his task. To be truthful he didn't have the temperament for this kind of work. He doubted he would ever grow up to be like old Sammum. He had always been happier rustling in the branches of cypress trees and cooling the backs of dragomans in the heat of the afternoon

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Resolved to take punishment in lieu of further humiliation he floated slowly back across the desert.

When he arrived at Baktanus' bronze tower the mighty Djinn was clearly less than pleased by his report.

"He neither fears the winds of the desert nor the waves of the sea. We afflicted him with displays of power and mischief all in vain. Although Ramal seems fair of mind and feature, I can only conclude that either the boy is senseless, a dolt or just too stubborn to be swayed."

Baktanus face reddened to the deep color of wine.

"I know I have failed you master, but I'm exhausted and at my wits end. Punish me as you will, but I cannot deal with this boy any longer."

"Very well, Zefir, I will have to see to this business myself. As for you, there is a smith in Carzal who just bought a new bellows. I think you know what your job will be for the next dozen years or so. Begone!"

"I thank you master. After the trials I have been through the tedium of the forge will offer welcome rest." Making a last obeisance Zefir floated from Baktanus' tower over the mountains towards Carzal.

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A cold wind came in off the desert earlier that evening and Kibir had lit a fire on the hearth in Ramal's room. At midnight the smoldering embers burst to full flame once again, fueled by something more than the spent cedar coals which remained. Out of the heart of this roaring blaze stepped the perfect, golden form of the djinn Baktanus.

Currents of heated air swirled around the djinn and through the room, bringing sweat to Ramal's brow as Baktanus drew closer. Baktanus pulled a wooden stool up to the side of the bed, the heat of his body causing the old wood to burn and blacken where he rested his haunches. He looked down in wonder at the face of the disbelieving boy, the face of an innocent, long dark hair lying in ringlets across his smooth, fair cheek.

Ramal awoke with a start at a breath of hot air and found himself looking into the face of the djinn only inches from his own. He sat up in bed and pulled the covers up to his chin.

Baktanus spoke with a voice like the tone of a great bronze bell. "Awaken to reality, mortal boy. Awaken and believe. I am the Djinn Baktanus, lord of the spirits of the desert wind, the spirits to whom you make no offerings, the spirits you fail to respect, the spirits you seem not to even acknowledge. What do you have to say for yourself now that I am here and in the flesh? Do you believe?"

Ramal stared in wonder at the smoke rising up where the Djinn's hand rested on his smoldering blankets while he considered his best reply. From his lessons he remembered that holy writ said that the Djinn were "created of subtlest fire", and that nature might well be reflected in disposition as well as in body temperature. When he spoke his words were chosend carefully.

"My lord, perhaps your servants were misled as to my beliefs. No one with eyes to see or ears to hear could fail to believe in the powers which move the wind and the storms. 'Tis foolish to deny facts which are so evident."

"Then why don't make offerings like your friends and family? Why don't you make signs of warding or mumble charms for your protection?"

"Why? Though I may believe, I don't choose to submit. My will has always been my own and while it is, you have no power over me. You may beguile and harass and annoy me with your minions, the foolish Zefir, the terrible Sammum and the dread Marid, but that's all. So, though I respect and believe in you, be gone my lord, for I will not serve you."

Baktanus rose to his feet in horror, his great bald pate striking sparks from the beams of the bedchamber roof. In his innocence the boy had deduced the dark secret of the Djann, that from the first days their great power brought with it a great weakness, that while they could effect the inanimate world freely, they could only truly harm those whose fear allowed them to be mastered.

Baktanus drew back and hissed in rage at the stupid, fearless boy. The fires of mad temper burst in the coals of his heart.

"Listen, feeble boy who says he knows our secrets. If we have weaknesses, so do you, and we will make your heart burn for your pride and the insolence you have shown us."

With that, the door of the bedchamber blew open behind him and Baktanus hurled himself through the house in the form of a great ball of fire. Everything he passed, every rug, every wall, every drapery burst into flame. Within moments the house of Kabir was an inferno. Mother and father and servants burned in their beds before they could awaken. Only Ramal escaped, to wander dazed and soot covered in the street dressed only in his nightshirt. As roof and walls fell in, a blazing ball of fire shot through the sky to the east across the desert.

