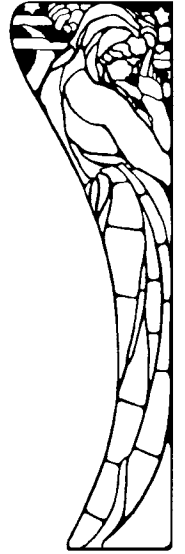


THE LOG THAT FLIES

#19

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TONIGHT'S EPISODE: DARK AT THE EDGE OF TOWN



Unemployment has been pleasant for these last few weeks; it's lovely to wake up every morning and know that I'm free. I could get used to this...

Now that I'm having Interregnum copied at a commercial service, I'll need to be a bit more careful about the size of my zine. I've made a few changes to the format of The Log That Flies to keep the page count down. A smaller font, less leading between lines...I hope that the overall look of the zine doesn't suffer. Who knows? Perhaps it will be an improvement.

There is one odd thing about my unemployment so far, though; I've done very little writing. That being the case, I'll use this issue just to catch up on topics and comments...

Topic #18: Future Imperfect?

It doesn't take a Ph.D. in psychohistory to see where the roleplaying hobby is headed. Since it peaked as a fad in the eighties, there have been fewer and fewer gamers around—and those that *are* available tend to be older. I haven't seen a roleplayer under the age of 20 in a long time. That's not a good sign.

Even the "core" group of older gamers has diminished. Several old-time gamers have written to me in the last few months to tell me that they're dropping their IR subscriptions because they're not roleplaying any more. All of these people were reading The Wild Hunt from its earliest days, and so must be in their forties at least (for those who might be concerned, we've picked up some new people too—and all of the people who

dropped their subscriptions were well into negative numbers in their accounts, anyway).

Putting together a group of gamers is an almost Sisyphian task these days. Most game stores devote more space to collectible card games than to RPG material, and there seems to be less new RPG material being published overall. The recent death of GDW is only the most visible example of the widespread pattern of disappearance of game companies. All this is anecdotal, but I'm convinced that old-fashioned traditional roleplaying is a dwindling pastime.

Of course, there's always the possibility of an anomalous rebirth of the hobby. That *might* have happened if Wizards of the Coast hadn't dropped their plans to produce a roleplaying game connected to Magic: The Gathering, though such a game would have had to be exceptional to successfully spark a gaming renaissance (and in any case, I suspect that new players wouldn't have been likely to try non-card RPGs). A renewal of roleplaying as a fad seems unlikely under present circumstances.



To sum up, then, it seems most likely that roleplaying as a hobby will continue to dwindle over the years. Most gamers will be over 60 by the year 2030; as they age and die their numbers will not be replenished. Long before that time the market for traditional roleplaying materials will have dropped to a point where it cannot sustain even a single profitable company, not even TSR. Game companies will have to move into new areas to survive; witness Avalon Hill's decision to move the main focus of the company to computer games, the headlong flight of many RPG companies into disastrous collectible card games, *Shadis* magazine's recent move away from RPGs and towards CCGs instead, and the introduction of new lines of fiction by Chaosium and White Wolf.

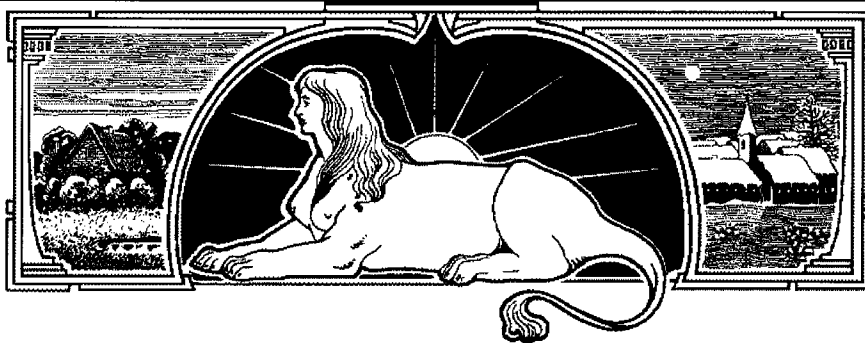
Old-time gamers and the few of their children who have been dragged into the hobby will have to rely on their old game books, use home-brewed systems, and perhaps publish non-commercial material on the net (or whatever equivalent is in use in 2060).

