

You take the high road, and I'll take the low road...

by Jessica Tiffin

technical consultation, opinion and argument by
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high versus low fantasy roleplaying

For a start, by high fantasy I don't mean necessarily elves and dragons, nor does low fantasy necessitate wall-to-wall bathroom humour. The difference I'm discussing is between the kind of roleplaying campaign with an enormous, epic sweep, where the characters are Heroes with a Destiny, on quests which affect the world, galaxy or universe; and the opposite extreme of gritty realism, counting your bullets/arrows, and characters who are street riff-raff on a quest to find enough coppers for the next mug of ale.

This is an old debate. Okay, maybe it's not necessarily an explicit debate to anyone but the die-hard role-playing argumentatives like me (I was brung up on the Great Cyberpunk Wrangle, after all), but I bet it underlies a lot of problems in a lot of role-playing games, whether the participants are aware of it or not. It's yet another aspect of the old problem of expectations in role-playing games - are the players and GM expecting the same level of play? Are you quite sure that you're all committed either to saving your butts from the local law enforcement, or saving the world? If the GM is intent on the party going to find the artifact that will prevent the next armageddon, s/he is going to be a bit twitchy if the party are more interested in a get-rich-quick scheme; likewise, the get-rich-quick party are likely to think "none of my business" when the artifact clues are dangled unsubtly in front of them.

I should add, for the sake of all you dichotomous possibility acolytes out there, that the terms "High" and "Low" in this discussion are PC to the max, being completely free of any value judgement, implicit statement of quality, or anything else, possibly including all meaning and sense. Anyone who wants to argue this gets to read my personal collection of arcane English Lit Criticism on the High Culture vs. Low Culture debate,

with its particular reference to postmodernism. Heh.

Thinking about it, there are a lot more manifestations of High/Low fantasy divides than at first appear. Most actual sword-and-sorcery campaigns fall fairly easily into the

high or low categories, the obvious one being D&D: High Fantasy revolves around 96th level characters battling the gods, Low Fantasy revolves around characters picking pockets in low taverns. But the same applies to other settings. Call of Cthulhu - High Fantasy is saving this dimension from the incursions of the Outer Gods,

Low Fantasy is saving a teenager from the nasty cult across the road.

Ars Magica: High Fantasy is saving the world from the Antichrist, or not, as the case may be (Hi, Alastair!), Low Fantasy is trying to scrape together enough silver to pay the grogs for a season (and Waldenstein mages may wince

on cue, here). Cyberpunk: High Fantasy is foiling a plot by a corporation trying to take over the world; Low Fantasy is trying to bring off the deal for illegal hardware from the dodgy dealer in the Rastafarian enclave. Think of

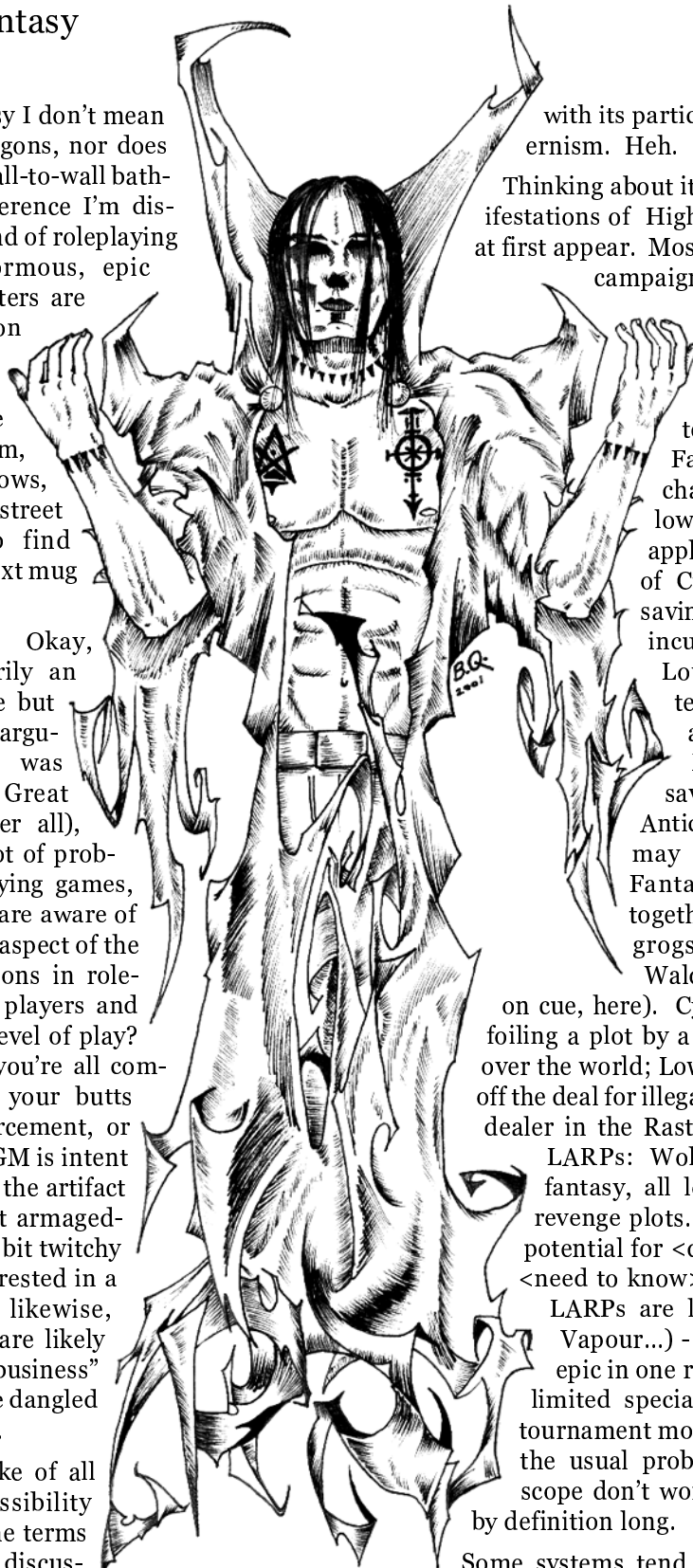
LARPs: Wolves are Running is low fantasy, all local politics and personal revenge plots. Twinkle Twinkle, with its potential for <deleted> <plotspoiler> and <need to know>, is definitely High. Most

