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On the Death of Tékumel

Your editor, in his final Issue, makes a plea to save Tékumel

It's not often that you get the opportunity to do things over; to make good the mistakes you've made in the past. I often think that's because we often don't realise that the mistake has been made, or we are not willing to admit to it because of the investment we've already made in the mistake itself. Maybe it needs someone to come along and say, "Hey, I think you're on the wrong track!" I intend to do that for Tékumel, whether my opinion is welcome or not. It's the prerogative of an editor writing his last Issue.

I've been playing on Tékumel for 20 years now since, on a dull June afternoon, I ventured into Nyelmu's garden with a group of fellow adventurers who were hell bent on internecine strife. We spent nearly 6 hours battling each other at a T-junction. After that I became Ghulfang, who wielded the black scimitar Thanaphon; Qolyemu, who became something other human; Purudesh; Ahanbasrim; Kanmi'yel, who became two separate Nlüss; Khepfrish, the archer who wounded Mirusiya during the civil war; Yaksibi the lawyer; Ssúdussanu, the hired thug; Zaklengu, the gigantic freak; Shorun and many others. All-in-all it's been a fun 20 years, but the good times look like they're coming to an end.

They're coming to an end because Tékumel is dying. Yes, there is a core of devoted fans amongst whom I number myself, but the number isn't growing too fast. Most of the players I know are over 30 and many are very close to the big 4-0. New players appear now and again, but I don't hear too many stories about the good Professor's yacht or his private Lear jet, so I guess they're not appearing in vast numbers. I don't think there are enough new players coming along even to maintain a critical mass and without that the end of Tékumel is only a matter of time.

The problem, you see, is the fixation that the RPG industry has on rules. You can't sell a new game without rules. You can't sell an old game without changing the rules trivially so that you can call them "advanced" or "new" or "realistic". Tékumel has suffered from this more than any game world. The original EPT rules weren't the greatest, but they worked well enough for the time. Swords and Glory were a vast improvement, but you still needed to interpret them to make scenarios work and to get around little inconsistencies. GURPS Tékumel was a good idea, but you still needed to keep your wits about you to stop rules Issues from becoming scenario Issues. Gardásiyal, leaving aside my well known opinion of the production quality, was OK but no improvement over S&G. Now, if you stand back, you can see the problem: Too much effort wasted on the rules and not enough on the world.

It's an interesting point that comes clear with hindsight. Even while all these different game systems were being published, some player groups were still producing their own. Yet no-one has rewritten the source book. They all want to keep the setting faithful to "real" Tékumel. After all, it's the painstaking detail, the exotic world, the coherence and vision that attract most people to Tékumel. Being Tsolyáni is a real role-player's challenge, especially for those of us brought up in an egalitarian Western society. There's a mythology and a history that actually make sense, not just some bastardised, third-class Middle Earth. There's a language primer that got even me interested in linguistics. There are even two half-way decent novels.

So, do I think saying "kill the rules, keep the world" will bring Tékumel role-playing back to where it should be? No. I still think it should be done, though. I think Gardásiyal, Swords and Glory, Adventures on Tékumel, whatever else. should be let quietly slip away, but unfortunately that's only half the solution. There's still the problem of getting that critical mass of new players. That's not easy to do and I think it can only be done with a sacrifice. It's a sacrifice that I don't think will be popular in some quarters and I have the most selfish reason of all for proposing it. In 20 years time, I still want to be able to sell my little boat in Jakálla harbour and head off for a life of adventure.

I guess the idea that inspired me was the Browser Wars. If you're not into computers that mightn't mean anything to you, so I'll explain it. Two multi-billion dollar corporations, Microsoft and Netscape, are fighting for market share by giving stuff away for free. They're happy because they know you'll be so impressed with the product that you'll want to actually pay for some of their other stuff. You're happy because you got some first-rate software for free (even if it is only yet another "beta"). I think the same thing has to happen to Tékumel. Put part (not all) of it into the public domain or license it for free. Put the Source Book onto the Internet. Encourage new players to read it and use it. It sounds weird, but maybe then there'll be ten thousand or a hundred thousand people who prefer Tékumel to any other gaming world, who may actually pay for follow-up material from the Professor himself.

Maybe you're sceptical. Maybe you think this is doing a disservice to Phil. Maybe you think it's none of my business. Maybe you think I have some ulterior motive. All I can do is point out the facts. If the strategy hasn't worked for the last 20 years it's not going to suddenly start working now. Without change, Tékumel is dead.

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