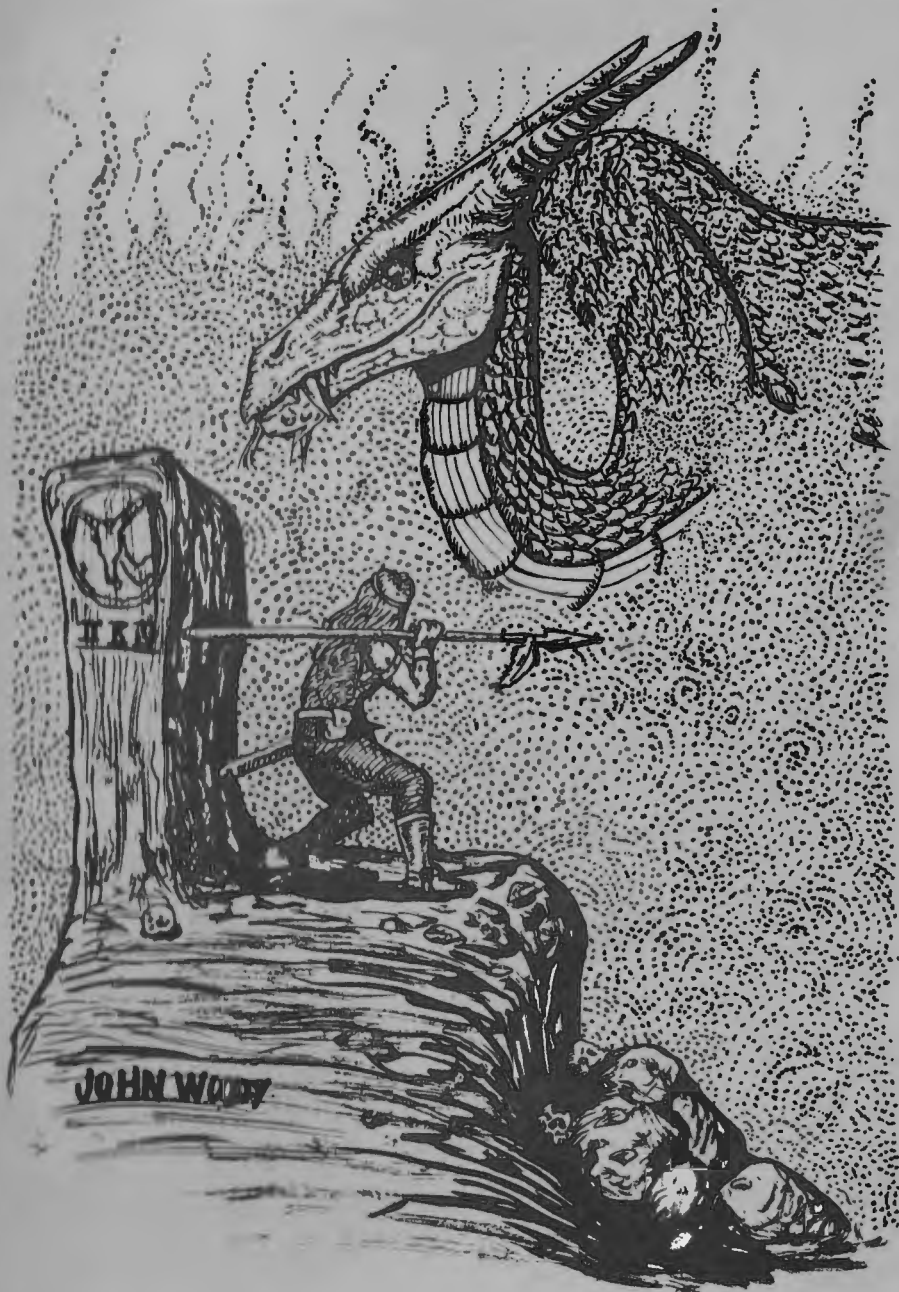


WHISPERS OF THE WOOD



**GAME
SYSTEMS
INC.**

PO Box 160129 Miami, FL 33116-0129

forwarding & address correction requested



WORDS FROM THE WOOD

It's time once again to sit down at the keyboard and tap out words of brilliance and wisdom to entertain and delight you, the reading audience. "How do I do it?" you might ask. Well, there is a lot of technical know-how involved . . . like where the power switch is and how to activate it, which keys to type to get the correct letter, and how to use a mouse. There's also a lot of creative avenues that have to be traveled. Coming up with new and inventive ways of expressing yourself is a process that . . . um . . . is hard, like, and not too easy. It's, like . . . hard and stuff. Oh yeah, and it's hard. So there you have it, a look into the process that results in this erstwhile column. Hope it was, like, fun.

I'm proud to announce that, by the time you are reading this column, we should have everyone set up to receive their email turns. We have been sending out turns via America Online and Compuserve for several weeks and things seem to be working fine. The Internet problems have been worked out as well, so we are set and ready to go.

Speaking of Internet, those of you on this system will need to UUdecode your email file BEFORE the Adobe Acrobat Reader can be used. If you try to read your file before UUdecoding it, you will be unable to read the file. If you are unsure where to get such the UUdecoder, ask your site administrator--he or she should be able to tell you where to get one.