While the heat from the last embers of his home warmed Ramal's tear-streaked face, a cool desert breeze blew on the back of his neck sent from some far off mountain tower where a great, golden Djinn wept in frustration and defeat.

Improve Your Spelling...
Carl Jones

The Mysteries of Mana

This little supplement is designed to add on to the **Ysgarth** magic system as found in **SpellCraft** and also provide some necessary changes and modifications, particularly to the system for handling enchantment. Also provided are a selection of new spells for several different disciplines.

In revising the system for enchantment, eliminate the previous versions of the spells *Create Matrix*, *Extended Matrix*, *Bind Soul* and *Mana Gathering*. *Mana Gathering* is now replaced with a skill of the same name, as indicated in the general errata sheet. The other spells are replaced by new versions provided here.

When doing enchantments follow these guidelines. No more than one matrix can exist on an object at a time, including living souls, so matrices cannot occupy the same area or be placed on living beings. Spirits bound in objects may try to break free as indicated in the new version of *Bind Spirit*, initiating a will battle against a defensive barrier established by that spell. There is now a clear differentiation between purely mechanical matrices and 'living' matrices. Regarding spells like *BladeSharp* and *Seeking Blade* with the classifications DEC or DJC, these spells are not restricted by the normal limitation on increasing duration by increasing Casting Level. Finally, spells of identical classifications cast in the same area or on the same object interract automatically by negating each other.

The other major change is to note that nothing should ever really be permanent, a fact which can be addressed by introducing the idea of spell decay. Spells which exist for a long time, especially large and powerful enchantments, have a tendancy to break down and to mutate because of the mass and power of the mana which they gather. Basically, spell decay takes place within a radius of about 3 meters. Enchantments and long-term spells within that area eventually begin to exchange mana and become deformed. The rate of loss of mana strength of enchantments in an area is the Total MP in the Area/100 MP per day off of each matrix, spell or enchantment individually. The MP of persons who stay in that area are also included and effected. The ultimate result of this decay is variable. Initially it is just an effect of draining of power from items, but once 50% of the MP in the locus have been drained off degeneration begins instead. At this point there is a MP/10% chance per spell or matrix that radical degeneration will take place. Several types of degeneration are possible. Mana in the area can begin to be repelled from the area at an accelerated rate (increasing 10% each day from that point on), powers may migrate from one matrix to another, spirits or living matrices may begin to gain influence over other matrices, all the matrices may begin to merge together, or most likely and most simply, mutation may begin to take place. Mutation results in changes in function or effect, categorized by a random change in one of the three letters of the spell classification, and adjustment of the nature of the enchantment to fit with that. In addition to this element of decay, Will Point bindings and barriers decay at the same rate that MP are lost from the matrix binding them. These changes should make enchantment work somewhat more reliably with more variety and less imbalance and inconsistency.

Finally, as a general rule modification, when a spell is raised to a higher Casting Level to increase effectiveness, it should be noted that additional CL are additive in determining new cost in MP and in determining MI. They are not multiplicative. Thus, if a spell was increased 3 CL on Range and 4 CL on duration, the resulting CL would be 7, not 12. In addition, it should be made clear that Base AP Cost does not increase with added CL, though MP Cost increases, as does the divisor for final MI. APC does not need to go up, since with increased CL the MI goes down and therefore it will probably be necessary to spend more AP to compensate. This means that *Warp Wood* cast at CL 5 to increase Range to 50 and Damage to 6 would have a CST of 20, an MPC of 60 and the other stats would stay the same. For a caster with an MI of 1000 with the spell his MI would drop from a standard base of 250 to only 50, which would effectively require him to double his AP to have a 100% chance of success. Using these changes should help strengthen mages considerably in areas where they were weak and slow previously.,

New & Revised Spells

These new spells are provided for your use, some because they fit with the changes in the enchantment system, but most just because they are needed. Use them wisely.

Warp Wood

CST: 4	MPC: 12	APC: 1800	FPC: 36	SAV: NA
RAN: 3	DUR: X	DAM: -2MD	CLS: DPC	GRP: HE

This will cause wood to warp. It will eventually warp and deform any piece of wood, but the most useful specific application is probably in warping or deforming a wooden weapon to reduce its effectiveness. Each CL will reduce MD of such a weapon by 2, and decrease AR or DR when using that weapon by 10%, as well as increasing the chance of that weapon breaking by 10%. Note that the range is a radius, effecting all wood in that area, so if it is cast on a quiver of arrows, they are all warped.