LARPs are low, (and none so low as Vapour...) - after all, it's difficult to be epic in one room over three hours, with

limited special effects. Likewise, most tournament modules are low fantasy, since the usual problems of limited time and scope don't work well with epic, which is

by definition long.

Some systems tend more towards one aspect than the other - Castle Falkenstein, for example, is a swashbuckling adventure game whose villains, by definition, are usually trying to Take Over the World, and it willingly sacrifices a lot of realism in the pursuit of that end. Traditional D&D, at least at low level,



is about the nitty-gritty of dungeons and who has enough money to pay for the ale. Cthulhu, being the One True System, can be played with great success at either extreme. Likewise, various GMs may tend towards one or other end of the scale. My personal preference is low fantasy. My first session ever entailed the hapless first-level party trying to recapture the village goat. (Never underestimate the amount of fun you can have with a simple goat...). Andrew Sturman, on the other hand, tends to think more in terms of nukes, Outer Gods and Balrogs. (Still haven't forgiven him for the bloody balrog).

So, given my incautious statement about lack of value judgement, what are the pros and cons? If you're an innocent GM starting out to create a campaign, what do you need to bear in mind as regards high or low angle? Likewise, if you're a player scouting for games, what can you expect? A brief, opinionated summary follows:

High Fantasy

General characteristics:

- * Epic plots involving kingdoms, worlds, gods, galaxies, the space-time continuum, whatever.

- * Characters who are either very powerful or who are especially significant owing to their birth, astrology, destiny, dazzling charisma or bizarre ability to exist perpetually at the fulcrum of any epic plot.

- * A tendency to gloss over mundane details of day-to-day realism such as laundry, horse-feed or, occasionally, travelling between continents.

Upside

- * It's epic. It can be spectacular, flashy, death-defying, terrifying, exhilarating and addictive.

- * As a player, it can be very freeing not to have to bother with basic details like who's paying the servants or whether there's a clean tunic in your backpack. You're hyper-powerful, mega-wealthy, and have far more important things to worry about, like the sun going nova in the next five minutes unless you win this combat.

- * It's why you roleplay - it offers a very, very different experience to the everyday grind of your real life.

Downside

- * It'll wear out your GM quicker'n two days on a treadmill with a nymphomaniac, since trying to keep tabs on the whole world is difficult when the characters keep rearranging it, or when every character has an individual world-shaking destiny to be fulfilled.

- * It also requires a particularly superlative GM to keep on coming up with challenges which will actually challenge superpowerful characters. Bizarrely, it's easier to get bored with a high fantasy campaign than it is with a low fantasy one. Oh, another threat to the fabric of reality itself... <yawn>. Or, in a memorable quote: "We kill a dragon and get 2 XP because it's been an arb session."

8 * It's bloody risky, since to challenge a super-powerful character means you do need to take inordinate risks with the fabric

of reality in your world - if the players fail to rise to the challenge, what they're up against isn't going to slap them on the wrist, it's going to render redundant three years of careful world-planning while rendering reality down for vis.

- * Realism? Pshaw! High fantasy is not even trying to be realistic, its rules are different; it often needs to be scripted quite tightly if the campaign isn't going to go up in smoke, or, more frequently, galaxy-wide radioactive rubble with tentacles.

