The Zine That Would Not Die

RACK & RUNE #6: ~~DEATH FROM ABOVE!!!~~

Minutes before this issue was due, my desk top publisher died.
Thus the crude appearance... <sigh>. I hate my desk top publisher...
Then the printer died.

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Since Rack and Rune #5, a small but significant change has taken place for
me: I've acquired a modem. As a result, I've been spending nearly all my free
time BBSing. My writing output has definitely suffered as a result, leading
me to formulate the following theorem:

"The amount of time spent on PC telecommunications rises in direct inverse
proportion to the amount of time available for other activities."

Among these other activities is sleep. Need I say more? Perhaps someone
should design a twelve-step program for BBS-aholics. I may do a small article
on BBSes for the next R&R, if such would not be out of place. I could focus
on the gaming aspects of each... Oh yes, I am also now reachable through the
InterNet, as the address above shows.

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Swanson: Among other things,it was interesting to notice how much your print
quality has improved since 1984. An interesting example of an improvement in
technology over an historically insignificant time.

To what extent does the Rending derive from, or share common roots with,
Runequest's Heroquesting? Your write-ups were quite reminiscent of several
pieces in Tales of the Reaching Moon #7 (the Heroquest Special). Parallel
evolution?

Butler: As a grunt player in the SIL "Foundation & Destiny" game, I don't
mind telling you I came out of it mad as hell. At the end, I and my friends
were among those screaming for the various claimants to the Galactic Throne
to "fight for it"...and we weren't kidding. Among the complaints I heard, the
most convincing was that there was considerable bias built into the game
towards an in-group -- I witnessed discrimination myself on the part of one
of the GMs (not towards me; I have no personal axe to grind). This was not
what I expected from a supposedly adult organization.

Apparently at least some of the GMs completely ignored or negated some
players actions, without giving the slightest excuse. While I understand that
this is sometimes necessary, I can't shake the feeling that the plan was for
the "in-group" to be declared the winners at the end -- some experienced
players said as much.

By the way, I was the "Barni Seldon" anarchy group...and it was I who sealed the GMs room shut overnight with a radiation warning sign. Not that it did any good.

Derryberry: Hmmm. "...drags him back to his room and rapes him"? I have to wonder how this was handled, as I GMed a similar situation myself once. It was pretty much played for laughs, but I can imagine...problems. Was the seduction roleplayed, or was it based on some sort of "personality trait" roll? Also, pregnancy from a single encounter sounds a lot like GM intervention to me. How did your character/you feel about all this?

Say -- just how bad is Wisconsin, anyway (for gaming, I mean)?

Erlandsen: I don't enter contests anymore. However, I have managed to recover something of value from the Mattmark experience, as you'll read elsewhere in this issue.

Sheetless systems do indeed seem to encourage better roleplaying and character identification/development. Though good players can compensate for their "unnatural" self(character)-knowledge this compensation itself seems to detract from their enjoyment of the game.

The reason Hawk left was simple: he was a pig, and I didn't want him. In fact, he was the prototype for the "sexist pig" GM in the Hall of Shame. The first thing he did was ask Dara, the only female character/player, which of the other PCs she was sleeping with. This despite the fact that I'd emphasized that they were all brought up together, as brothers and sister!

In an early session, the PCs found a mysterious baby in the wild. They wondered how to feed it, among other things. Hawk's player looked contemptuous, and said to Dara:

"Can't you provide milk for it?"

"From where?" she asked bewilderedly (Dara was a young girl at the time).

"Well....make it!" he said, gesturing toward her chest.

Mind you, the player was not stupid. As far as I could tell, he was simply being a harassing pig -- that was how he got his kicks.

I called him the next day, and told him the game was cancelled. We kept on meeting same as always, of course. And it was much better without him. He'd also tended to stupid violence, in a world where violence by humans was punishable by death -- another reason the game was better off without him. I consider him a good example of a sort of D&D mentality -- not only confused by the concept of roleplaying, but actually affronted by it.

Jorenby: Welcome! Glad to see that you've decided to join the Hunt full-time (you have, haven't you? 8^>).

You seem to be working up an impressive body of work about Romance in RPGs, an element which is frequently overlooked. Just out of curiosity, what's your academic background? Do I detect some prior Sociology experience?

Nereyon...is a challenge. It's simply too much to write up, and so I'll be condensing the past several years into a few paragraphs. Now I wish that I'd kept notes...

Keller: Just out of curiosity, have you actually run or played in any of these? They sound like educational experiences, strangely enough. I've sometimes thought that many Americans need to experience despotism, that they might appreciate what we seem to be losing -- freedom -- now. Is the intention to carry over Paranoia's humor, as well?

