

interactive fantasy issue 3

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim
Rudyard Kipling

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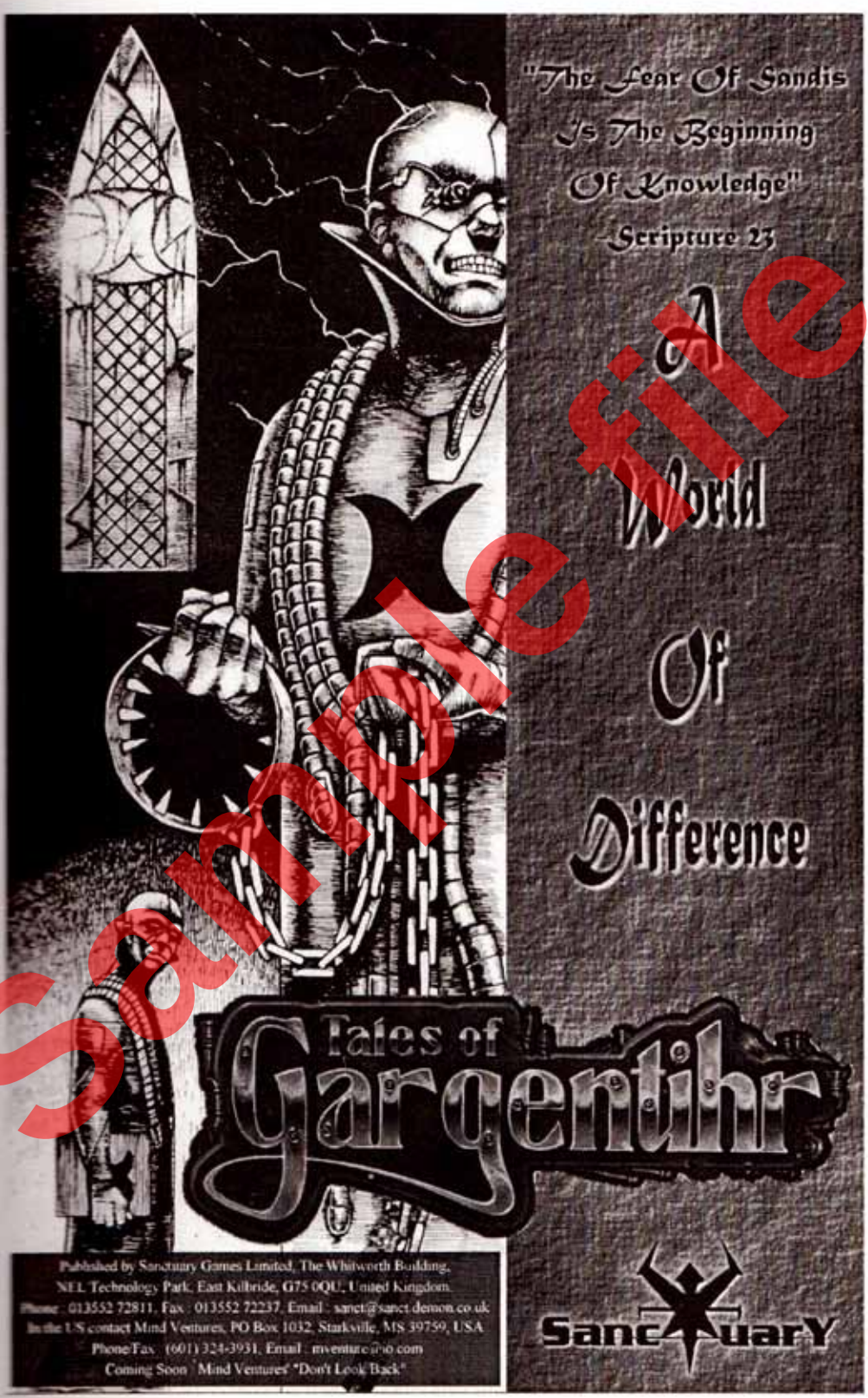
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Editorial

> 'In a world without women, what would men become?'
> 'Scarce, ma'am. Mighty scarce.'
>
> *Mark Twain*