- * Also, unless your GM is superlative, as aforementioned, s/he is not going to keep up with small details, which means inconsistencies can creep in, to the irritation of players. As well as inconsistencies, this means that small details in your character's day-to-day life cease to matter, and may be assumed to happen by the GM whose focus is on higher things. This means that otherwise satisfying detail can become meaningless and unchallenging.

- * High fantasy campaigns are particularly prone to the dangers of scripting, when the DM's epic vision for the world is so complex and compelling that character actions don't really affect it at all.

Low Fantasy

General characteristics:

- * It attempts a certain degree of realism - minor details matter, your GM won't let you get away with glossing over who's feeding the horses. Basic realities like whether you're making enough money to survive, actually apply.

- * Characters start at low-level, and don't have heroic superpowers, enormous wealth or vital destinies to pursue; they are normal people within the framework of the world.

- * Plots tend to operate in the microcosm rather than the macrocosm. Goals are realistic and down-to-earth, challenges are finite and well-defined. Low-fantasy campaigns are wonderful for politics, since skillfully-planted pieces of information, for example, can actually make a difference.

Upside

- * It's gritty. It's realistic. Real Roleplayers(tm) do it. It makes you feel that you've worked for your feeling of satisfaction.

- * It's easy for the GM to control, and it doesn't take much in the way of bad guys to put the fear of wossname into the party. Most tournament modules are low fantasy for this reason: it is possible to realistically structure and contain a plot without resorting to scripting.

- * It tends to encourage good roleplaying, since we can technically (this is CLAWs, after all) all relate more easily to grubbing-for-money than we can to saving-the-world. It's also easier to build up a realistic sense of your character's personality and reactions when you have some detail to interact with. Low fantasy campaigns tend to have more than a meringue's chance in a waterspout of turning into a long-term game with inter-

esting characters.

Downside

* It's one step away from Chartered Accountants, the RPG. If you wanted to worry about money for booze, you wouldn't have to roleplay to do it, you do it every weekend, anyway. You roleplay because you want to mess about with magic/ cyberware / evil cults, not because you want to worry about whether you're carrying a cigarette lighter. Low fantasy games can sometimes feel like an ongoing helpless struggle against massive odds.

* Even if detail is satisfying and necessary, low-fantasy campaigns particularly can run into problems with pace - it's easy to become bogged down in day-to-day detail when what is really needed is the GM to say "All right, two weeks pass."

High/Low Fantasy and Tolkien, damn him

If things stayed where they were put, and definitions were absolute, and all that rot, the above comments might be some use. The problem is, though, that high and low fantasy, despite being apparently mutually exclusive, tend to blend, blur and generally bond in a way that isn't always productive. Be it never so high, High Fantasy can have domestic moments. Be they never so low, any innocent 2nd-level dungeon crawler could accidentally crawl across - oh, say a Balrog? (Bloody Sturman). The above definitions are fairly clear-cut, but really it's a spectrum, not a binary state: most campaigns will tend more one way than the other, but few are absolute.

Personally, I blame Tolkien. Lord of the Rings gets pretty High Fantasy - apart from its ancient, epic history (and you don't get much higher than Elves), the heroes are up against Sauron, and are led by Aragorn, your prime example of the Player Character with Destiny. On the other hand, think about the Frodo/Sam sequences - all that buggering around in Ithilien cooking rabbits, for heaven's sake! Tolkien, being a wily old coot, pulls off the perfect mix of high and low - the high is never too distant or unrealistic because of the domestic nature of the hobbit bits, but the hobbits, while being obviously low-level characters without special skills, are

elevated by their association with the high fantasy of the Ring quest, Sauron and the whole nine yards.