Will the hobby disappear entirely? The answer depends on the number of children who are brought into roleplaying. Gamers don't appear to be a particularly fecund lot—I know very few gamers who have children, and of those few many *stop* gaming once their children are born—so the odds are that there will, in fact, no longer be traditional roleplaying after 2060 or so. The material will remain in books and in electronic form, but gaming will be a dead art.

But the future isn't entirely bleak. On the positive side, the death of roleplaying means that anti-gaming groups will no longer have anything to attack. ☺

Better yet, many of the skills and concepts of gaming seem likely to continue in other forms. For example, it seems very likely that interactive entertainment will become more and more popular in the years to come; and the concepts and archetypes of roleplaying are shared by most forms of interactive entertainment. Friends who've designed best-selling CD-ROM games tell me that the principles of game design and plot construction known to any decent gamemaster are extremely applicable to computer game design. And *Call of Cthulhu*'s Sandy Petersen is an excellent example of a roleplayer who has made the (highly lucrative) crossover to entertainment software design.

As new and more powerful types of interactive entertainment are developed, the skills and patterns developed by roleplaying may well become quite valuable. Who knows? In ten years colleges may be



offering degrees in plot construction, game pacing, and effective NPC creation.

But even if all this *does* happen, the disappearance of traditional roleplaying will be regrettable. The personal touch and social aspects of gaming will be smothered by the corporate approach. For example, imagine a traditional RPG campaign run by the Disney™ corporation. It would no doubt be slick, well-written, professionally acted...and sterile. The range of player action would be subtly but definitely constrained to fit within strait-laced corporate standards. And instead of filling their traditional role as wondering monsters, Giant Rats would be worshipped as gods. ☺

Topic #19: Struck by Structure

Fundamental to any roleplaying campaign is the conceptual structure which controls it. That structure is the basic frame upon which the gamemaster creates the framework of the campaign, like a tapestry on a loom; as the initial pattern is set, so the goes the game. And yet the creation of campaign structure is rarely considered as a subject in itself.

The basic building block of all plot structure is the *story*; a flow of events containing a beginning, a middle, and an end. This essential unit can be used in three ways. There are few unalloyed examples of these forms in the real world, of course; many stories combine different elements from various forms, with one type predominating.

I. The Stand-Alone

A > B > C

A stand-alone story is self-contained; the point of the story is the telling or playing of it, and once the end is reached there is nothing more to be said. In roleplaying, the one-shot scenario is an example of a stand-alone structure. Made-for-TV movies follow this pattern; so do many short stories. Anthology shows such as *The Twilight Zone* are an excellent example of collections of unrelated stand-alone plots. This structure offers the advantage of extreme clarity and comparatively little commitment of time. It is limited in

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effectiveness, however. Compared to other, longer forms it doesn't give the creator enough time to develop sub-themes and characterization. In a game, players won't have enough time to build a strong attachment to their characters. On the other hand, a series of unconnected stand-alones allows treatment of many widely differing stories and settings.

II. A Never-Ending Cycle

$A > B > C > A > B > C$ (repeat until failure)

Take a set of characters—appealing ones, if possible. Produce a string of unconnected stories about them. The result is a cyclical plot structure. This is the most common story form used on television; almost every drama and sitcom falls into this pattern. So do most comic books. Early roleplaying campaigns used this form almost exclusively, and I suspect that it is still the most popular type of campaign.

The advantages of this form are several. In a way, it provides the greatest quantity of material for the effort expended by the creator; once the characters and setting are created, new stories may be plugged into the formula with ease. Since the basics never change, little or no upkeep is necessary. The formula can be repeated indefinitely; participants will have a chance to become familiar with the characters and develop attachments. Individual characters and settings can be more richly developed over time, as they accrue additional details—though the creator(s) must be careful not to alter the basic structure, lest the cycle be disrupted and disaffect participants/consumers.

The cyclical form offers advantages from a financial perspective, too. As the only form which has the potential to continue indefinitely, it is ideally suited to a medium such as television in which the ultimate point is marketing. Obviously a successful and potentially eternal structure is appealing to advertisers...

...which is itself a disadvantage, of course. In television the purpose of the cyclical series is not to tell a story, but to protect a profit-making entity. Thus a disadvantage of the cyclical form is its inherently static quality. Successors to the original *Star Trek* series are an excellent example of this; corporate executives have made no secret of the fact that their only purpose in producing the show is to “protect the franchise” and thereby their profits. Absolute changelessness is the law. Thus far this approach seems to have been successful

from a financial viewpoint, though it is arguable that the *Star Trek* story and universe have been diminished by it.