The imagery sometimes associated with role-playing games cannot be very encouraging to women who are considering becoming involved in the hobby. I have just taken four games, more or less at random, down from my shelf. The cover of one (*Shattered Dreams*) depicts a female in a very low-cut dress, being touched below the breast by a sinister shadow-creature. Another (*TORG*) depicts a woman wielding a very large gun. 'Nothing wrong with that', you may say—but she evidently thought that it would be sensible to go into combat wearing her bathing costume. She has another gun strapped to her naked thigh, which also sports a tattoo. The bearded clergyman she is standing next to is fully clothed. Freud would have had a field day.

Pictures of this kind are probably symptoms, rather than causes, of the male-ness of the role-playing hobby. Since most gamers are young males it is not surprising that games companies decorate their games with pictures that they think young males will like to look at. Such artwork is more often the result of thoughtlessness rather than any desire to smuggle pornography in by the back door. Fantasy artists put their women in silly clothes because that is what women in fantasy artwork have always looked like. The two games that I have so unfairly picked on are not particularly sexist in their content or themes; it's only the artwork that is at fault. I've never met a man who would admit to liking this sort of thing, and most women in the hobby tend to regard it as sad and silly rather than sexist and offensive.

The other two books in my very un-scientific survey were *GURPS* supplements—*Robin Hood* and *Arabian Nights*. One shows a male wizard and his male apprentice calling up a male efreet; the other, a group of merry men ambushing a much less merry but equally male group of Norman soldiers. No women were in evidence in either case. Here, one cannot blame either the writers or the artists, since it is obviously the fault of the subject matter. The yarns of Robin Hood and the Arabian Nights are the stories of a man's world.

That, of course, is the problem.

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Most role-playing games still address themselves to what have generally been regarded as 'male' themes: combat and the military. Characters spend their army severance pay on space-craft to become mercenaries and bounty hunters; they are approached in bars by grey-beards who want them to rescue their daughters from wizards' towers; they aspire to become Knights of the Round Table or Imperial Space Marines. Whole role-playing supplements have been given over to pictures of military uniforms; whole books have been written containing nothing but game-statistics for guns, or lovingly developed rule systems for dealing with cars, tanks, space-craft and giant, weapons-laden robots. When has a role-playing game ever primarily addressed the art, music or agriculture of an imaginary world, let alone that world's fashions or child-rearing practices? Someone will say, 'Those subjects have no application to role-playing games: they are dull and un-exciting.'

I repeat; that is the problem. Why did role-playing games become obsessed with the warrior to the exclusion of the nurturer?

Furthermore, many role-playing games are set in archaic cultures in which politically incorrect values are the norm: not only the romanticized Middle Ages, but also Victorian England or the 1930s. In such societies, the roles of women and men were more sharply differentiated than they are today. Could it be that, for male gamers, this is part of the appeal? Perhaps it appeals to the same ethos as the Wild Man culture: that some men—particularly, perhaps, rather studious, unathletic 'nerds'—yearn for a world of heterosexual male friendships; of hunting, honour and warfare. Cinematic science fiction, much more obviously, calls up the male world of the barrack-room. (Ursula Le Guin commented that Star Wars ceased to be interesting at the half-way point, when everyone got into uniform.) At one level, there is probably nothing very wrong with this. If men really do have an inborn urge to kill animals and each other, then role-playing games are probably a very harmless way of getting it out of their systems. But some of us hope that there is rather more to it than that.

This is not to say that it is impossible to play women in role-playing games, nor that women never role-play. I can only think of one game that explicitly rules out female PCs. Most games fall over themselves to admit them. The science fiction militaries envisaged by *Traveller* and *Prime Directive* recruit women and men as equals. The Order of Hermes allows female wizards. *Warhammer FRPG* lets women take up any career. *Castle Falkenstein* emancipates Victorian women so they can join in the swashbuckling. *Space: 1889* leaves the ladies un-liberated and patronized, but invites them to play missionaries and explorers, or dress up as boys. Perhaps this latter suggestion is the most honest: how many RPG females are in fact little more than women in men's clothes?