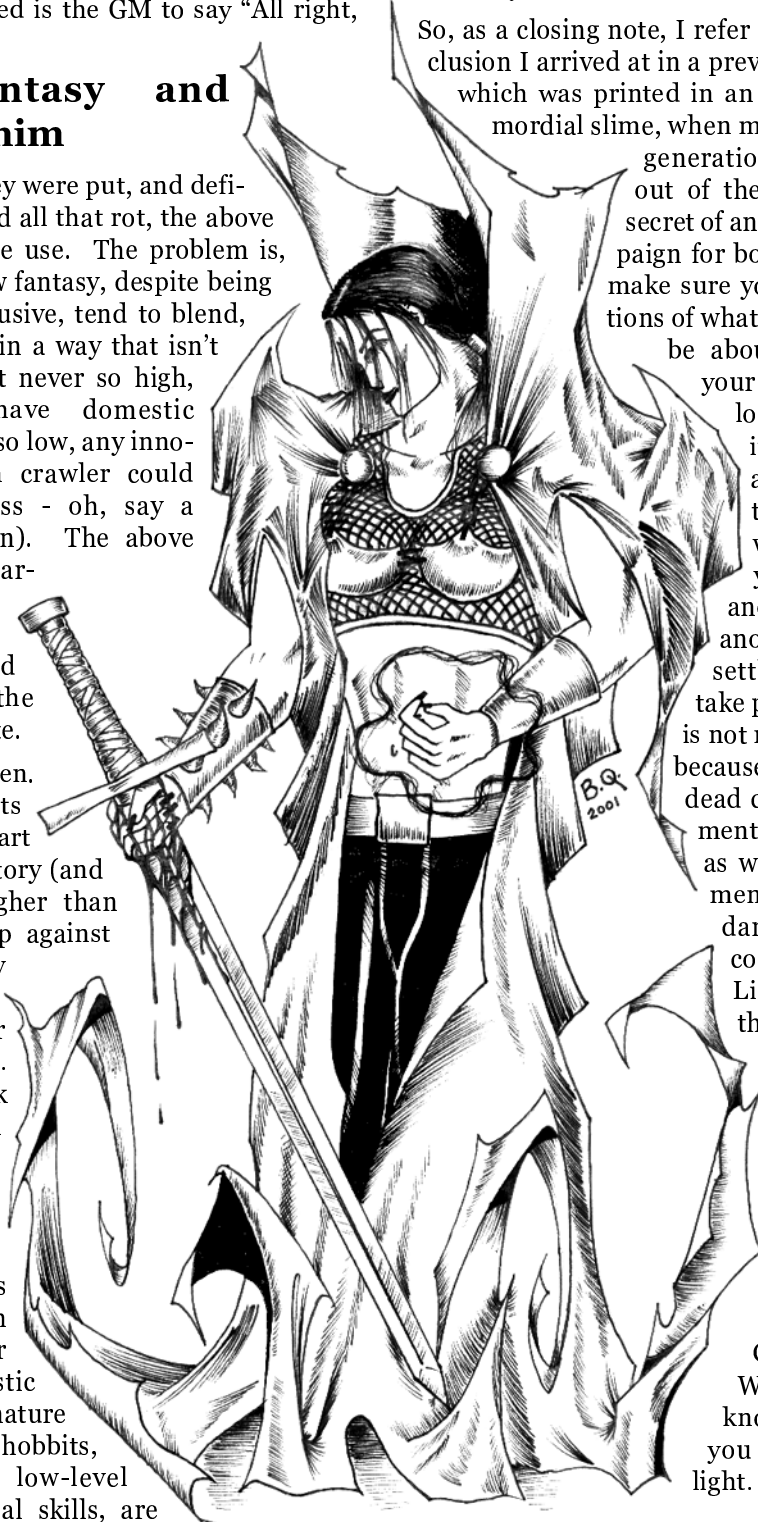
That kind of thing, though, is a lot easier in Literature than it is in roleplaying. It takes a cunning GM indeed (see wily old coot, above) to mix high and low elements in such a way as to refrain from annoying players to the point of murder. If you're off to save the world on your flying horse with the magic of the realm at your fingertips, you don't want to be told that the horse has lost a shoe. Likewise, if you're intent on cleaning out the dungeon to finance a better sword, you don't relish suddenly discovering that this bit of treasure (a) needs to be returned to location (b) in the teeth of demon (c) and the armies of (d), or the world will end in apocalypse (e), have a nice day.

So, as a closing note, I refer you to the identical conclusion I arrived at in a previous CLAWmarks article which was printed in an edition back in the primordial slime, when most of the current CLAW

generation were still struggling out of the eggshells... Really, the secret of an ongoing, satisfying campaign for both players and GM is to make sure you have similar expectations of what the campaign is going to be about. Don't just develop

your character all on your lonesome. Rather discuss it with the other players and see if you'll fit in with their concepts and the way they want to go. If you don't, then think up another character or find another game. And don't settle for second best: to take part in a campaign which is not really what you want just because it's available, is a fairly dead cert for killing the enjoyment of the other participants as well as your own. Not to mention the ever-present danger of High Player's corpse being found in the Liesbeeck suffocated by their own dice collection, while Low Campaign and Low GM are conspicuous by their alibis. Or vice versa.

A simple creed, but one I espouse with utter faith. Raise Your Roleplaying Consciousness and Choose Your Games Well. Let me know when you see the light.



KAOS 2001: KILLING AS AN ORGANISED SPORT

A recently unclassified dossier on the Hack 'n Slash of Live-Action Gaming.

Mark Ferry pulls the pin

KAOS or **KILLING AS AN ORGANISED SPORT** is an assassination game run from time to time (read seldom) by CLAWs UCT. For KAOS 2001 twenty-seven players signed up for a week's worth of paranoia - slipping quietly from shadow to shadow, stalking and being stalked by a cunning enemies armed with only waterpistols and plastic knives. Well at least that was the idea, anyway.

In reality KAOS 2001 turned out to be a short, bloody, mayhem-filled week. More of a blood-bath than could reasonably have been expected, in fact. James Illingworth was blown away by Keightley Reynolds no more than three minutes into a game which was to last a total of 124 hours. This senseless waste of human life set the pace for the next thirty hours,

which saw the brutal slayings of 10 more innocent victims. Perhaps it was the assignment of five targets per player or perhaps the relative inexperience of the players involved...