One interesting aspect of the cyclical story pattern is the means by which it ends. The point of such a pattern is to continue indefinitely; as with all things, the series will eventually become stale and unprofitable. Since there is no provision for winding the cycle up, however, the result is that cyclical stories often end abruptly, with little or no sense of closure. In the case of television, this means either no ending at all or a hasty wrap-up episode with no meaningful connection to the preceding body of work. This results in unsatisfied viewers.

III. The Meta-Cycle

Also known as an “arc”, the meta-cycle is a long-duration story form that has a beginning, middle, and end. This type can be divided into two sub-forms: “Padded” and “Expanded”.

$A > abc > abc > (B?) abc > abc > C$

Padded story structures are a fairly straight combination of types I and II. Between the beginning and end of the entire cycle are any number of sub-stories. These sub-stories have comparatively little impact on the

overarching story. In such a structure, the existence of a “middle” point is usually academic; between the beginning and the end all stories are interchangeable. There is little difference between this form and that of a Never-Ending Cycle that includes a beginning and ending, and the advantages and disadvantages are similar to the Type II form.

$A > aa > ab > B > bb > bc > C$

In the expanded meta-cycle structure the basic story is enlarged to a large but limited extent; there is a beginning, middle, and end, each of which is developed in greater detail. The basic story is given greater elaboration and depth, through sub-cycles with associated sub-plots and recursions.

This is the most complex of the various structures. It is also the least common in any medium.

The expanded meta-cycle is a form of *saga*, and as such its roots are ancient. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are excellent historical examples of this form; in modern literature, *The Lord of the Rings* is an obvious exemplar. Both *The Prisoner* and *Babylon 5* are combination forms, containing type II and III elements; though they have definite arcs and go through an evolutionary process, there is a degree of “padding” used to add bulk to the story. This



additional padding may be necessary to avoid the simplification of an expanded saga; otherwise viewer/participants might find every new plot point to be too obviously connected to the main plot. In other words, if everything that happens is significant to the story arc, the creator will suffer the considerable disadvantage of predictability and consequent boredom and disenchantment by consumers.

There are obvious advantages to the expanded meta-cycle. It allows the creator to tell a story in great detail; there is no limitation on length apart from those imposed by the medium (i.e., until the show is cancelled, the publishing option is dropped, or the players stop coming to the game).

A well-done saga is also addictive. As players/viewers/readers learn more about the characters and setting they come to *care* for them, too. The result is loyal fans who support the efforts of the creator, and often attempt to create their own additions to the story (which is, of course, the point in a roleplaying game).

The last advantage to the expanded meta-cycle is the least tangible, and the most difficult to define. It is a sense of meaning. By its nature the saga must have a *point*, and if the story is successful that point will be powerfully conveyed to the participants. It is even possible for that meaning to influence the participants' lives outside of the story itself, and thus to make a lasting mark on society. But in any case, a well-done arc, once completed, can be the most powerful form of storytelling possible. Each section of the arc gives added resonance and meaning to the whole.

Disadvantages are obvious. The expanded meta-cycle demands a maximum investment of time and skill. If handled poorly, it falls apart; and the failure is that much more painful to the creator because of the greater amount of work that has gone into the creative process. The structure is also less flexible than other forms. Additions and alterations must be weighed carefully to avoid disrupting the basic story. The expanded meta-cycle also demands more from the viewer/player, which can be a particular handicap in commercial media; once the saga has begun, bringing new spectators up to speed

on the storyline is difficult (come to think of it, that applies to roleplaying sagas as well).

* * *

All of these forms of story structure are used in roleplaying games, and I've run and played in all three types myself. Type I is any one-shot scenario; soloquests also fit within this category, and so do many **Paranoia** campaigns (I suspect that **TOON** games do as well, though I haven't played any).

Classic **AD&D™** roleplaying campaigns can be placed within category II, though the continuing improvement of character abilities provides an upward curve to the power level of the game that makes it a less than perfect example of the type; old-style **Traveller** with its lack of PC skill improvement is closer to an ideal Never-Ending Cycle, though typically characters tend to acquire money and equipment over time.

In my own experience I'm presently involved with an old-fashioned round-robin **RuneQuest** campaign which could be considered category II. It's fun, the characters are relatively low maintenance, and it's easy to create a scenario for the campaign.