Guide Growth

CST: 3	MPC: 10	APC: 600	FPC: 12	SAV: NA
RAN: T	DUR: X	DAM: NA	CLS: CJC	GRP: HE

This will guide the growth of any plant into whatever form or special shape the caster chooses (within realistic limitations for that type of plant). It does not accelerate growth, and need only be cast once, with the results appearing as the plant matures.

Healing Wood

CST: 11	MPC: 9	APC: 2700	FPC: 54	SAV: NA
RAN: T	DEL: 12H	DAM: 20	CLS: CQD	GRP: HE

This allows the caster to use the healing power of a living plant to cure a human being. It requires that the tree be split open and the

wounded person sealed inside it, borrowing from the lifeforce of the tree for the delay period, at the end of which time the indicated amount of healing will be done, either overall or spread equally among the areas wounded. Note that only part of the persons body need be sealed within the tree if that is the only area that needs healing.

Neutralize Mass

CST: 3   MPC: 8   APC: 1200   FPC: 24   SAV: NA
RAN: 10   DUR: 1Mi   DAM: -30lb   CLS: DOC   GRP: WI

This will reduce the mass of a single object or being by the indicated amount. If mass is reduced to less than zero then the object will begin to actually be repelled from the earth and float upwards.

Matrix of Binding

CST: 9   MPC: 12   APC: 2500   FPC: 50   SAV: NA
RAN: T   DUR: 1We   DAM: 10MP   CLS: AND   GRP: EN

This creates a matrix located in a non-living (soulless) item which will hold cast spells for its duration, and release them in accordance with a trigger established at the same time that it is cast using the spell *Triggering*. As the spells placed in the matrix are released, they are permanently erased from the Matrix, and when the last spell in the Matrix is expended then the matrix is gone. A Matrix will hold up to 10MP of spells per casting level and no additional mana above the casting of the spell and creation of the Matrix need be expended. The AP cost to trigger a spell from this sort of Matrix is always 20 AP regardless of the spell in question or its power.

Living Matrix (Pseudosoul)

CST: 14   MPC: 15   APC: 2700   FPC: 54   SAV: NA
RAN: T   DUR: 1We   DAM: 10MP   CLS: AMF   GRP: EN

This is a very different approach to enchantment. Instead of creating a purely mechanical matrix, the caster creates an artificial imitation of a living soul. This creation has virtually no intelligence or rational ability (under normal circumstances), and will perform its function reliably. With each casting level it has the equivalent of a TAL of 1, with a resevoir of 10MP. It will generate its own MP at the rate of Total MP Capacity/30 MP per day. Mana Points can also be fed into it using the *Mana Channelling* spell. With each CL it also gets 10 LSP, which can be used to essentially teach it, or to program it with spells. It can cast spells at a number of CL equal to the number of SL of that spell which it has 'learned', or at a lower level when prompted with a *Triggering* spell, which needs to be cast on it in order to make it function. All spells are cast at 95% MI, and the casting time is 1/5th of the normal APC of the spell, taking casting level into account. The Living Matrix must be created in a physical object which does not have a soul or matrix of any kind already.

Mana Channelling

CST: 11   MPC: 14   APC: 1550   FPC: 31   SAV: NA
RAN: T   DUR: 1We   DAM: 30MP   CLS: AKC   GRP: EN

This allows the caster to move mana from one place to another. If it is cast, or if it is in an item, it allows the caster to move mana from his own spirit into that item. It will not allow mana to be moved from an involuntary target, and MP paid to cast the spell are not transferred. In addition, once the spell is cast, additional MP can be transferred for the duration of the spell at a cost of 1 MP lost per 3 MP transferred.