How did it work?

The game was run by three judges (d@vid, Mark Ferry & Duncan Truter) who also took the in-game role of law enforcement officers with powers of search, seizure, arrest and detention over players. Players who executed public assassinations were certain to draw the attention of the local law enforcement (to their eventual soggy detriment).

In contrast to previous years, this running included a few extra elements to add to the action (and administrative effort, *sigh*). Players were given an amount of KAOS Creds and were each issued with licences for their (legal) weapons. A number of players were given con-



THE THRILL KILL KLOB

SOME NOTABLE DEATHS

Brindley Uytendogaardt impales Steve Emslie

Steve: "I wasn't thinking about KAOS at the time..." Which is why you got shot, Steve.

Steve was carelessly walking in front of Brindley, who deftly fired off a high powered dart and then ducked behind a pillar. Steve felt something, stopped and noticed the sucker-capped dart on the ground. He never even knew who killed him.

"Hey, where did that come from? I guess I must be dead." - Steve's dying words

Brindley beguiles Caroline

What a scumbag. The second of a three-person killing spree by Brindley.

Candice Cloete eliminates Gareth Saul, in plain sight

Right on Jammie steps, where everyone could see.

Candice Cloete downed by Brindley

He took the law in to his own hands.

Andrew "Pinktofu" Moore flushes Konstantin Nedev

Andrew walked out of the loo. Straight in to Konstantin.

10 Jon Warncke randomly murders civilian David Campey

Was Jon bored? Was this planned? Marshals found one extensively mutilated

corpse identified as David Campey. The victim died from multiple stab wounds. No prints were found.

Juan "Dodge Bullets" Barrios matrix-ripples Brindley

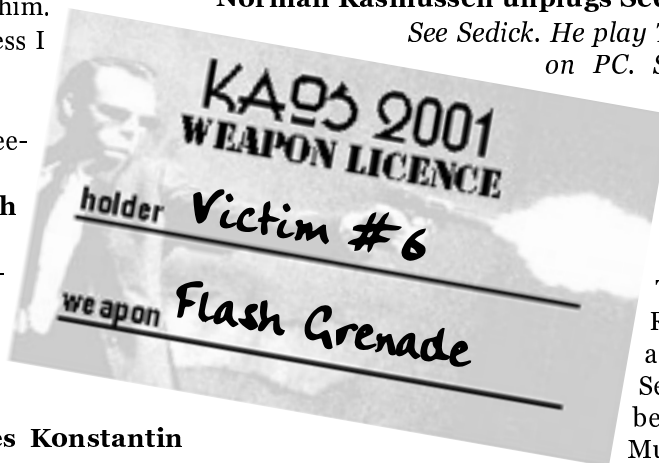
Brindley got too cocky this time. Juan saw Brindley coming and, leaning back, arms waving like an octopus falling out of a tree, limboed under Brindley's dart and returned fire. **FATALITY!**

Marshals Mark Ferry & David Seaward were on the scene - "The cleanest cut case of self-defence I ever saw..."

Norman Rasmussen unplugs Sedick Martin

See Sedick. He play *Total Annihilation* on PC. See Norman. He play *Total Annihilation* on Sedic.

Sed had been invited to the house of Turner, Timm & Rasmussen to play a network game. Sedick mistakenly believed that Muslim hospitality



applied in this situation and that no-one would be so low as to "kapp me at their home while I was there as a guest". What short-sightedness...

At 22h00, Norman entered the room where Sedick was playing *Total Annihilation* and blew him away.

tracts to kill specific targets for KAOS Creds or specific motivations for targeting someone. Add a corrupt cop, a pinch of conspiracy in the form of a syndicate and stir.

The event itself kicked off at 9am on Monday 19 March after players had been e-mailed the names of their targets, and ran until Friday afternoon, by which time one judge at least was exceedingly weary.

Shadowrunning

The atmosphere created by the game is *supposed* to encourage players to skip lectures and creep around campus looking wily and furtive. Players chose to play one of two character types - Runners or Suits. The Suits were required to wear a suit or similar smart wear and in return were given more Creds with which to start the game. Runners were welcome to wear whatever they liked (most chose their own very effective student disguises).



Just for a laugh, we added the **Playing Dead** rule. When you get shot you play dead. Not "roll-over-and-play-dead" dead. I mean third-act-of-Macbeth kind of dead. It doesn't matter whether you're in the middle of Jammie Plaza with hundreds of pairs of trendoid eyes focused on you, or whether you're giving your assassin a lift home (I'll get you for that, Dave. Just you wait). Of course most of the time players get taken by surprise and completely forget to play dead. Kudos to Andy then for remembering to throw himself down the stairs...

Cut to the chase

At closing time Sias, Sam, Keightley and David Sharpe were all still standing. Sam managed the highest number of kills with three - winning the title KAOS Mastaah.

