



this is our history

carnel

issue 32

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Editorial

This is the issue that started off with a layout and ended up with a theme. The theme was futuristic retro and I hope it is working for you right now as you read. The theme lead some of the proposed articles being weeded out, fantasy articles had a face that just did not fit the typeface. I also wanted to write some articles about the computer tools and games that I have been playing recently. Suddenly everything began to fit: an issue entirely about technology and gaming!

I am not going to deny that there is an awful lot of about *World of Warcraft* in this issue. I am also not going to deny that I have been playing an awful lot of it recently and as ever with zines art definitely imitates life. I do not think I have to apologise for it though. This new online fantasy game appeals outside the core fantasy market and has huge numbers of subscribers around the world.

Such huge numbers mean the game has an appeal far beyond its niches of roleplayers, online gamers and existing Warcraft fans. I cannot help but feel that there are some answers here for those who want to broaden the appeal and player base of roleplaying as a whole.

As a game *World of Warcraft* has plenty of rough edges but as an experience it is hard to beat. It also shows the way that computer RPGs can co-opt the social and interactive parts of the table games to add to the compulsion to play just five minutes more.

In addition to online gaming there is also some discussion of the way the Internet is shaping gaming. There is the online campaign radio show from RPGMP3, featuring recordings of a group's gaming sessions. I have also written a little bit about the latest in PDF publishing. Internet distribution could transform the popularity and longevity of games. Without a need for economical print runs more games, supplements and scenarios will find a public and nothing will be out of print again.

Finally there is a bit of a lightning trip through some of my latest RPG purchases. There is no space in this issue to go into depth but some of the best (along with anything that catches my eye at the imminent Dragonmeet 2005 convention) will be getting a more in-depth review in a few issues.

Hope you enjoy the issue!

Robert

the exemplar of the story-based computer RPG to date.

Morrowind

Arriving after **NWN** Morrowind is not just a different looking game (it takes place in third-person 3D) but a game built on entirely different assumptions. There is still the concept of a storyline but there is also the idea of creating a whole world and just letting the player explore it in their own time and in their own way. The amount of care and attention that has gone into the world is quite amazing. The game studio hired a number of writers (including some familiar roleplaying names) to develop the story and also do things like write short stories and serials, the text of which was then placed into the game within the in-game books. When your character reads a book in Morrowind you actually see the pages of the book on screen and page through it yourself. An NPC may have an incomplete set and I have found myself wandering around book stores and NPCs with large libraries looking to complete a set or at least read a missing episode.

The sheer involvement and interaction in the world is hard to convey but something I think really matters to me is that everything is consistent. If you are wandering

along a path and you hear what sounds like fighting then there are actually two NPCs out there fighting. You might find them but if you are slow you are likely just to find the body of the loser. Although the range of flora and fauna is somewhat limited compared to the real world Morrowind does allow you to pick flowers out of bushes and assigns each animal a distinctive call that means you can recognise a guar long before you can see it. Everything fits together.

A friend of mine mentioned how he liked to take his character onto the top of a hillside and watch the sunrise. That comment seems to capture the magic of Morrowind for me, there is a storyline (and it too is very good) but the real heart of the game is in creating your own story. Or in my case collecting different helmets for my character. Hey, everyone needs a hobby...

The Online World

World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft was released to huge anticipation but what is amazing is the way that it has completely blown all expectations about its success away. The game studio

Blizzard could not buy enough hardware to keep up with the demand for the game in the USA, they made a similar underestimate when the game was launched in Europe. In less than two years the game has come to be called the "gorilla" of the MMORPG world, crushing all other games to the margins and setting the standards online games will need to play by from now.

WoW is incredibly addictive because the game design is very clever about the way it offers different axes of progress through the game. It is easy to simply log on with a set objective, to achieve a mission or explore an area for example and then end up picking up other game strands. Sometimes this is as simple as wanting to pick up just a "few more" experience points for a new level or unexpected discovering a quest but the thing that is more compelling is that a player can set themselves as kinds of different objectives and at any given point they are likely to be close to completing one of them.