"Deep" roleplaying campaigns can be generally placed in category III. My own Nereyon campaign fits that

category nicely: it has a definite beginning, middle, and end (though not reached yet), and has lasted for eight or nine years. Over that time the characters and world have evolved considerably, with numerous revelations that have required the players to reconsider past events in a new light. Conversely, their actions have changed the world and forced *me* to re-evaluate major plot points.

When I began this essay I assumed that insofar as the types would be compared to each other, the expanded meta-cycle would emerge as the superior structure. It was that form of roleplaying that drew me into the hobby, after all; and I've spent twelve or more years working on that form. On television, meta-cycle shows such as *The Prisoner* and *Babylon 5* have stood head and shoulders above other forms in my book. Of *course* sagas are the best way to go—or so I thought.

But that's not how it turned out. It's fortunate that I'm involved with

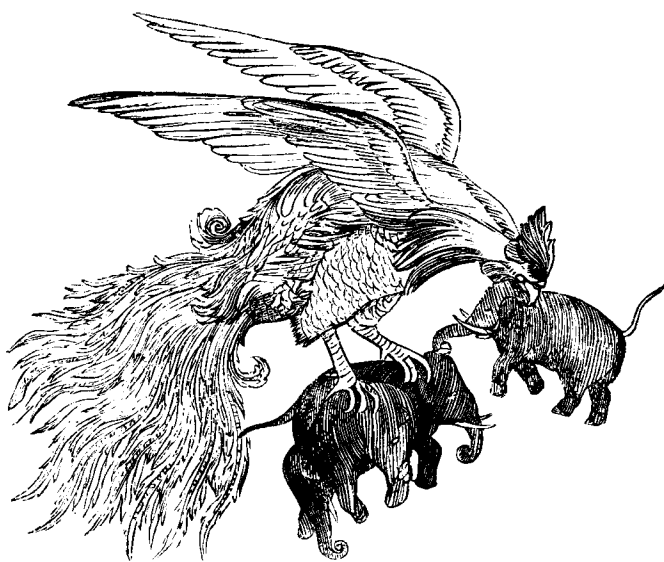


two RPG campaigns, one each of types II and III; that gives me a chance to compare. And to discover that comparisons of this sort are meaningless. It's a cliché, yes, but the fact is that *each* form has unique and valuable qualities. Each has its place. Perhaps the meta-cycle RPG campaign is under-represented in the gaming world, but then the effort for such a game is more than many people would want to expend—and in truth many GMs probably lack the skill and patience to develop such a campaign. Other forms offer different enjoyment and advantages, and the comparative success of type II roleplaying does not detract from the good points of type III.

In television, too, there are outstanding shows in all forms. *B5* and *The Prisoner* are well-written and enjoyable, but the original *Star Trek* is equally so—and that show is almost pure type II. And *The Twilight Zone* proves that a show that follows the type I pattern can be as meaningful and classic as any other.

The lesson, then (if one may be derived at all) is that though structure determines the nature of the entertainment, it is quality of writing (or in roleplaying games, quality of design) that determines how enjoyable the experience will be. Given the choice, I'd rather play in a type II campaign run by a great GM than in a type III game run by a mediocre one; just as I'd rather watch *The Twilight Zone* than *Star Trek: Voyager*. Hell, it isn't even a difficult choice. ☺

Okay, it's a lot of wordage to end with a *Voyager* slam...but have you *seen* that show? It's awful! ☺



Comments #17



Rich Staats: I was glad to get a good introduction to your campaign world, Rich! It was amusing to try and figure out where various elements had come from. The settings you'd like to try were quite interesting, too—ideas like those are the reason that I came up with the “Roleplaying Short Stories” concept (which, of course, never flew).

Virgil Greene: Congratulations on your new email address—I imagine you must have suffered some withdrawal pains during the interregnum (and that just might be the first time I've had an excuse to use that word in a sentence without referring to IR—just thought I'd point it out ☺). ✿ An interesting setting, Virgil. It seems somehow novelistic (is that a word?); have you considered writing short stories in that setting? ✿ “Player Character Suicide” was another useful addition to your growing number of articles on RPGs. One question, though: how does “Blaze of Glory” differ from “Self-Sacrifice”? ✿ Speaking of your articles, you may be interested to hear that a German WWW page called “Funstuff” has a direct link to your “Vampires: The Varieties” article in the [Interregnum](#) page...