If other UCT societies roleplayed...
Islamic Society - Unknown Armies

Rounding off a miserable evening, Sed lost the Total Annihilation game.

"Dude. Now that was *not* cool. Not even Kosher"

Juan "the one" Barrios chokes on David Sharpe's Chi

You queues you lose... David Sharpe silenced Juan whilst Juan was ordering food from the Engineering Cafeteria. David Sharpe also silenced a witness (Jo McDaid) in the process.

"All your dead are belong to us!"

Matthew Beets beats Piotr Dubla doubly

"You shouldn't stand there, you could get sta-aaa... aaack... eeeech... aaaaaa aaaarg..." - Piotr

Sam Morar liquidizes Ryan Kruger

Late on the Wednesday night, our sources uncovered this classified company memo apparently written by Sam Morar himself:

"After divulging the crucial info that he had no weapon, and intended to kill his assassins with their own weapons, I made sure there were no marshals around (Marshal Dave was nearby) and shot the target as he was about to turn around in the bathroom stall. [Ryan, did your parents never teach you to close the loo door? - Ed] I then closed the door, took out my super body-liquidizer-o-matic and poured the victim down the toilet, not forgetting to flush the loo and put down the seat afterwards. This body will never turn up..."

Matthew Tagg crucifies Terry-Jo Thorne

In a 1-on-1, Terry-Jo fired first but fell short. Matthew returned fire fatally wounding Terry-Jo... Alas for those who forget to fire a warning shot.

Andrew "Pinktofu" Moore severs Jon Warncke's

addiction to MUDing

What sweet irony. Strange how KAOS can bring out weaknesses in people. Brindley got cocky, Sed preferred Total Annihilation. And Jon was too busy MUDing to pay any attention to the *real* world.

Andrew Moore offed by someone on the stairs

Andy actually suffered a *real* injury when enacting his playing dead routine. Falling down the stairs is reserved only for the brave.

Matthew Beets takes out Janet Horn

She was really quite upset. 'Twas her predictability that did her in.

Matthew Tagg almost dismisses Bevan Timm

In a vicious and unprovoked attack, Matthew Tagg blew away most of Bevan Timm's left shoulder. Bevan's gun apparently misfired on the first retaliatory shot. Bevan turned and ran...smart man.

Matthew Tagg takes out Norman Rasmussen

Matthew got greedy here and planted two bullets in Norman's back. Norman wasn't one of his targets, it was just for kicks. However the chase that ensued took them through Marshal Mark's jurisdiction...

Mark Ferry places Matthew Tagg six feet under

"I was standing on Highway 666. To some a beautiful stretch of the Old Students Union Building..."

David Sharpe judo-chops Sias

An attempt was made on the life of Sias Mey on the Thursday by a crazed Easterner wielding a blunt object greatly resembling a hand. Sias was last seen in a critical condition in the CLAWroom...

SKOOTING WIF 733T SKI772

Brindley's tongue in cheek/foot in mouth guide to thumping 40K players at GenCon 2001

For all those who are unfamiliar with the term 40K, here's a brief intro. It's glorified Chess. Miniature figurines on a table top killing other miniature figurines on a table top. It's expensive, it's time consuming and it's heavily strategic. The strategically impotent, horribly impatient or partially blind need not apply - try Mage Knight rather.

So, after winning the 40K tournament at GenCon I, in my nauseating arrogance, feel that I am the most appropriate person to dispense knowledge of 733T 5KI775 capable of eradicating various opponents.

I will start off with what one requires to win a tournament. I will skip what one is obviously assumed to have - ie: an army. The first point that the few of you pedantic bastards out there will say is: "What about the army type?! Surely that matters?"

The answer is a resounding "No! You silly twat!". It doesn't matter what army you play - providing you balance your 5KI775 well - we'll get to this. Unless you are thinking of playing ultramarines. I mean, honestly! Ultramarines? Get a real army, you novice. Oh and Dark Angels are pretty pointless as well. So apart from those two - oh yeah, Saim-Hain Eldar - don't bother! I mean..Jetbikes..Whooooooo! I'm quivering - Not! Oh, and unless you KNOW how to play Orks - don't bother ...and unless you have 2 BIG tanks - don't bother with Imperial guard either. And Dark Eldar - be careful- these pansy bitches are difficult to play. So, as mentioned, you can play any army!

The first thing one requires to win a 40K tournament is an organic rules/battle assistant device. This organic rules device should also have the statistical calculations add-on and the play-like-a-scaly-bastard patch. My particular device was a model 21 David Sharpe. Capable of assimilating and processing hundreds of thousands of army variables a second and including the latest patch of "scaly-bastard" this seemed like the obvious choice.