One of the key concepts in this compelling gameplay is the idea of "unlocking" aspects of the game. Initially a player has access to only a limited area of the game in terms of geography and the ability of the character they have chosen to play. The more they play the more they

"unlock" the game, new abilities are available for use, it is possible to enter and explore new areas, more information about the area and the NPCs becomes available. Essentially "unlocking" is rather like a system of continual reward: every time the player does something they are rewarded and have a sense of achievement.

Where **WoW** really improves on this basic model is the fact that it offers several different tracks through the game. For example if you are finding a "story" quest (one which will open up several new missions when completed) hard to complete you might decide to spend some time improving your crafting skills or you might go and explore a section of the map you've never been to. Essentially the game never really has a "dead-end" there are usually several different strands of the game going on at once and it is easy to transfer from one to another.

The Social Contract

Computer games are normally regarded as an anti-social pastime. In fact the solitary nature of many computer games is, as I see it, one of their virtues as they provide "drop-in" entertainment that can be used as desired.

WoW turns this on its head because it uses the social element of game play to keep you playing. Some quests and tasks are deliberately too hard or too time-consuming to be done by a single player. You have to collaborate with other players to get them done. From this necessary connection then comes all manner of social engineering. "I helped you with this, now you help me with this.", "Can you help me with this quest it will not take very long" and so on and so forth. Before you know it the quid pro quo has eaten up three hours of your life.

Of course there is always the worse possibility that you actually end up liking the people you are playing with and at that point you might end up playing the game just to chat and interact with those people.

Online games invert the rules of computer games as they have been up to now. There is no pause button, no chance to step away from the screen when there are four other real people relying on you to help them play.

Emergent Behaviour

Emergent behaviour is a kind of difficult concept to explain who has not played that many computer games

but it is actually a fairly familiar concept from over the table games. In essence Emergent Behaviour is anything in the game where the creators and programmers have created something that results in a new way to play or interact with the game which has not been explicitly programmed into the game.

A classic example in **WoW** is Base Jumping; this is essentially the act of jumping your character off very high things with the goal of not dying when you hit the ground. This initially developed as a way of escaping monsters who are tied to a particular area or skipping difficult areas in dungeons. However having learnt of the possibility of doing these jumps as a valid game technique it has now turned into an activity that is purely to entertain and impress. Who can jump from the highest or riskiest starting point? Who looks the best as they plummet through the air? Who can use the spells and items in the game most imaginatively when jumping?

These questions are not quantifiable in terms of systems, maths and mechanics. They belong to a fuzzy, social world of mutual entertainment.

Emergent behaviour is an interesting element of the appeal of online games as because people end up

playing their own games rather than jumping through the hoops the designers have set them. The sense of engagement and ownership is therefore that much greater than would otherwise be the case.

There are some gamers who argue that everything in a MMORPG should be driven by the players actions and the developers should create tools to support the type of things the players want to do. For them, say, ideas start with the in-character roleplaying within the games forums or message system and then the developers give material form to the roleplaying structures that are already in place and created by the players themselves.

I would describe things like my helmet collecting in Morrowind as an example of emergent behaviour. Nothing in the game made me go and collect helmets except for the fact that you can and I liked giving my character different looks. Because I was enjoying the collecting I was prepared to go hunting monsters with cool hats and searching the stores of the various towns and cities for new examples.

The Flaws of Worldcraft

WoW has a hundred reasons for spending yet another

hour online. However outside of its compelling minute to minute play it does have some major issues that mean that like many computer games people can play in a total obsessive manner for months on end and then promptly stop never to return.

Adieu Le Grind

WoW was meant to be the game that brought an end to grinding. In this it often less than successful; there are a number of quests that consist of shopping lists of numbers of certain creatures that need to be killed before the character can progress.

Another variation on this is to with drop rates. If the drop rate has been set too low then you have to kill a lot of monsters to get hold of an item to complete a quest.

I find this repetitive killing to be so tedious it can stop me from playing the game for weeks on end. The slaughter is not just tiresome but also highlights another flaw within the game.