Bind Soul

CST: 8   MPC: 15   APC: 1100   FPC: 22   SAV: S
RAN: 10   DUR: 1We   DAM: NA   CLS: ANC   GRP: ENMY

This will bind a soul or other naturally generated spirit into an object as long as no other matrices or spirits are already there. Both spirit and caster must agree to this and the spirit must not already be bound to some other object, like its body. *Sever Soul* can be used to separate spirits and bodies. If the spirit is unwilling to be bound, it must be dominated in a Will Battle, which can be initiated with an appropriate spell. Once a spirit is bound, it may attempt to break free, doing Will Battle with a barrier equal to Caster's WIL x 5 Will Points per CL of the spell. Note that at Casting Level 1 *Bind Soul* only works on spirits equal to or lower than the level summoned with *Lesser*

Summoning. 2 CL are needed for spirits of the level of *Prime Summoning*. 3 CL are needed for spirits of the level of *Greater Summoning*. Once a spirit is bound, it can be programmed just like a Living Matrix, or it can be compelled with a Trigger to use its own spells, if it has them. Spirits which are bound are of varying levels of power, but Lesser Spirits usually have around 50 MP, Prime Spirits around 100 and Greater Spirits around 200. Skill Points for programming such a spirit should be at about the same level as the spirit's MP.

Analyze Enchantment

CST: 7   MPC: 9   APC: 4000   FPC: 80   SAV: NA
RAN: T   DUR: X   DAM: NA   CLS: ACC   GRP: ENDI

This will tell the caster the nature of the enchantment on an object, the contents of a matrix, or the nature of an ongoing spell which is effecting a specific target. Specificity is limited by the ability of the caster to comprehend the magic used, to some degree.

Soul Claw

CST: 17   MPC: 22   APC: 900   FPC: 18   SAV: TAL
RAN: 10K DUR: 1Da   DAM: S   CLS: ANB   GRP: ENNE

This creates a bond between the soul of a target and the caster. At any time during the duration the caster may activate the soul claw. He can either cause extreme pain for the target, with a loss of all mental AP while that effect is being triggered, or it can be used to cause death if a WIL save is failed. The TAL save is made at the time of casting. An excellent spell for getting someone to do what you want. The second range is the distance over which the spell can be activated to torment or slay.

Summon Minor Spirit

CST: 11   MPC: 11   APC: 2500   FPC: 50   SAV: NA
RAN: 1K   DUR: 10Mi DAM: NA   CLS: AHD   GRP: DISH

This summons a natural spirit of fewer than 30 WP and automatically binds him to the service of the caster for the duration of the spell. These spirits have limited magical powers, are non-material, not particularly intelligent, but can communicate with the caster. The exact nature of the spirit to be summoned is somewhat flexible. They are usually extremely weak elementals, like sprites or zephyrs, and are primarily used for surveillance. They can do no damage, but are easily dispelled with a variety of protective spells and barriers, or with a simple eliminate mana.

Horrific Revelation

CST: 5   MPC: 15   APC: 2500   FPC: 50   SAV: NA
RAN: 10   DUR: 1CR   DAM: 60AP   CLS: BAC   GRP: DI

This reveals to a single target his worst nightmare, plucked from his mind and sent back to it as an interractive hallucination. It causes AP loss, can disorient the target, and can even cause death in thos of particularly weakness, at the discretion of the GM.

Miniaturization

CST: 10   MPC: 20   APC: 3600   FPC: 72   SAV: TAL
RAN: T   DUR: 1Da   DAM: NA   CLS: AEC   GRP: EN

This takes a single being or object of up to 5 cubic meters in volume and reduces it to 1/10th of its original size for the duration of the spell, though it can be returned to full size on command by the caster. Beings reduced in size are not harmed, but their abilities are appropriately reduced.

Compass

CST: 9   MPC: 9   APC: 200   FPC: 4   SAV: NA
RAN: T/S DUR: 10Mi DAM: NA   CLS: GND   GRP: DIEN

When cast on an object, like a needle, this will cause that object to invariably point north, or in any other consistent physical direction of the caster's choice, like up, down, east, west, etc.

Transvision

CST: 4   MPC: 6   APC: 450   FPC: 9   SAV: NA
RAN: 10   DUR: 1Mi   DAM: NA   CLS: BKC   GRP: DI

This allows the caster to displace the locus of his vision to any location within range, even if he cannot see that location or has not

been there, assuming he can visualize the new perspective relative to his current location. It allows the caster to look around a room without entering it, for example.