Joe Teller & Kiralee McCauley: The Academy is an intriguing setting; I suppose you could actually set a campaign within its grounds without having much need to go beyond its boundaries. I'd like to see what points (if any) it has in common with the University of Tuos. ✿ Sorry that I messed up the formatting of your zine this time! Unfortunately when text is imported into my usual DTP program tabs and such are eliminated. If I hadn't been working at top speed I'd have caught the error when I proofread...oops! ✿ KM: Actually the Mage has the best ending in the [Interregnum](#) online soloquest; you must have missed it. I'm pro-magic too, which is why one of the spells that the Mage has results in the closest thing to a happy ending in the game—and I'm not talking about the Transformation spell. ✿ JT: I don't think our tastes in Heinlein are so very different...

Mike Lavoie: Hendrix. Clapton. Interesting choices of names for your NPCs...☺ ✿ About the “timed sequences” in the *Prisoners of Ice* CD-ROM game: is the speed required affected by the speed of your computer? Scott recently picked up a Pentium 120 motherboard, and some games now move so quickly on his system that it's impossible to play them. It seems to me that a good game would be able to limit itself to a maximum speed, no matter what the speed of the processor. ✿ It seems that at least four [Interregnum](#) people like *Warlock*; Lois and I enjoyed it too. If we ever have an IR party maybe we'll rent the video...

David Dunham: I'm going over Pendragon Pass more carefully now that I'm playing and GMing in a Glorantha setting; it's funny, but although many of the players are fairly familiar with Glorantha we have curious blind spots. For example, what exactly is the status of a *thane*? Are Tricksters hung by Orlanthi the moment they're recognized, or might they talk their way out of it? That sort of thing. Normally I'd make my own interpretations, but since the campaign is a rotating one consensus is an issue—and thus, so is textual authority. What sources of information do you use for your campaign? ✿ Re your Gloranthan campaign with PCs who are Dragonkill vets only—I'm curious. How do the players handle their characters? I'd think that there would be a high level of post-traumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, etc.. As a player I'd probably have Vietnam in mind.

Scott Shafer: I like the sound of your campaign world—the mixture of magic and technology has always interested me, perhaps because it hasn't been done to death anywhere *near* as much as either of its constituent genres. ✿ Technology can be “Taken”? Interesting. Do I detect some influence from the early books in Glen Cook's [The Black Company](#) series? ✿ I'm glad to hear that DSS is working out for you. Roughly how much does it cost? And are you using a cable or antennae to

get local channels? * Why would a godlike Nephilim want to merge with a mere human? * **Talisman** is okay, but has a definite burnout factor—for a while it seemed almost as popular as **Magic: The Gathering** (before the M:TG fad went completely nuts, anyway), but I don't know anyone who has played it in years. When you come right down to it, there just isn't any *skill* involved in the game...



Dave Dickie: Sorry to hear that your Net supplier is hassling you; connect-time charges are one reason that I decided to go with TIAC rather than The World (TIAC charges flat-rate instead). But I'm amazed that they're charging you retroactively for it...that's awful. * Re **Laurie Anderson:** I like her too. It's funny, though: do you realize that there are a lot of kids who probably wouldn't have a clue what an LP is? Future shock... * I'd skip the last several new **Watt-Evans** books—he really went downhill recently. His best stuff is mostly out of print. You can usually find some of his older works in any decent-sized used book store, though. * A nice **Kethem** collection—it gives a good perspective on the world. * I noticed that fragmentary border lines appeared here and there in this issue—a glitch?

George Phillies: Chess players may search through a million or more openings, but I strongly suspect that they use a computer to do it. My problem is that there is *no* computer index for the 135,000+ clipart images that I have on CD-ROM; I have to rely on two large and not-very-well-indexed books. The thumbnail images therein are tiny, and in some cases totally useless. The classification of images is often capricious, and in some cases the books list the wrong directory or worse, the wrong disk. In the case of the twelve-disk set the files aren't even named in a way that allow tracing, so that when someone wants a specific image from a past issue (as happened not too long ago) I must plow through *all* the thumbnails by hand. * Re American politics: the assumption that atheists are by definition evil continues to prevail, as noted in recent remarks by Buchanan. * Re *The Warrior Unseen*: the demonlord was quite menacing, which made his abrupt end seem somewhat anti-climactic. There may be a danger that Elaine is *too* powerful; despite her own fears it's becoming difficult to believe that anything can really threaten or defeat her. Still, this installment was exciting and well-written.