One should use the organic rules device before constructing one's army. Be sure to choose your army first as the rules device will only confuse you further as it churns out various and multiple possibilities. This will help you in pre-battle calculations which should get you prepared for anything. Do not let your opponent know you have this device, and do not communicate with your device whilst playing your opponent lest you intend invoking violence.

Once you have chosen your rules device and your army, and have constructed it, you

then need an enemy morale decimator. This may come in various forms ranging from pictures of you and your opponent's mother in bed together, to informing the opponent that his pet has been knocked over. (In the latter, more extreme case,

you should actually have the pet knocked down, as a simple cell phone call home might thwart your charade.) I was lucky enough to be blessed with the mobile organic enemy morale decimator model 21 Duncan Truter. This device was truly miraculous. At any time it is in the vicinity (after all it is mobile) and you roll more than two 6's at any point, the device spontaneously

screams out **"GEE, THAT WAS A RAPING!!"**. If you are lucky enough to beat your opponent entirely, the device does the all demoralizing war cry: **"SUCK IT DOWN!"**.

This worked so well, in fact, that one particular player I played against dropped out of the tournament after his entire army was obliterated before the start of his 5th turn. It was the poor boy's first battle.

The third tip to win is grooming. If you look better than the opponent he will feel inferior. This in turn will manifest itself in a form of negative psychic energy which will course through his unwashed matted hair, down his pimply skin into his sandpaper-like hands and reveal itself in the form of poor dice rolls. And here's the best bit about the grooming - if you do lose, you still look better than him! He may get him a trophy at the after party - but you are more likely to get laid! At which point you can get your mobile demoralisation device to saunter past and echo **"SUCK IT DOWN!"**

I will dispense the fourth tip in the form of a multiple choice question.

When your opponent says: "So, how long have you been playing?"

Your response is:

A: "I am the CLAW Warlord! Feel my wrath of power through 5 years experience!!"

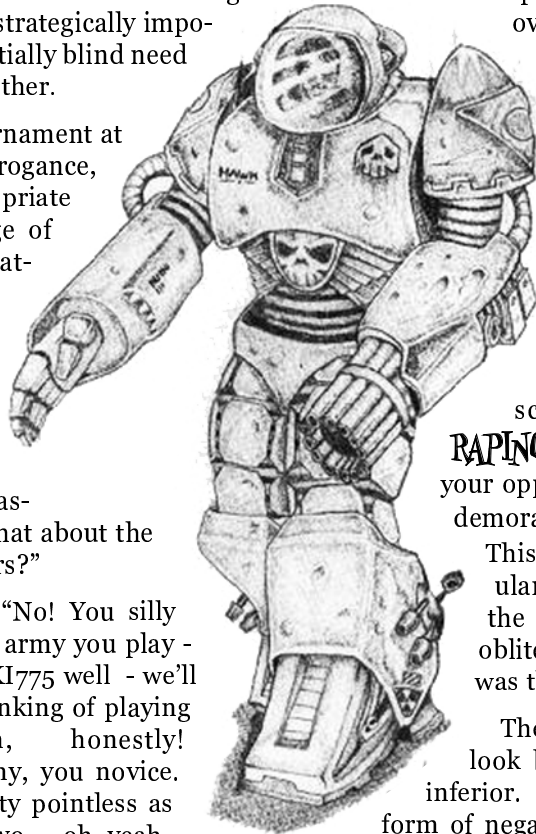
B: "It doesn't matter. I'm a strategic prodigy and I will eat you!"

C: "A year or two"

D: "A week or two"

E: "Dude, I got this game from a friend yesterday, could you tell me what a ballistic skill means?"

As tempting as the first two options are, they are the incorrect ones. The correct answer as you may have guessed it is E. You should not only underplay your time spent playing this game, you should also put your oppo-



ment into a position of **helping you!** Asking questions will continue to assert your naivety and annoy your opponent - which may actually trigger the demoralization device. For example, when you move your land speeder into range so it can use its multi-melta - a horribly obvious anti-tank weapon - that is when you say:

“What does that mean ? Is that six? I rolled a hit ? Oh, and it penetrates the armour automatically? Wow! That’s kinda cool. So what happens to your truck thing ? A six! What does that mean ? It’s blown up ? Sorry dude!”

At which point **“WHAT A RAPING!”** should resound through the hall.

The fifth point actually goes hand in hand with the third. Cheerleaders. Now this doesn’t have to take the form of loose girls in tight outfits as not everyone has access to CLAWgirls. When I use the term Cheerleaders I use this in a fairly androgynous interpretation. People who support you. People who clap and cheer every time an opponent fails to make an armour save. As you can clearly imagine this will definitely help you win - either through sheer frustration of your opponent or through disqualification of your opponent when he tries to stab you in the face with his range ruler. If it fails to help you win, your apparent popularity will again count in your favour for scoring at the after party.