Show Path
CST: 12   MPC: 9   APC: 1000   FPC: 20   SAV: NA
RAN: 100   DUR: 10Mi   DAM: NA   CLS: ABD   GRP: DI

This will create a magically marked pathway, visible only to the caster from his current location to a specific target or location with which he is familiar. It will choose the easiest, most practical path, limited by conditions set by the caster at the time of casting (for example, 'no climbing', 'without crossing water', etc). It will assess physical obstructions, and overlook them if they can be breached or opened by the caster.

Analyze Dimensions
CST: 2   MPC: 4   APC: 1400   FPC: 28   SAV: NA
RAN: 10   DUR: I   DAM: NA   CLS: DCC   GRP: DI

This will inform the caster of all of the dimensions and specifications and measurements of a specific target, including any

relatively complex aspects if the caster can conceive of them, such as velocity and specific gravity.

Entropic Curse
CST: 7   MPC: 9   APC: 800   FPC: 16   SAV: TAL
RAN: 10   DUR: 1Ho   DAM: 5%   CLS: AEB   GRP: EN

This increases the weight of entropy on a specific target or object if a TAL save is failed. Each CL will increase the chance of fumbling all spells, saving rolls or attacks by the indicated amount for each CL. It can be cast on a weapon or object, or on a person. It increases the fumble percentage with that weapon or by that person in all instances for the duration of the spell.

Transformation
CST: 13   MPC: 13   APC: 1000   FPC: 22   SAV: TAL
RAN: 10   DUR: 1Ho   DAM: NA   CLS: CPE   GRP: BESH

This transforms any single target within range into any creature or object with which the caster is familiar without doing any actual physical damage to the target. The target gains all of the

fects of damage are straight out of **D&D**. If I ran TSR I would sue Omnigon Games. If I ran Omnigon Games I'd be ashamed of myself. There's something admirable about imitating or borrowing ideas from a good game. It at least shows an acknowledgement of good game design. There's something pathetic about shamelessly ripping off a game as bad as **D&D**, making no effort to update or improve it, and then trying to sell it as your own.

Admittedly, not everything in **Omnigon** is straight out of **D&D**. Aside from the mechanics of the game, what background there is has its differences (it has to since this is a Science Fiction game), and there are some adjustments to the combat mechanics to take into consideration modern and future firearms. The set of player races which is presented replaces Elves and Dwarves with 'alien' races derived from anthropomorphizing Earth species. The history and campaign background which is presented is almost three pages long. Far more space is given to a lengthy set of weapon descriptions, an examination of vehicles and high tech toys which were highly reminiscent of traditional magic items. There's also a short section on alien creatures (monsters), all of which, even the fungoid beings called Fungee, are anthropomorphic. There is also a Psi/Spell system which works off of Psi Points, a laudable improvement over **D&D**. Finally, and perhaps most disappointing, is the one moment of hope in an otherwise grim package, the attempt at

a skill system. After character creation they begin to discuss skills, but it's a trick. There are only 16 non-combat skills, and every single one of them is an adventuring skill, picking locks, cracking computers, sneaking up on people. There's no option for skill in anything you couldn't use in battle or in a bandit raid. No intellectual skills, no scientific skills, not even a skill for piloting or navigating a space ship (I guess people teleport from planet to planet or something), much less driving or piloting the various neato surface and aerial vehicles which they detail. This skill system is pathetic and disappointing, raising our hopes and then really adding nothing to the game.

It's always easy to draw comparisons between any role-playing game and its ancestral roots in **D&D**. But it shouldn't be this easy. Even TSR has tried to bring their systems up to date. You'd think that if a small company wanted to compete and make a splash in the marketplace they would at least try to offer something that looked vaguely new. I want to defend small companies. I want to be able to praise them through the roof. They have the freedom to really burst out on the cutting edge of gaming. It makes me sick when they don't even pretend to try. Not even Avalon Hill or TSR would produce a game like **Omnigon** in their most desperate attempt to embrace the status quo of gaming. Even they would recognize this as a game which was ten years out of date before it saw print. How else can I say it? Don't buy **Omnigon**. If you buy it, I'll come by your house and laugh at you. (D N)

New & Noteworthy

To keep you informed about developments here at Ragnarok, we've put together this listing and description of our newest releases and forthcoming projects. While we make no guarantees about how accurately we will follow our proposed publishing schedule, the information found here is as accurate as we can make it. Our number of new releases was down during the past year, but in 1990 we expect things to pick up considerably. All of the items listed here may be ordered with the standard order form, and any items which are not yet in print will be sent as soon as they are released.