Tim Emrick: A much-belated welcome to **IR**. Tim! It's always good to see a fresh face. And I enjoyed your zine very much. * One question, though: how do you *pronounce* Y'ha-nthlei, anyway? * The campaign sounds neat—the characters are imaginative and different, and from the descriptions seem to have avoided the minmaxing that I remember was common with GURPS (and with most other character-design games, as I recall). Am I right in guessing that the game isn't necessarily as doom-bound as a standard CoC campaign? * "Fifi" caught my attention too—I couldn't help but visualize a Cthuloid french poodle, and immediately lost SAN. ☺ * Since you mentioned De Marigny, I must ask: Have you read the indescribably horrible novel *The Clock of Dreams* by Brian Lumley, in which he single-handedly gets HPL's coffin to reach RPMs never before witnessed? De Marigny was featured... * Speaking of the Dreamlands, I have it on good authority that a new **Dreamlands** book may be coming out before the end of the year...finally. * Your mention of the restricted access shelves of the Miskatonic Library remind me of a story in the news recently: it seems

that millions of dollars worth of ancient, irreplaceable books in the Library of Congress have had large chunks cut out and stolen. I wonder if Miskatonic has suffered the same fate? * Nice job on the handouts. * Incidentally, do your players read **IR**? Mine do, and I often have to think twice about what I can and can't include...for example, there's a scenario that I couldn't write up for this issue, because we're still playing it.

David Hoberman: Nice to see you back, David—I hope your schedule will allow you to write more often in the future. * Perhaps I shouldn't say it, but I have to: it was really fun DTPing your zine this time, trying to duplicate the look of the previous ones that you did yourself. Challenging... * Sorry about the subheading, but that space looked too empty—and all the previous issues had something there. I'd have been more witty, but I finished the job late at night. ☺ * Ranna and her cybersetting remind me of a character that I created for a short-lived campaign some time ago. He also suffered from extreme weakness (requiring a wheelchair), was extremely pale and thin, and felt that he only really *lived* in cyberspace...I always regretted that I didn't have more time to play him. * The tips on running a PBEM were well done. Have you considered writing tips on how to *play* in a PBEM? As a GM, your perspective would be valuable. * I loved the Quotes of Note, as always.

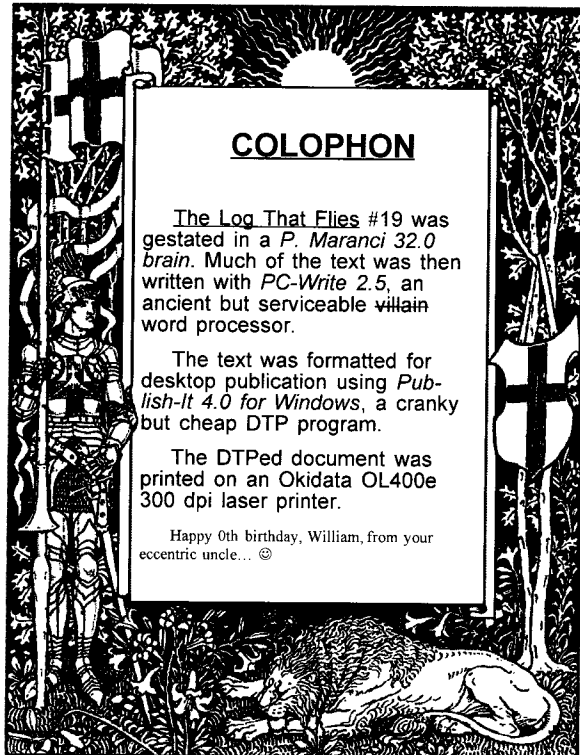
COMMENTS #18

Will I always be one issue behind? Stay tuned! ☺

NEXTISH:

Wish I knew...there are a lot of projects in the works. The difficulty is mustering the will to sit down in front of the computer and *write* the stuff. If I manage that, who knows? Maybe a scenario...with luck, even some fiction. In the meantime, take care!

—>Pete



COLOPHON

The *Log That Flies* #19 was gestated in a *P. Maranci 32.0 brain*. Much of the text was then written with *PC-Write 2.5*, an ancient but serviceable villain word processor.

The text was formatted for desktop publication using *Pub-lish-it 4.0 for Windows*, a cranky but cheap DTP program.

The DTPed document was printed on an Okidata OL400e 300 dpi laser printer.

Happy 0th birthday, William, from your eccentric uncle... ☺