Lack of Consequences

"Hey adventurer! Be a good chap and go and wipe out that kobold tribe that has been threatening the mine

would you?" So off you go to kill as many kobolds as are required, turn in the quest and...

And nothing happens. The mine is still threatened, whenever you return to the mine it will still be overrun with kolbods.

My most frustrating example of the lack of persistence in the game world was with a simple quest, uniting two lovers who belong to families that just cannot get along. It is a staple of the genre and therefore perhaps the lack of conclusion was more noticeable. After running around and gathering the ingredients for an invisibility potion the lovers are united. Or rather one of them takes the potion and disappears for ten seconds, only to reappear with no further dialogue options. If even there had been some further dialogue, perhaps to the effect that the pair were planning to run away at some point in the future there would have been a bit more closure.

This lack of polish runs through a lot of **WoW** although each feature release does help take the rougher edges away.

This lack of feeling of having an impact on the world can leave you feeling alienated from the game. With single player games we are now used to being integrated with

the world and having to make choices about what kind of character we want to be. There is no cause and effect in **WoW** and the result can be that the player becomes nothing more than an observer.

A more important aspect of the lack of consequences is in the conflict between the two player groups in the game. If one faction manages to invade the others city and overrun their territory the long-term consequences are nil. In fact ten minutes after the invaders leave the entire sector will respawn back to its normal state with no sign of the furious battle that has taken place.

The Loneliness of the Solo Player

The solo player experience has been neglected in **WoW**. Now it is possible to argue that there is not a great deal of reason to focus much on single player in an online game. The trouble is that there is a gulf in the experience of the solo player and the those who can play the game with friends or other players they do not hate too much.

The reason is that there is has been a serious lack in attention to the details of the game. The very thing that made *Morrowind* so absorbing is what is lacking here.

It is impossible to talk to many of the NPCs and even

any application that allows add-ons or is itself open source.

The interface is really good and there is a lot of intuitive interaction with the tools. There is of course some learning curve with the various options and tools but compared to something like *Paint Shop Pro* or the *GIMP* both of which I have struggled to use then it is a lot easier.

Inkscape is also GPL open source, meaning it is both ethically and financially sound. In fact I find it hard to believe that such a good program is available gratis and I may end up having to donate some money to project out of guilt over using something so damn fine.

Open Office 2.0

OpenOffice matters a lot to me. Particularly because it is what I use to write **carnel** itself. In fact this whole issue was produced using the Open Office 2.0 because I wanted to get a good feel for what I can expect.

I decided to switch to using the new release because someone has managed to add an SVG import package to it which means I can use Inkscape to generate graphics and diagrams.

OpenOffice is a great replacement for Word. It is a fully featured word processor that is great for DTP, does decent exports to HTML and PDF and is easy to use.

Word may be the standard but it focusses a lot on use within a company network environment and does not really focus on making writing documents easy.

Again OpenOffice has that open source superiority factor but at the end of the day it is simply a better word processor than anything I have used to date.

RPGGen

Okay so after two more general tools let us have a look at something more targeted at the RPG market. I recently agreed to try and write a one hour scenario for *d20 Modern*. After writing up my introduction my first stop was to the RPG Gen site for the latest stable version of this vital *d20* utility.

The program allows you create PCs and NPCs easily and with only a few clicks. When designing NPCs it is especially useful for making modifications and instantly seeing the results stat-wise.

RPG Gen is basically the daddy of roleplaying character

generators with a huge fanbase and a dedicated team of coders. There have been problems in the past with company's not letting their "property" be used in the program. Until now this has been (in my mind) a loss only to those companies.

Now though there is a company set up to bridge between the free content of the main program and the propriety game information. In the name of research I decided to buy myself the game information for creating Eberron characters. The first issue was the scrappy storefront that resulted in a purchase of the Eberron kit which then seemed not to work. After a bit of head-scratching I realised that I needed to purchase the D&D 3.5 basic rules pack as well. With that done there was a little bit of manual fiddling around with a new installation of RPGGen but after that everything seemed pretty smooth and I was able to fiddle around with a few characters in the standard RPGGen way.