The one game that assumes that most PCs will be males is Pendrag-

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on. Since it specifically sets out to tell the stories of knights in a romantic medieval world, there is little point in censuring the game for this. If you are going to go off to war, or on the quest for the Holy Grail, you are likely to leave the women-folk at home. A supplementary volume makes some interesting suggestions about incorporating women PCs into the game. There is a small precedent for female knights in medieval literature, and since this is fantasy there is no reason why Arthur should not operate an equal opportunities policy at the Round Table. It is not too difficult to imagine Valkyrie-like warrior-women among the Saxons. If that fails, you could always generate a lady wizard to join the lads on their adventures. Given the type of thing that Pendragon is trying to do, this is a valid approach. But it makes a massive assumption: that the way to admit female characters into an RPG is to come up with a reason why they should be joining in the murdering and pillaging with the blokes. We admit women into our games, but they have to be macho women, preferably with guns.

It may work for Pendragon, but as a general rule it seems terribly restrictive. Rather than giving swords to the women, why not try to persuade the men to put them down? Why not write scenarios about the things that the other fifty per cent of the population were doing while the men were engaged in mass slaughter? Things like raising children, learning and teaching, making things, wielding subtle political power, creating and telling stories, or (in the mythic versions) practising magic.

We will, of course, be told that a game of 'women's pursuits' in a fantasy society would be boring: and, doubtless, a game about embroidery or bathing the children would be dull—every bit as dull as a game about a polishing armour, digging a latrine or repairing a tank. But would role-playing games really become less interesting if their focus was broadened; away from combat and power, and into the issues of real human relationships, in which, throughout history, both men and women have been involved? Are the stories of Florence Nightingale, Tess Durbeyfield or Moll Flanders less interesting because those women rarely took up weapons or engaged in physical action?

Some people will say yes. Some gamers find it impossible to imagine a role-playing game that does not take combat as its primary focus. A recent review in a British games magazine made the mind-boggling assertion that 'a role-playing game is only as good as its combat system'. If that is the view taken by the majority of gamers, and by the games industry, then we have answered a question that role-players have often been concerned about. Perhaps they should not have been asking why so few women play role-playing games, but why so few people play them.

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OVERVIEWS

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There are many forms of interactive fiction and role-playing; the activities can be conducted through many different media and put to many different uses—fun, educational and therapeutic. In this section, the various fields of interactive narrative are introduced and analysed by experts and leading authorities.



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Narrative and Atmosphere in Boardgame Systems

By Mike Siggins

Boardgames are almost as old as civilization. Since the days of ancient Sumer people have been playing games, presumably for enjoyment. However, with very few exceptions, it has only been in the last twenty-five years or so that games have grown beyond the classic abstract and *Monopoly* 'roll two dice and move round the board' systems. Initially as a by-product and subsequently by design, the narrative element has risen inexorably, culminating in the almost pure-strain story-telling systems such as *Once Upon a Time* (Atlas).

I believe that the narrative trend began in the late 1960s and early '70s through the growth of decent adult boardgames, miniatures gaming, historical simulations and, of course, their prodigal son, role-playing games. There is no doubt in my mind that the role-playing genre has had a marked effect on the attitudes and expectations of boardgamers, both directly and indirectly.

It is my contention that all non-abstract games tell a story. Who they tell it to, how they tell it and who gets a say in the outcome are different matters entirely. These narratives are a prime source of atmosphere—and for me, atmosphere is the main attraction of all types of games, be they historical or fantasy, sports or combat simulations, computer-based or card games. Whatever the subject, if you feel that you are there, living the role, then the game system works well. Predictably then, I obtain nothing from Chess or Draughts and only trace levels from *Trivial Pursuit*. Only when we reach Mah-Jong and Go are there any stirrings in the emotional department and it is this area that defines for me a strong or a weak game.

Narrative Mechanisms

What is a boardgame narrative? This will be, of necessity, a wide-ranging definition because of the many types of game system. 'Narrative' can mean players inventing a storyline and saying it out loud; it can be a series of events generated by the system that creates a story in the players' minds; it can be a pre-set plot that the players discover section by section, or it can be as simple as a description of a sports event which

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the players follow with interest. Like all stories, it helps if it is interesting and not over-long.