Phillies: The Cordwainer Smith story I had specifically in mind was "Under Old Earth". The vast underground passages through which Lord Sto Odin travels seem like an ideal setting for a game. Also, within that setting players need not be Lords of the Instrumentality to be effective, nor would NPC Lords necessarily play a part in the campaign.

You're right; I should have called the cops on Mattmark. Too late now, though.

The Nereyon beginning is closely related to an article I wrote some time ago on forming PC groups as a natural basis of a roleplaying campaign. I rewrote the article several times to White Wolf's requests, and can no longer stand to look at the bloody thing. Maybe some day I'll get over it.

Gold: "Evil saints"? You'll have to define your terms -- in which case, you'll have answered the question. That seems to me to be a question of personal morality rather than roleplaying (though of course the two may coincide).

In regard to tests of character, the Pendragon system would offer one way to handle such situations. To me, however, this is unsatisfying. On the other hand, I must point out that by requiring characters to make "physical" sacrifices that parallel moral choices (i.e., take damage or lose money for doing what is right, you are demonstrating a wargaming approach to roleplaying. If the players are falling short in roleplaying, it seems to me that forcing them to take "mechanical" harm is self-defeating -- it affects them only so far as they look at the game from a wargaming, mechanical perspective. This is not likely to correct the situation.

Enjoyed the story about Ehud very much.

Ricker: Good luck at the new job.

Your description of Basic Role Playing-derived systems as "snapshots of a developing kernal" is the best I've seen yet. It makes a few things clear.

As far as the Instrumentality goes: Maybe I'm a freak, but it seems to me that Smith left more than enough material to extrapolate from. In any case, the incredible richness of the background makes considerable developmental work worthwhile for me. It's one of those series which I re-read every year or so, wishing that there was more and more...

Come to think of it, Herbert's Dosadi universe (composed of "Whipping Star" and "The Dosadi Experiment") is another such series. I much prefer it to the overblown "Dune" books.

Thanks for the typesetting suggestions. As you can see, I've implemented some of them. **(Not!) Maybe next time...**

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Swanson: I didn't realize teaching paid anything these days. Hope the job search is fruitful soon.

Glad to see that you're back on the InterNet. I've only been on it for a month or so, and already I feel as if I couldn't function without it.

Just out of curiosity, what do you plan to do with your writeups? They really should be seen by more people...

Derryberry: Actually, the best game I've been in have had three "core" players, one or two "minor" players, and a great GM. The CoC session was the only one in which I've been the only player. Maybe I should try it again.

I'm not at all sensitive about Vlad and Hawk Nereyon drop-outs -- as you can see above, I've just detailed the Hawk situation. Vlad's player, however, was the one who introduced me to the Hunt. Though I don't know if he still reads this, I'd rather not offend him. I'll therefore give a limited account of that event...at a later date.

"Voting with my feet"... for some reason, I usually don't do this. As it turns out, I somehow mortally offended the killer GM, who would no longer have me in his house. I'm not sure why, but I think it had something to do with an impromptu Lenny Bruce bit I did when I saw that he had those little metal cylinders holding Holy Script of some sort in the doorways. An Hebrew tradition, I believe. I'm a born iconoclast, and he didn't *seem* that religious. Oops.

Yes, Zanzibar the Mage is my character. I didn't quite create him, however; he's more the expression of my crankiness during long hikes.

John Mitzman is currently working on several papers. I don't know when (if at all) he'll be able to contribute to the Hunt again. But I'll pass on all comments...

Good job on Greentech.

Dunham: I read and enjoyed PenDragon Pass in TotRM. You used Hypercard for all of that? I'm jealous. Hmmm. I wonder if there'll be a version of Hypercard for the IBM ever...

I have a new theory: If a person likes Mystery Science Theater 3000, he/she can play a good Dragonewt. Otherwise, not. Frankly, I think it more of a reach to play a (non-renegade) dwarf or Malkioni sorcerer than a Dragonewt. Bizarre insanity is easier for most players to simulate than rigid conformity of mind... However, I'm not sure that dragonewt PCs are right for most game. It would either have to be strictly for laughs, or for the most serious roleplaying. No middle ground.

Erlandsen: IFGS weapons are now hollow fiberglass cores jacketed in thick closed-cell foam insulation -- they're too light and soft to hurt, though they look great. I've compared them to weapons used by several other LRPG

organizations, and they're definitely superior. Paintball is *much more painful.

The combats are pretty closely refereed. During frequent "Holds", hits are quickly recapitulated. There hasn't been a dispute such as you've suggested yet.

The kamikaze death you described does sound like a good way for a departing player to close out their account.

Cyberpunk? I'm starting to wonder about the term. One friend says the movie Bladerunner is cyberpunk, another swears it isn't. I'd was surprised by the question -- I'd always thought of it as science fiction. I'm turned of by Cyberpunk... Likewise, I'd somehow overlooked that Greentech was c-punk. Strange.