I'd like to go over some email protocol here, so that we will have everything straight. First, when we mail out new games, we will NOT, I repeat NOT be sending out the first turn via email. The first turn will go out by US Mail, as normal. This is to confirm that the player exists and is living at that address. All subsequent turns can be emailed, upon request, but the first turn will not.

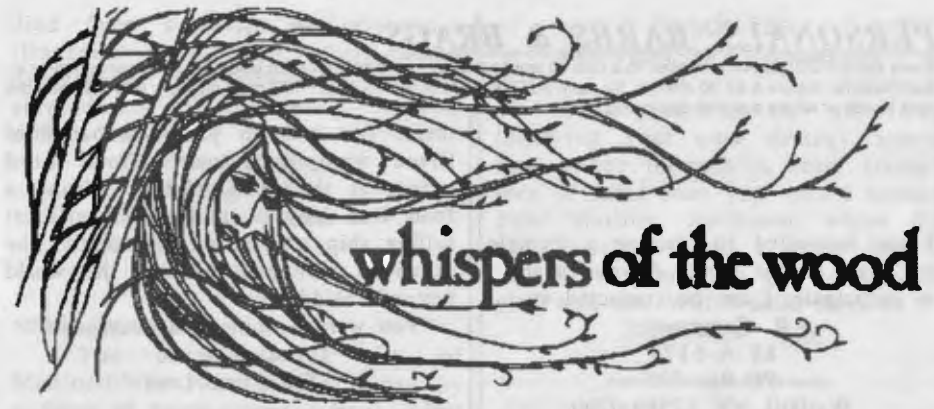
A number of players have asked about one-week all-email/all-fax games. We will be happy to accommodate any team and/or player who wishes to join such a game. Just ask to be set up in such a game when you send in your requests. Now that the email service is up and running, there's no reason why you can't get your fix of ME-PBM on a weekly basis.

What about cards and email addresses for these games, you ask? That's a good question! For one-week all-email games (and for these games only) we will accept, with your initial request to be set up in the game, 3x5 cards with your name and email address so that communication can be set up immediately once the initial turns are received. Please note that we will only be doing this for the one-week all-email games only, as these players will have no easy way of establishing contact.

Another question that is frequently asked is what will happen to the cards that non-email players send to the email players? GSI will forward these cards and any other communication as usual. This way, notes and cards will be forwarded to those players receiving their turns by email, just slightly slower. Please note that we will NOT be accepting messages via email directed to non-email players (just as we do not accept such messages on fax turns). You are more than welcome to mail your cards separately--just make sure the game# and the player# of the receiving party is clearly marked on the card.