Black Altars

This is the seventh adventure in the **Ysgarth Adventure Series**. It presents an extremely detailed urban fantasy setting and five fully developed adventure to form a campaign based around issues of religious intrigue. It is the third in a sub-series of adventures set in the city of Tolemeias, following, but not dependant on, **Street Shadows** and **Dark Waters**. Together they cover all the aspects of urban life and adventure from a mature perspective, with intelligent, role-playing oriented adventures excellent for building and extended campaign. **Black Altars** is in a magazine-size 8 1/2 x 11 inch format, with a removable cover which contains all the maps and a separate sixteen-page section of text. Rules and statistics are provided for use with **Ysgarth** or **AD&D**. ($3.95)(2107)

Popes & Princes

This is one of our most ambitious projects, a boardgame of the Hundred Years War for up to 15 players. It covers economic, political and military conflict in the high middle ages, with lots of different strategies and rules which are comprehensive, but simple enough to learn in a few minutes. We've been working on **Popes & Princes** for almost fifteen years. No game has been more extensively playtested or more perfectly developed. You will fell like a medieval monarch struggling to form an empire and dominate the power of the church. **Popes & Princes** includes a 17x33 inch map, 10 sheets of counters, almost 200 playing cards, record sheets and complete rules. ($15.95) (5051)

EsperAgents

This is a complete role-playing game, with simple, flexible mechanics, complete background and four adventures, set in a near future world of social decay and psychic espionage. The players take the roles of psychic super-spies who use their special abilities to tear secrets from the very minds of enemy agents, or psychic investigators fighting the forces of the supernatural. **EsperAgents** includes the latest version of the complete basic rules of **To Challenge Tomorrow**, as well as additional mechanics for Psi Skills, new Psi and general skills, background, adventures and campaign suggestions. ($6.95) (6210)

Killers by Design

Now you can design your own psychotic killers for use with the **Psychos & Slashers** series of games, taking the classic card game into the realm of role-playing. Complete simple mechanics plus record sheets are included, and **Killers by Design** is fully compatible with all previous volumes of **Psychos & Slashers**. ($3.95) (5205)

Bag o' Bits

This supplement of **Psychos & Slashers** provides a large selection of new Killers, Settings, Weapons and Victims, as well as additional rules and cards to update **Suburban Slasher** and **Kamp Killjoy** and make them fully compatible with **Psychotic Settings**. ($5.95) (5204)

Psychotic Settings

The third in the shocking **Psychos & Slashers** series of games. **Psychotic Settings** expands the game onto a college campus and adds new rules and cards for a system of modular map settings which can be put together to form hundreds of different maps which add a whole new dimension to the game. ($6.95)(5203)

Coming Soon

These products are scheduled for release in the next few months. We don't guarantee the dates mentioned, but they will all be out before GenCon at the end of the summer.

Nighmare Realm

This is our most ambitious boargame project to date, a game which we hope will break into the mass market in a huge way. It is the 1890s and Eleanore Trellyn has been stricken with scarlet fever. She is in a delirious sleep and Dr. Drayton says that she will either die before dawn or her fever will break and she will awaken on the road to recovery. Her parents can't sleep for worry, but in Eleanore's dreams supernatural forces are at work. Thesix dreamlords are fighting for her soul, some to doom her and some to save her at the dawn. In the dreamworld, their minions, creatures of myth and legend, fight with wiles and sorcery across shifting terrain to see who will claim Eleanore's soul. Players take the roles of the dreamlords in fantastic battle. The mechanics are very flexible. **Nightmare Realm** is profusely illustrated with fantastic art in the Art Nouveau style of the 1890s. It includes seven map sections, cards for spells, weapons and creatures, record sheets, dreamlord character sheets and counters, all illustrated, all produced on heavy, glossy stock, boxed with a color cover. This is a lavish, unbelievably fun game, combining the best elements of role-playing and boardgaming. ($9.95 — Special Advance Price) (5041) (May 1990)