As I mentioned above, Jon Mitzman is busy with his studies. But he wanted me to tell you that the player who tapes every session does not *keep the tapes -- he reuses them after he transcribes them. Personally, I *still think he's crazy.

Your Greentech writeup captured the bleakness of the genre nicely, without making it seem boring (as C-punk so often is to me). Well done.

Jorenby: "Torg"-type cards are like almost everything else: good in their place. However, you hit the nail on the head: the cards *do* serve to emphasize the unreality of the situation. By giving the players so much power over an area they normally do not control, they move the balance of play toward a more wargaming type basis. For example: In a recent Runequest game using Torg cards, I played a dark troll. One of the cards I held was "surprise weakness" or some such. When a strange giant beastie came flying out of the sky and bit my arm off, I played the card and said "Surprise -- this breed of creature is fatally allergic to troll flesh!" It dropped dead, amidst roars of player laughter.

This was fun, but it was my (the player's) cleverness that was in use, not my roleplaying ability. When a player has a "system-hack" power available, his or her extra thought and attention is likely to lead toward ways to use that power effectively, rather then toward better roleplaying. Which is fine, if that's what you want.

PROPAGANDA WARNING!

Gamers should be aware that the generic superhero character design book "Heroes Now!" from Task Force Games, carries a disclaimer on page 3. A so-called "'Political Correctness' Warning", it proclaims that:

"It was decided well in advance that this book would definitely *not* be 'politically correct.' In fact its contents tend toward the socially, politically, morally, ethically, and religiously conservative side. To tell the truth, the authors and editors think our heritage of western culture, heterosexuality, traditional families, Judeo-Christian values, Jesus Christ and God are all pretty neat."

"...we do recommend them to everybody -- your life can only better for it (sic)."

"Consider this book to be one of the 'Op-Ed' pages in gaming."

I for one object to being sold propaganda -- for ANY cause -- without it being labelled ON THE COVER as such. Roleplaying games are, in my opinion, a form of art -- and too many works of art have been corrupted by the author's deliberate subordination of the creation to his or her own personal message. Let others make their own choices, but I'll not buy anything from Task Force Games, the authors, or editors of "Heroes Now!" ever again.

I'll buy my own Op-Ed pages, thank you.

A large part of my anger is simply due to the authors' hypocrisy. The warning purported to be a fair notice of the authors' bias, but it was on page three, not the title page, below the introduction. The typeface was standard size, and the text was boxed. The headline was somewhat larger. The point is that this warning was NOT likely to be noticed while flipping through before purchase. The statement in the warning that

"...if your sensibilities will be offended... return this book to the shelf now."

is totally hypocritical. Most purchasers are unlikely to read that extensively before they buy, and are more likely to skim the body of the work rather than read the introduction -- at least, I know I am. You can check it out for yourself.

To tell you the truth, I'm so annoyed that I haven't been able to bring myself to read the book itself.

Theme 171: Short Story vs. Serial

Short story vs. Serial? I went over that pretty thoroughly in R&R #1, so rather than repeat myself (much) I'll just say this: Both have value. The neverending "serial" form seems to be far more prevalent. This is unfortunate: many of our most powerful legends would be meaningless without their final chapters. Would the legend of Robin Hood have had anywhere near the same impact without the final blind arrow shot? And what of The Lord of the Rings -- would it have made any sense if Frodo had picked himself up after the Final Battle and suggested an orc-hunt? The point is that a proper closure can lend structure, timing, and focus to a campaign, increasing the roleplaying impact for all.

Theme 170 : Experience

When it comes to character improvement, I definitely come down on the side of skill-based systems. There are a number of reasons for this, but two leap to mind: 1) Bias and 2) realism/reasonableness. How my attitudes became crystallized involves -- what else -- a Horror Story.

A common failing of experience-point based systems is that they tend to award points primarily for killing: an approach that even some hard-core fanatics

have trouble with. As a result, many such systems now advocate awarding extra XPs for "roleplaying". But roleplaying is hard to define.The problem is that of trying to quantify something that is essentially unquantifiable. The inevitable result is that points are awarded based on the GMs *perception* of the player's roleplaying. This can be a problem. A roommate of mine (a long time ago) was a great GM. His worlds and NPCs and plots were brilliant, both different and exciting. He had one weakness, however: when he got in a bad mood, I was the one he'd take it out on. He'd almost always apologize later (much later), but in the meantime he'd abuse and insult me in the game, in front of everybody. Mind you, he didn't do that often enough to make me stop playing with him, but it was still very annoying.

At one point, in a game of Fantasy Hero, he kept creating NPCs who would beat my character into the dust -- despite the fact that I was supposed to be a great warrior. My character was even beaten by a peasant! I got annoyed, as it was clear that there was some cheating going on. At the end of the session, he awarded the other players about 10 experience points each. He gave me one, "if you want it" (sneer).