A boardgame system can generate these narratives in a number of ways. At one extreme, there is the 'minimal prompt' of cards and basic rules encouraging flexible story-telling by the players—as exemplified by *Once Upon a Time* and *Dark Cults*—and at the other there is the simple discovery of a preset storyline, as in *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective*. The net result here is effectively the same as reading a book, albeit usually with the chance to explore several different plot routes. Between these two poles are a range of factors affecting the level of creative input. Some games feature deduction, some action cards or simply dice rolls, while others allow a group vote to determine the way forward. In most cases there are a massive number of permutations as to how a given game will develop. Either way, the story unfolds as the game progresses.

Most systems will, like adventure gamebooks, rely on rudimentary decision-making to create a varying storyline. A player ready to advance their squad of infantrymen, or perhaps their Ali Baba character, might be able to decide whether to progress across the wadi, into the mountains or to stay put. Each action might reveal a further development in the mutable plotline or, with more than one player, influence a multiple-outcome scenario. All the while, the mind fills in the gaps, perhaps drawing on graphical or textual atmosphere, creating a virtual narrative experience. The player says 'Okay, let's cross the wadi. If we can make the oasis we won't be so exposed to the tanks/roc'. Their mind sees the desert, the cowering characters, the blazing sun and even the palm trees. This is the mark of a good game.

The underlying concept of narrative is also largely dependent on the individuals actually playing the game. In the same way there are people in the world who cannot (or will not) tackle role-playing games, there are gamers who discern little in the way of narrative in a boardgame. Some see a boardgame purely as an abstract exercise, even when it isn't specifically designed that way, and don't 'imagine' the developing plot presented to them. In fairness, as we shall see, some games encourage visualization better than others, but it is a rare game that offers nothing at all. Other gamers seem to be overwhelmed by the competitive nature of play (a concept relatively rare in role-play except in tournaments, in my experience) and any wider benefits are lost in the pursuit of glory.

Broadly speaking then, boardgame narratives can be experienced in two ways: passively or actively. In both cases, the player will rationalize the outcomes and, depending on the nature and quality of the system, this will create the atmosphere and long-term attraction. In fact, these correspond almost exactly with the varying styles of gamemas-

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tering in role-playing games (e.g. referee as story-teller, against active player participation) except that a collective knowledge of the rulebook and system replaces a human referee.

The passive reaction is where the player responds to the system, which in turn is generating the story. This is best typified by sports simulations, for instance a baseball or soccer game, wherein the resulting constructs are absorbed and enhanced in the mind, hopefully forming a satisfactory course of the game. The key component here is rationalization—if the outcome can be checked against 'reality', the players will be able to suspend disbelief. In this role then, the game system is the prompter and the player is reactive, sometimes even completely dormant.

In the active capacity, the player creates or at least affects the story in tandem with the game system. In multi-player games, several players will influence the unfolding action, for instance by financial decisions in the building of a railway or perhaps simply by playing sequential event cards, and the system must be able to assimilate and manage these multiple inputs. Again, the ability to rationalize is crucial. In this case, the players are the prompters and assume proactive roles, while the system, in varying degrees, becomes more reactive.

I don't think there is any better enhancement to a decent narrative mechanism than a convincing theme and inspirational graphics. In the same way that a well crafted role-playing campaign and superbly painted figurines add to the aesthetic quality of play, a game with close links to its theme and a production job that prompts trouser wetting is definitely the one to have. Although it is perfectly possible to enjoy, and visualize, from a textual game, graphics are undoubtedly of help in creating the whole picture. This can be as straightforward as a graphic of a tank on a counter or as impressive as a beautifully rendered period map of the world.