Some players have asked about receiving their turns by email AND by regular mail. While we have no problems doing this, there will be an additional \$5 charge to have this done. We have set up the email turns to replace the hard copy turns we normally send, so the charge is to reflect the additional handling this will require. The same \$5 charge applies to any replacement email turn -

(CONTINUED ON P. 14)



ALONG THE PATHWAYS

Words From the Wood.....	Inside Cover
EDITOR'S COLUMN	
Personals.....	1
COMMUNICATION	
Alternatives to Victory Conditions	7
OPINION/STRATEGY	
Erkenbrand's Rescue	12
FICTION	
Ask the Oracle	15
QUESTIONS	
Hall of Heroes.....	16
THE VICTORS.	

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This Month's Cover: "An Unexpected Surprise"

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PERSONALS: BARBS & BRAGS

Every current GSI player is entitled to a free 60 word personal in this column each issue, for each game they're in. Submissions require a \$2.00 charge for each additional set of 40 words (61-100 is \$2.00 etc.). GSI reserves the right to edit or refuse material deemed unsuitable.

I am interested in starting a Female vs. Male grudge game. Anyone wishing to participate, I can be contacted at:

R. Campanale
88-A-6177
PO Box 700

Wallkill NY 12589-0700

Let's show them how it's done!
Nightfall

Middle-earth™ PBM
circa 1650

GAME 13

Ostohor remembered Lord Marshal Pelendur's last words--"I'm trusting you with the last 1250 heavy cav Cardolan may ever have."

My first and last command he thought, as countless evil hordes overran his army as they slept. What happened to the scouting reports? This was worse than the chariot Dad loaned me and I crashed. That's a big hoof uhnk.

92 turns, 3 Free Peoples vs. 8 Dark Servants. It's about time you got your act together. Toy with us much more, we'll win! To the West Point boys, I'm sure your instructors are impressed with your performance . . . NOT!!!

GAME 66

We have been playing cat and mouse with the Elrond curse company for almost a year. In that time you have claimed many heroes, Nazgûl among

them. You can bet your last barrel of Elven wine there were Cloud Lord agents at the dock wishing Elrond a fond Bon Voyage as that magnificent sailing ship transported him across the ocean to his next home in the world beyond Middle-earth.

You were a noble and courageous adversary.
The Cloud Lord

GAME 103

The woman was silent until the pale blue light rippling across the water's surface had resolved itself into the shadowy form of a Nazgûl.

"All is ready, my lord, but there are reports of Free armies on East road and approaching Westgate."

He shrugged. "So? Strike anyway. Westgate is secure . . ."

Here we go again. Déjà vu, anyone?
Rhys (18)

Fellow Warriors,

I'd like to send this greeting to you all on the eve of our 2nd anniversary. It's been a great game, guys, though I do hope we've managed to clear out you bad guys before our 3rd anniversary rolls around. Middle-earth will be Free!

Argeleb II

GAME 105

Khamûl, Master of Moria and Mirkwood--

Milord, as spring came to Minas Anor, so did my army, as you ordered, finding it occupied by an army of Corsairs under Marshal Angamaitë and Warlord Adûmir. It is my pleasure to inform you that within a fortnight of our arrival, Adûmir lay dead in public duel at Celedhring's feet, Angamaitë

died from a series of mysterious illnesses, and after their army dispersed, the city/keep quickly surrendered to our threat. Further orders, milord?

Your faithful minion,
Raugwath
Regent in Gondor

GAME 115

NEWS FLASH--(Turn 41)

The once-beautiful city of Mithlond-West was overrun today by a force of battle-crazed mûmak riders dragging war machines and accompanied by the mighty wym Throkmau. In exemplary formations, with bronze and steel weapons and wearing shiny steel and mithril armor, the force bearing the banner of the Quiet Avenger dazzled those residents quick enough to get out of the way--and trampled the rest. The Gray Havens are a haven no more . . .

GAME 116

Cheap! Cheap! Cheap! Arfanhil, you sound like a bird. Let's see how much gold is in your coffers left behind from "fortunes of war"--DEAD characters!

Dûrmorgul
Minion of Sauron

Hey Khamûl, Hoarmûrath, like my new jewelry? Isn't it . . . precious?

Durmorgûl

GAME 122

Another world I have plunged into Darkness.

Those that believe there is some cosmic balance have not met me.