I didn't throw my dinner in his face, but did walk out. He apologized later, but I still cannot stand experience point based systems.

Skill-driven systems make a lot more sense to me. They remove the GM as direct arbiter of rewards, and make a lot more sense. Those skills you use more, you are likely to get better with. There's none of this "you killed three goblins, now you can climb walls better" nonsense. If that were the case, modern mass-murderers would be masters of many skills. This doesn't seem to be the case.

I'm sure some will say that skill systems are cumbersome to use, but I simply can't agree. While Runequest sheets (for example) might have more information on them than an AD&D sheet, there is less need for the Runequest player to refer to additional materials.

Nereyon: Recapitulation II

I have come to face the fact that there is no way that I can write four or five years of game history in any detail. Therefore, on my players' advice, I am presenting the background in a capsulized form, and will explain historic details as they become relevant to the write-up. My players have expressed an interest in helping with this, so we may well be presenting a "Best of Nereyon" feature, in which only the most memorable sessions will be written up.

The characters began as young Watchers at a secret estate (Big Hill) n the far West, near the Great Desert. Though young, each had passed the age of legal training for Watchers, and so would certainly be executed if discovered by the cruel and mysterious NeMarren, inhuman warrior- race which had conquered the land. They had recently discovered that they were not living as secluded a life as they thought: their existence was being both hidden and supported by several human village-leaders, who desperately needed their Chaos-fighting powers. The human leader of the nearby town came one day to beg for help from the PCs: a tribe of marauding Desert Raiders were plundering the Coast of Sand, destroying villages and enslaving those not slain outright. Worst of all, the Raiders had taken tax funds owed to the NeMarren,

who were notoriously short-tempered with tax-delinquent villages. Though not a matter of Chaos, the threat warranted Watcher intervention.

The young Watchers performed well on their first outing. Recognizing that they were no match for the bandits, they concocted a sleeping potion which, placed in a well, would render all who drank from it unconscious. They would rescue the sleeping slaves and the stolen property, taking the Raiders' horses to ensure that they would not continue their activities. Locating the bandits at an oasis, they proceeded with the plan. All went as expected, with one exception: once in the camp, Vlad (the Healer) drew his sword and began running the sleeping bandits through the heart -- something they had previously agreed not to do. Some were awoken by the sounds of death, and combat ensued. Victorious, the Watchers headed back to the Town to return the freed slaves and property.

A scene of horror greeted them: the body of the Town Elder, skinned and hanging on a gibbet in the Town square. A NeMarren had come, and he was full of wrath...

Heroquesting

Issue #7 of Tales of the Reaching Moon was extremely interesting. The many different visions of the Runequest Heroquest presented a fascinating example of a multitude of approaches deriving from a single precept. My own version of the Heroquest was different from them all, however.

The HeroQuest is a journey to a deeper level of meaning. By entering the "mythic structure" of the world, characters may influence the structure of mundane reality. The characters insert themselves *as characters* into the meta-fiction of the world, using their position within the story to rewrite events -- but many forces oppose such change. The characters must draw upon only the purest inspiration, supported by ritual, as falseness or weakness is inevitably fatal.

I feel that the HeroQuest should be a meaningful event for both the character *and player* -- the emotional delineation between the two being much less real than is pretended. The only way for a non-mechanical event to have impact on a character is through roleplaying; the only way for a roleplaying event to be effective is by affecting the player directly. A HeroQuest should be a memorable experience in the player's life, rather than simply being another accretion-of-power incident. Heroquesting, in other words, is more than simply Super-Runequest.

This is a challenge for any gamemaster, and so I gave much thought to my first attempt. I saw a need to tap into a basic level of meaning in my own mind. Over-ordered preparation (encounter 1, 2, 3) would, I felt be counter-productive to this approach; therefore, I "prepared" by clearing away any mechanical considerations. Since my mind was to serve as the whole of the Godplane/Heroquest experience, I decided to attempt to set myself in a state which would enable me to draw off my subconscious in the most effective way possible -- the subconscious being the closest to a "myth processor" I could come to.

In other words, I deliberately winged it. Worked, too.

Scenario: "Against the Rise of Emon"

I recently realized that there is one use I can make of the scenario pack I wrote for the Mattmark Contest (from lastish): I can give it away. If anyone would be interested in a copy of a large five-part non-Glorantha Runequest module, let me know. If you're in the area, give me a call; otherwise, I can send the file through InterNet. I have also posted it on the Argus local bulletin board system (617) 674-2345. Finally, I could mail it with a SASE -- but it *is* rather heavy. Over forty single-spaced pages. Of course, I could copy them double-sided...

Nextish: Another Horror Story, more Nereyon, more gaming philosophy...

What a day...

PM