As for narrative scope, the typical board or card game is certainly limited in comparison with RPGs, freeform games or anything similar. Because of the closed nature of the system, rigidly defined and purposefully restricted by the ruleset, a boardgame cannot deliver the open- ended flexibility of its cousins. Nevertheless, boardgame systems have their advantages. They can be designed to offer punchy, time-limited experiences that are self-contained. They allow a player to experience numerous vastly different subjects and situations in the same time as, say, a role-playing campaign. They can permit a player to explore a situation from several levels or viewpoints. They tend to allow easier absorption of 'sound bites' of systems and experiences. They also tend to demand far less in the way of preparation for a typical game session—the system and story are there waiting to be discovered and require no planning or reading of modules.

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A closed system's parameters may be expanded by developing a generic system such as *Squad Leader* (Avalon Hill) which, through numerous scenarios and expansion kits, permits wide ranging and in depth treatment of WWII tactical combat that could conceivably keep one occupied for many years of gaming.

Interaction and Narrative

Boardgames, when properly designed and structured, can offer two main forms of interaction: between the players themselves and between the players and the game system. Some games, often regarded as the classics, provide both elements—*1830* and *Civilization* (Avalon Hill) being prime examples. In the same way that some players will not tolerate fantasy themes or games of pure chance, there are those who consider a game without player interaction as worthless. In most cases they have a point; few are the games that place one in the position of a multi-player but nevertheless solitaire session while also encouraging repeated play. Those which do are usually those with a high narrative or atmospheric content or fundamental system appeal. They must compensate for the lack of interaction by enhancing other game aspects, effectively replacing a human opponent with an acceptable system counterpart.

The strongest test of a game's appeal is whether it can survive solitaire play—an unusual concept in most role-playing systems beyond paragraph books and solo adventures. Here, player interaction is unavailable out of necessity (or choice) and the system becomes the opponent or fellow player. Like the best computer games, boardgames can provide solitary gamers with both a foil for their creative muse and a willing opponent. Some games fail to engage creativity and tend more toward analysis—these are the solitaire puzzles typified by many adventure games and abstract systems. Others manage to captivate and enthral from the moment the box is opened or the pieces laid out. To my mind, a solitaire system stands or falls on its narrative strength and the very best ones will be played again and again. Personally, I find that only the very best solitaire games pass this test, and they can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

However, as easy as it is to overstress the importance of interaction between players, it is a vital ingredient in a successful game. The bottomless pits of Game Theory, psychology and social adequacy all open up but need, for this exercise, to be deftly side-stepped. Each has their influence on a group of gamers enjoying a session, but bereft of the character cloak provided by role-play systems, it is you against the other people. Not surprisingly, then (and more markedly in older players), games-playing often becomes a social vehicle. The boardgame is the central focus but allows discussion and chat as well as the gaming experience. The turn structure of a boardgame is also relevant here. In a role-playing game, players and referee are active most of the time. In

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many boardgames, the turn structure means you might be waiting for your turn and therefore possibly becoming bored or distracted. Modern games have tried to avoid this by utilizing more interactive systems, but it is still a problem.

At its best though, there is a wonderful *mélange* of interaction based partly on what is going on in the game, partly from running in-jokes and partly through general conversation. All of this goes to make the narrative strength all the more important. A game with a weak storyline or a system that forces inaction can easily lose its appeal and interest wanders, usually to the next game on the pile or the Sunday papers. It can be argued, then, that game groups are primarily social. They remain together not only because they like the same games but because they get on with their opponents—they work as a unit. Winning becomes of secondary importance to having a good time.

The rest of this article will concentrate on the many types of boardgames, using examples of notable mechanics within each class and hopefully indicating how narrative systems work. The only category excluded is historical games, which I hope to cover in depth in a later article.

Party Games

There will be few readers unfamiliar with *Pictionary*, Charades, *Trivial Pursuit* and their many offshoots. There are however a surprising number of narrative games that can be played in the 'party' environment and enjoyed by an adult audience.

The most childish, and probably therefore the most enjoyable, is *Smuggle* (MB), a game in which you must convince one other player that you are not smuggling and have paid the correct duties. Reminiscent of Cheat or Spoof in its requirement for straight faces, bluff and the ability to read other people, it remains an all-time favourite if somewhat limited in its scope for narrative ploys.