Crimson Toad
Dwar

GAME 125 CONTEST OF CHAMPIONS

Bosimytas Reval, are you following your own strategy article about when the end is near? Haven't seen or heard from you since I torched Buhr Marling. Northmen, where did your little navy go? I would like to sink it! Woodmen, so you are next to play with me. Will Waulfa survive?

Zarendarger (15)

The Sea of Rhûn is not safe! Both Baaltroc and Cairtin were struck down by sickness while trying to recover Lest. Several others have been either kidnapped or killed. With the loss of Tharbad, the Northmen fall, but the Free shall prevail!

Éoder (hostage)

The road from Minas Arnor to Calmirie is not paved in stone, it is paved in bones. The bones of fallen pawns.

Fitting decor for the newest addition to the Fire Lord's domain.

Crimson Toad
Iron Ren

GAME 141

Dear Gondors,

You deserve your share.
1 for you and 1 for me.
2 for you and 1 . . . 2 for me.
3 for you and 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 for me.
Etc., etc., etc.,

You steal from me, you fill my war chests.

(16) Berserker

GAME 154

Dear Northman, Eothraim, Dwarf and however,

That Storm Cloud you see approaching from the south is dust and smoke. The thunder you hear is the sound of chariots, and the chant goes something like this: "Burn baby burn, just burn."

Ovatha II

"Hahaha!" laughed Akhōrahil. "Nothing can stop me now! My armies shall triumph and I am supreme! Nothing can stand in m . . .

<<<UJLGGHHH>>>

---Attention. Your turn has been terminated by the Post Office. Please deposit another turn in the hopper, and do try to get it in on time. Obviously eleven days isn't enough.---

Rats.

Rhys (15)

GAME 158

Celdrahil,

You should be more careful of your armies. I did appreciate the bonus destruction, but if you continue to make those unfortunate mistakes, you will have to depend on your allies to conquer Mordor.

To all FP: The milk run is over, you will have to fight for every inch of ground. This game is far from over . . .

Hoarmûrath

Defender of Mordor

GAME 165

We are not proud--we are the Men of Gondor. We will dig our holes and remain the bastion of security that blankets the others. We will fight to the last man, woman and child so there will be none left to feed the Dark Forces. The Men of Gondor shall stand tall this day.

GAME 167

The Dog Lord is on the ropes and down for the count.

Free Peoples assault Mordor--armies and characters roam at will.

GAME 176

"Northmen!" the general bellowed. "We've got Northmen in Mordor? What's going on here? After we took Dilgul, didn't we finish them?"

"Uh, well, sir, we, uh, never actually took . . . But we've been busy, sir! Tarondor smashed through the Ungol road, you know, and . . ."

"And how many turns did it take our agents to kill this Tarondor?"

"Uh, well, sir, we, uh, never actually killed . . . But we've been busy, sir! The Dwarves and Eothraim crashed through the Morannon and . . ."

"How could they do that? Where were Bulrakur and Gothmog?"

"Uh, as far as we could tell, uh, Angmar and Mirkwood, uh, sir . . ."

"And WHAT exactly were they doing in ANGMAR and MIRKWOOD?"

"Uh, well, that is, uh, apparently nothing, uh, sir . . ."

"This is preposterous! Gondorians in Ungol! Mirkwood fallen! Bring me Ren and Khamûl!"

"Uh, well, that's another thing, uh, sir . . ."

Beawyn the Fair sighed languorously as she shifted her skimpy togette to catch the breezes off the beach at Rhûn.

"Will no suitors come for me? Why must I be so alone? Sigh . . ."

She knew well the answer--her dazzling beauty intimidated men, it always had. But surely there must be someone out there man enough to tame her wild fury. So alone . . . So alone.

GAME 178

Since Mûrazôr's death at Elrond's hand, there has been no whimpering from Angmar, just silence. Mayhaps somebody finally learned some humility. 2 Nazgûl dead, 7 to go plus some Lieutenants. Only two of the Free have fallen but some steadfast Neutrals have seen the light.

Zarendarger (4)

GAME 181

Well,

I have fought the Dragon Lord, Witch-king and Rhudaur. All have fallen to the combined might of the Free nations. Many fell to Arthedain lances, Cardolan swords, Woodmen spears, Noldo challenges, Sinda agents and my AXE.