WorldCraft

This is the much awaited (and much delayed) third book of the fifth edition of **Ysgarth**. It contains a massive amount of information, including history, societies, demographics, linguistics, geography, meteorology, flora, fauna, adventures, world design and everything else you need to know about the world of Ysgarth and about world and campaign design in general. Also included are extended addenda and errata for the first two books of **Ysgarth** and a special solo adventure. **WorldCraft** is a 40 page full-size (8 1/2 x 11 inch) book, and is also available boxed with **RoleCraft** and **SpellCraft**. ($5.95) (4303) (July 1990)

Cyberia

You've never seen a Cyberpunk world like this. Society has gone to hell, biological warfare, polution and runaway technology are twisting humanity beyond all recognition, but in their grubby little rooms spread across the blighted urban landscape, the computer jockies have linked their minds together through the vast computer network and something new and strange is growing, the nation of Cyberia. Cyberia is a world which exists in the imagination and in the minds of interactive computers, where human hackers and giant artificial intelligences have staked claims and built their own alternate realities. Wireheads stay jacked in for days for the special pleasures which the lawless areas of Cyberia can offer. And on the outskirts there are the evil intelligences of New Providence, dead brains kept alive beyond their time, programmed into the network because of their power, influence and knowledge. In the would outside society is decaying, governments are crumbling and giant corporations are buying up the souls of humanity, but in Cyberia a rebellious movement is growing. **Cyberia** gives some original personality to a popular genre and includes complete mechanics and three adventures. (6206) ($6.95) (June 1990)

In the Long View

A variety of new products are planned for later this year or early next year. We aren't accepting orders for most of them yet, but we thought you'd like to know about them. **Across A Million Years** is a new TCT based game for time-travel and alternate universe adventuring. **Pacific Passage** is a new boardgame to go with **Middle Passage** and **Passage to Cathay** covering the China trade in the late 18th and early 19th century. **Guns at Noon** takes TCT into the old west with revised rules and several adventures. **Tales of the New Odyssians** is a collection of Victorian era horror and espionage adventures for use with **London by Night** or **Esperagents**. The **To Challenge Tomorrow Campaign Book** with background and adventures for a number of settings is in the works. The sixth edition of **Ysgarth** is also scheduled for release sometime this year. It will be a single rather impressive looking book with revised rules and all the contents of the three books of the current third edition.

Remember -- We now take Visa and MasterCard orders by mail or by phone at 512/472-6534

1990 SIGMA AWARDS

Any game or game-related product released or produced in the calendar year 1989 is eligible for the SIGMA Awards. Any interested gamer may vote in the SIGMA Awards using this ballot or any reasonable facsimile. Only one ballot per person. Ballots are not valid unless they are signed and include a verifiable name and address. You may vote for up to three products in each category. If a second round of voting is required, anyone who voted in the first ballot will receive a final ballot. A final selection of a winner and a 'Honorable Mention' will be made in each category. Please send all ballots to the address provided below by August 1st, 1990.

BEST ROLE-PLAYING GAME
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BEST RPG AID/SUPPLEMENT
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BEST STRATEGY GAME
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BEST STRATEGY GAME AID
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BEST MINIATURE FIGURE
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BEST COMPUTER GAME
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BEST PLAY-BY-MAIL GAME
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BEST PERIODICAL
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NAME: _____
ADDRESS: _____
CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP CODE: _____

The Society of Independent Game Manufacturers
3716 Robinson Avenue, Austin, TX 78722

Abyss Magazine
3716 Robinson Ave., Austin, TX 78722

SIGMA AWARDS 1989

Society of Independent Game Manufacturers

Best Role-Playing Game
GURPS: Space
Steve Jackson Games

Best RPG Aid/Supplement
Cyclopedia Talislanta
Bard Games

Best Strategy Game
Sky Galleons of Mars
Game Designer's Workshop

Best Strategy Game Aid
Psychotic Settings
Ragnarok Enterprises

Best Miniature Figure
Aztec Army
Ral Partha Enterprises

Best Computer Game
Pool of Radiance
Strategic Simulations

Best Play-by-Mail Game
Kings & Things
Andon Games

Best Periodical
White Wolf Magazine
White Wolf Publishing

Popcorn Wagon
16.7 USA 1902
Bulk Rate