For a commercial setup I felt the service was well below par. The purchase and installation had the same rough and ready feel as RPGGen but I am willing to forgive a lot about a volunteer open source project. For a commercial proposition I do not think it would have been

too much to ask to have a little installer program take away the effort of setting up a specific installation for me. In fact such a tool could also be used to manage the updates for the kits as well as keep users informed of which sets were available.

RPGGen is such a valuable tool that I half-suspect that anyone who plays d20 and who has a computer already uses it. Interestingly it is as useful for players as it is for GMs. Both groups can use it as a way of storing and generating characters, easily trying out different configurations and options with the results being instantly calculated. However a GM is likely to get the most benefit by using the program not only to archive stock characters and specific NPCs but also as a time-saving way of generating encounters and NPCs of a specific level and challenge rating. This cuts all the work out of most common complaint against d20 as a practical system

GM's Second Brain

This is an interesting utility that allows you to create game notes and link the text to other topics. It is essentially a simple tool, for example you write a

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description of an NPC, then you can link the description to the town where the NPC lives, their employer, the religion they follow and so on.

The tool is somewhat like a little personal Wiki and you can export the output to a HTML page for printing or publishing on the web.

There are a few rough edges but as an open source product you can download the very simple project code (just four files) and play around with it. I have already changed a few things about the way it works to make it more useful to me.

I am currently using the program to write the campaign "book" for my Conspiracy of Shadows game and intend to release my modified version once I am done playing with it.

It is perfectly serviceable "out of the box" and I would recommend it as a handy dandy tool regardless of the game you play.

SRD Online

Finally a couple of websites that do a lot to make the *d20* SRD (the standard game rules that everyone may

use) a lot easier to read. They were an invaluable reference while I was writing my one hour game for Dragonmeet.

They take the standard SRD text files from *WotC* and have turned them into nicely laid out HTML websites. Both have nice cross-referencing that allows you to jump to the definition of the various rule terms as you come across them. The organisation is also admirable as you have several ways of drilling down for information.

D&D SRD

<http://www.d20srd.org/>

Modern SRD

<http://www.12tomidnight.com/d20modernsrd/Home.php>

The New Flesh

Rather than any in-depth reviews this time I have gone for a broad but brief look at all the games that have come my way recently.

The Indie Selection

Lacuna is a kind of unusual game, it is hard to describe what the setting is about or what the game sessions should be about. The central conceit is that research discovers that dreamers can influence and be aware of one another's dreams, then that in fact dreamers seem to share some kind of collective unconsciousness. Finally having trained dreamers to enter this collective dream deliberately the researchers discover "others" in the dreamscape. It is not so much a game as some mechanics and a concept. The GM is left to come up with an interpretation of the symbols of the shared consciousness and its inhabitants. That is a lot of work but it is an engaging concept. It also has a pretty good website which is worth spending some time on.

The Shadow of Yesterday or **TSOY** as it is know to its friends is Gothic Romance Fantasy. Charlotte Bronte with

orcs as the blurb goes. The game borrows a lot from *Heroquest* and the pros and cons of that game system are shared here. Its flexible and sometimes annoying vague. It is focussed on broad narrative not fine-grained simulation. What **TSOY** does differently though is offer a great way of defining characters and their development. There is also a great depiction of elves as self-obsessed Zen-like beings transcending human concepts of the world, self and truth. Good enough to steal.

Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End is a supplement for A-State the Steampunk, Victoriana science-fantasy game (it draws from the same source of ideas as China Melville's *Perdido Street Station* but more literally and less philosophically). It describes a section of the huge pseudo-London city that forms the setting of the game and it is great encapsulate of the strengths and weaknesses of the game. I enjoyed it and thought it offered a great deal in a small amount of space for the money. Some elements are slightly stock but overall it provides a great vision of a decaying city filled with squatters who are desperate and hopeful in equal measures.

Conspiracy of Shadows has received a Revised edition

The times they are a-changing...

This issue **carnel** takes a look at PDFs, computer games, MP3s and all manner of roleplaying related technological wizardry. There was so much to write there wasn't enough room for pictures.

So why are you still reading the back cover?