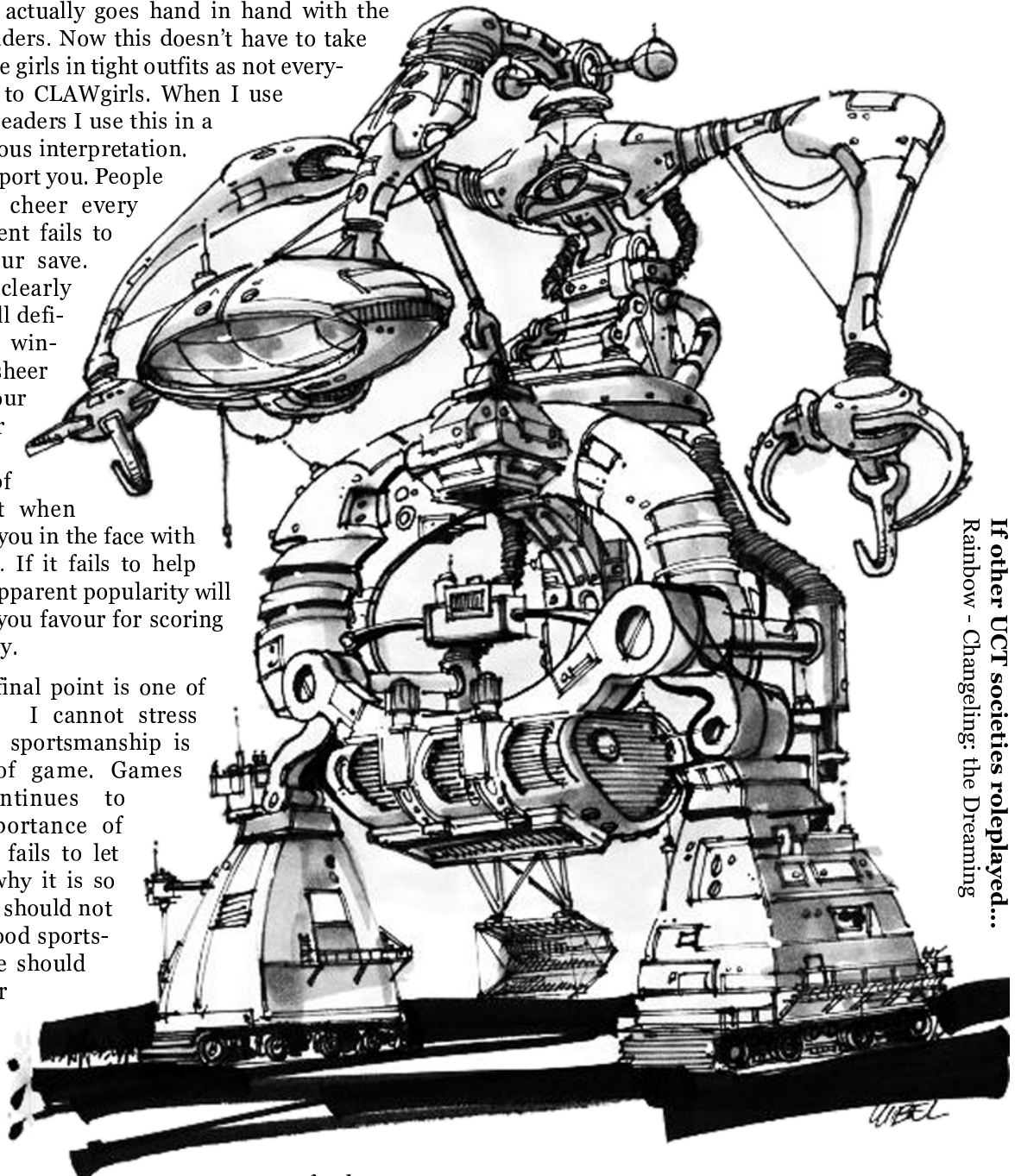
The sixth and final point is one of sportsmanship. I cannot stress how important sportsmanship is in this type of game. Games Workshop continues to stress the importance of this virtue, yet fails to let anyone know why it is so important. One should not strive to be a good sportsman. NO! One should try to be a better sportsman - better than your opponent. Once you have attained the

status of better sportsman than your opponent, that automatically rene-gades your opponent into the “bad sportsman” realms. So during the battle you can always say: “Gee bru, that was so swak - that’s just not cricket. You’re not a good

sportsman.” Again this manifests itself in the form of negative psychic energy, which will in turn affect the dice rolls. If your opponent is too stupid to have psychic manifestations, he may be so wracked with guilt that will purposely do silly things - like move his most valuable unit in front of your most powerful gun - a clearly desperate attempt to regain sportsmanship points from you.

With the knowledge of 733T 5KI775 now dispensed I hope each of you wargamers out there will continue to 5K007 your opponents...

And may the best player win.



If other UCT societies roleplayed...
Rainbow - Changeling: the Dreaming

If other UCT societies roleplayed...
Aikido/Judo/Jujitsu/Karate - Legend of the Five Rings