Going one better than this is the group of literary games that call on one's creative writing powers. These come in three flavours: *Fictionary Dictionary* (Generic), *Ex Libris* (Oxford Games) and *Poesiemeister* (Generic). In the former, an obscure word is selected at random from a dictionary. Each player then writes down a believable definition of the word and the results are voted on as to which is the best. In some variants, bonus points can be earned for identifying the real answer, in *Call My Bluff* fashion. The same idea is extended in *Ex Libris* wherein you compile the closing lines of a book in the style of the author, having had the first line read out, and in *Poesiemeister* the same is applied to poetry. All good fun, in the right company, and often surprising to find your demure friend possesses a Gothic Horror streak.

Probably the best of all the party games, and in fact good enough

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to pass muster for game-group play, is *Doolittle & Waite* (Inward). This is a game in which players take it in turn to be the plaintiff and defendant in a fictitious court case. Each player is assigned cards showing the strength of their case should it progress to court, but the idea is to extract the largest possible pre-trial settlement. The most money wins, rather than the most cases. Shades of 'L.A. Law' here. Players are encouraged to negotiate, cajole or appease, and get away with paying out as little, or gaining as much, as they can. The game is excellent as it stands but unfortunately, as far as narrative goes, it represents an opportunity lost. This is because the cases are generic and without textual substance—the trial strength is a numerical rating with modifiers for evidence and so on. Imagine the same game with basic descriptions of your case, hidden information and free rein on your tactics.

General Games

This is a category of games in search of an appropriate title, which is odd since most of my writing concerns them. The French, rather grandiosely, call them *Jeux de Société*; the best we have come up with is 'Fluffy Games', which nomenclature is either contemptuous or apt, depending on your viewpoint. Where do these games fit? Above party games and mass-market titles such as *Monopoly* and *Cluedo*, somewhat below complex simulations and war-games, but sometimes overlapping at either end.

They are characterized by strong, appealing game systems (with great importance attached to novelty), usually simple rules and mechanics, and often sumptuous production (the phrase 'Nice Bits' is often bandied). The theming of these games can vary from near-perfect to tenuous while the depth of play ranges from the ultra-simple to the involved, with commensurate play length implications—eight hours or more to complete *Civilization* is not uncommon. However, the main draw of the recent designs is that they manage to squeeze an awful lot of play into perhaps sixty or ninety minutes, sometimes at a surprisingly challenging level. The subject matter ranges from collecting modern art to potato farming, through ecological, crime, business, political, historical and railway themes, from flying-carpet racing to Formula 1.

It is probably easiest to start with the direct offshoots of role-playing games, usually produced either as an attempt to spread the role-playing genre to the mass market or as an introductory vehicle. None of these bears much resemblance to role-playing, and often precious little in the way of formal narrative generation, but all are strong on the adventure and hack'n'slay elements. Two of the first games out of the blocks, following TSR's *Dungeon*, were *Sorceror's Cave* and *Mystic Wood* (both Gibsons). The idea here was to progress your character, extremely rudimentary by role-playing game standards (plain old 'Fighter' or

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'Wizard' is about par for the course), through an ever-expanding series of dungeon tunnels, meeting monsters and grabbing treasure. As the dungeon complex was explored, extra cards would be added to the map—long games, if your character managed to survive, could cover the dining table with ease. That aside, depth of play and encouragement to return was minimal.

The second generation of pseudo-role-playing games, which have been extremely successful, are typified by *HeroQuest* and *Space Crusade* (MB/Games Workshop). The developments have been a move from largely aimless wandering to specific missions and scenarios, there are some enhancements to the characters (though still very basic) and they are blessed with some excellent components. The underlying game is much the same as *Dungeon*—move around, don't get hurt and kill as much as you can. Only in their advanced forms, with the appearance of embryonic character development systems (and yet more nice bits), is there any progress towards role-playing proper.

There is a large group of games that are effectively solitaire but can be played multi-player, with their narrative merits carrying them through. Some of the best ones are covered later under paragraph systems but there is a clutch of games, each outstanding in its own way, that are worth mentioning. The most applicable theme for this type of game seems to be exploration. In *Source of the Nile* (Avalon Hill), *Oregon Trail* (FGU) and *Age of Exploration* (Timjim) the player is put in the shoes of an adventurer who must organize an expedition to deepest Africa, the American West and the New World respectively. The administration of buying ships and supplies complete, each game allows for incremental progress across a map with detail being explained as progress is made. The major appeal is the inherent event systems that allow for discoveries to be made *en route*. Whether it is a source of fresh water, a tribe of Indians or the entire Inca civilization, it hardly matters. The excitement is there as your exhausted bearers head on into the jungle in the hope of finding riches, fame or the source of the Nile. The interesting factor is that all three mechanics permit an acceptable level of decision making. While the system will throw up hostile natives, scurvy, storms or fervent missionaries, it is usually your choice to have gone that route and you often have some chance of extricating yourself. The events themselves may be unavoidable, but then that is life and you react accordingly.

Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective (Sleuth) and its successor *Gumshoe* are unique in the boardgames world. They provide a series of cases for the players to solve by use of a wide array of game aids—period newspapers, street maps, libraries and so on. Although the crimes and perpetrators are predetermined, the uncovering of the means and motive creates a fascinating tale as you move around London, trying to

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deduce the answers in the shortest possible time. Frankly, if you are as good at sleuthing as I am (terrible), it is sufficiently interesting to just mosey around absorbing the atmosphere, look up the clues and make a wild guess before checking the answer at the end. For period flavour, strength of plot and general milieu, these are the best around. The sole drawback is that once you've played the cases and looked at the answers, they can't be played again until you've forgotten all about them. A small price to pay for excellence.

Another superbly themed game is *Liftoff* (Task Force), effectively a solitaire challenge to take control of the American (or Russian) space programme, undertaking R&D, training of astronauts and developing new systems to try and be the first to put a man on the moon. The build-up to the One Small Step is long, occasionally frustrating yet thoroughly absorbing—you get to build satellites, rocket systems, capsules and eventually lunar landers, all of which need to be tested and sent on hazardous missions. Each of these missions is graphically displayed and at each stage problems can occur, tests have to be made and equipment checked. The narrative builds steadily, both on missions and overall, and the feelings engendered are quite remarkable—the loss of a Saturn V on launch is surprisingly powerful.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the solitaires are the negotiation games which, by definition, require several people (and the more the better). It is in these games where your story-telling, lying (or honest), overbearing (or timid) personality comes completely to the fore. Or then again you can just act right out of character. Anything goes, in some cases quite literally (see the antics in Sharp's *The Game of Diplomacy*). The games themselves are characterized by extremely simple systems that serve to spark or implement the extended negotiations between players. Sometimes there are concrete, if subjectively pliable, facts in the game to base one's negotiations upon; in others there is nothing at all beyond the survival instinct (and all the classic Balloon Game strategies are evident here).

The grandfather of all negotiation games is *Diplomacy* (Avalon Hill). In this, you play one of seven major European powers in the run-up to World War One. Your aim is to conquer half of Europe by using the basic combat system (just a few fleets and armies) to occupy supply centres. The problem arises in that it is extremely difficult to do this alone and therefore alliances are the order of the day. Russia and Turkey might agree to steamroll west rather than attacking each other, Britain and France will probably go for the throat (as usual) and Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy might form a defensive pact until one of them decides they can benefit from a timely 'stab'. It is this foul act (the breaking of an agreement for selfish benefit) that characterizes *Diplomacy* and most other negotiation games. My word is most definitely

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not my bond and, understandably, many players dislike the bitter feelings generated, even though it is just a game.

In *Junta* (Creative), the mechanics are more important than in *Diplomacy* and the sides are rather less equal throughout the game. Players take the roles of senior military personalities in a banana republic. Using a clever, ever-changing voting system, one of them will become El Presidente, the others clamour for the vacant commands of air force, armies and so on. The negotiation comes in when the positions are allocated and the budget needs to be agreed, as the main aim is to line your Swiss bank account with dollars.

Three recent additions to the negotiation field are *Intrige* (FX Schmid), *Quo Vadis* (Hans im Gluck) and *Rette Sich Wer Kann* (Walter Muller). All emanating from Germany, these represent the crowning form of the genre. In *Intrige* you are trying to place your family in lucrative job positions, in *Quo Vadis* you are trying to raise your politicians through the ranks to become Roman Senators and in *Rette*, one of the best games of all types to appear for some time, you are trying to land your shipwrecked (and sinking) sailors on a desert island at the expense of all the other players.

Fans of comic art will be familiar with the flexibility afforded by the linked frame format to convey a story. One of the most original games currently on the market is *Dinosaurs of the Lost World* (Avalon Hill). This uses a standard board to regulate strategic movement and a comic-style storyboard system to determine what happens when you meet the inevitable dinosaurs, volcanos, lost tribes and all the usual Doug McClure fare. The system was never used again to my knowledge, which is surprising.

In a similar vein, though taking a completely different approach, we have *Sherlock Holmes: The Card Game* (Gibsons). This is, to my knowledge, a unique system of linked playing cards which not only builds up a reasonably coherent storyline but also allows for a deduction subsystem. The game works on the traditional basis of each player taking a turn to play a card. Each one describes what Mr Holmes is up to, such as taking a hansom to the country or experiencing a pea souper, but the next card laid must follow the previous card's colour code or you miss a turn. As Sherlock moves around London and its surrounds, more characters, such as Mycroft, can become involved, the net closes as clues appear and a culprit gradually comes to light. This is a fascinating system and one that could have many applications elsewhere.

The final grouping to fit under the general games banner are the true story-telling systems. *Dark Cults*, *Once Upon a Time* and *Into the Dark Continent* are the three main examples of the form. All the systems work in a similar fashion: players are dealt a hand of cards with textual and/or graphical prompts and use these as a basis which is embellished,

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often considerably, by story-telling. The theming is good, especially in *Once Upon a Time*, since almost everyone has experienced fairy tales at some time in their life. In most respects these are the ultimate narrative games—it is hard to imagine a more sparse mechanic than cards and there is little to impede freedom of expression.

Paragraph Systems

There is little I can add to the comprehensive piece on paragraph books in *Inter*action* #1, except to say that the genre has both been adopted and expanded upon in the boardgame field. To my knowledge, one of the first paragraph books was *State of Emergency* (Heinemann, 1969) in which it was your task to govern the emerging state of Lakoto as adviser to its prime minister. The text is longer than the norm (with a commensurate reduction in the decision tree branches), and reads more like a novel than most, but for its time it is an impressive work and still stands scrutiny today.

In the early 1980s, SPI injected some life into the form in the shape of *Ares* magazine. Three of the better games to appear in this distinctly patchy publication were *The Stainless Steel Rat*, *The Voyage of the Pandora* and *The Wreck of the Pandora*. Each of these systems used paragraphs to create superbly themed, if short, games. A long fallow period followed, rejuvenated I assume by the success of *Fighting Fantasy*. For some reason many of the games that followed had a sporting theme. Vic Marks tried his hand with the *Ultimate One Day Cricket Match* where you made the tactical decisions, there was a quite passable strategic soccer equivalent in the shape of *Tactics* and the Americans joined in with the baseball-rooted *Can You Win the Pennant*?

It was, however, the advent of paragraph games that really moved the genre along. There are two seminal designs in this field: *Ambush* (Victory) and *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (West End). Both are rich in atmosphere but to all intents and purposes solitaire: *Ambush* is designed that way and the two-player follow-up, *Open Fire*, proved to be very disappointing. *Arabian Nights* can accommodate several players but they all do their own thing independently; a healthy dose of *schadenfreude* as your rival Aladdin is locked up by a genie is about as interactive as it gets.

Ambush was a ground-breaking system when it appeared and was followed by a series of successful modules—one failing was that once played, the scenarios would become stale. The system was entirely driven from a screened paragraph sheet with windows that would be referred to as an indicator of events in the set scenario. The player, in control of a squad of men, would make appropriate decisions and read off the results. In response, the enemy moved and attacked, tanks appeared in ambushes, unusual events occurred, casualties were inflicted and the scenario progressed to a realistic (if occasionally Hollywood)

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