It is time to march, my friends, the Prince needs our aid.

On to Mordor!

Bain

South Gondor:

You are the most pitiable whelp of an opponent as I have ever seen! Your tactics and strategies are as predictable as the setting sun. Ergo your 6000 troops lay dead at the base of my capitol. Did you really think splitting your army would grant you the advantage? But, I am glad we fought. Indeed, it gave me yet another chance to witness first hand the unparalleled ineptitude that is your life. Although your feeble attempts to dominate my empire are mildly amusing, I grow increasingly bored by your idiocy.

Quiet Avenger

GAME 184

I tried to write a poem last night
When my eyes beheld an eerie sight,

Trolls and orcs and goblins too--

This place looks like an Éothraim zoo,

I want to walk out in the grass
But stepped in wolf dung to my . . .
backpack,

When my friends arrive I guess
I'll get help cleaning up this mess.

High Plains Drifter

GAME 186

Although it was too late to spare your troops, nice kill on Odagus! Mirkwood is heating up and that's the way we like it! Now, if we could just get someone else to ink a line or two in *Whispers* . . .

Death to Sauron!

Helcent

GAME 187

North Gondor attack Dunlending? Ahh . . . you so stoopid!

Robster Craw (25)

GAME 188

Nûrnen Records Proudly Announces--

The one-and-only Blind Mage
and his Singing Sorcerers!

Hear Akhōrahil sing his hit single,

"The Blind Mage Blues," along
with the old favorites like:

"If I Only Had A Port"

"Who Turned Out The Lights"

"Nine Old Nazgûl" and more!

This album not available in stores...

Call now to get this unique bargain!

GAME 190

Dragon Lord,

KICKING BUTT! Witchey-poo is first. Ask him if he is laughing. You were lucky the first time but not now. Goblin Gate is history and I don't need no crystal ball to see it. As for the Woodmen and Sinda, they may be a little down but not out by any means.

Selur Rodrom

Arfanhil rose, silencing the Lords who had gathered in the Great Hall. "It is time to act," he said softly. "We have delayed as best we can, but we can wait no longer."

A nervous rumble spread through the assembly. "No more talk! No more discussion! This matter is closed--Rhudaur marches to war!"

GAME 191

Woodmen Strategy:

Send Waulfa to Gundabad. Defeat WK army, take huge losses, face new army; lose Buhr Fram to WK cavalry; march north to meet WK cavalry with Osric, leaving capitol undefended. Waulfa trapped at Gundabad, Osric loses battle, Maethelburg captured by Dragon Lord; another WK army hired at Gundabad. Waulfa's army destroyed. Good Plan!

Zûlkhôra, Captain of Cavalry
Mûrazôr's Favorite

GAME 193

Four Lords for a Nazgûl went
Four armies to war are sent
Four nations let forth a battle cry
"Hear us Mûrazôr! Prepare to die!"

One such Lord did come to call
Brought forth his hordes to the Nazgûl's hall
Did combat brave and won the day
Though a heavy price did his soldiers pay

On this great day Fate did grant
The Nazgûl chained and his artifacts
Yet did this Lord loosen his grip
When came night let the Nazgûl slip

Now a bloody price for this he'll pay
For his life and soul the Lord does pay
Like the sound of thunder comes a sea of black

To rip and tear and death deal back
Wraith of Angmar

GAME 194

Fear me, peasants.
Fear my wrath.
My magic.
And my sight.
For if I see you, it will be too late.
Over.

The end.
For in the days
Of sorry slaves--
I am coming.
Maybe not today
(Or tomorrow)
But soon.
Death awaits you, fools.
Death--and oblivion.

I AM AKHÔRAHIL
You may call me Master.

GAME 197

Lords of Middle-earth,
The Noldor stand ready to aid all of you who oppose the will of Sauron and his evil minions. Once again he has unleashed his black riders upon the land. Soon they shall come crashing down upon us from their dark fortress in the mountains of Mordor. The Lords of the Free must present a united front against the servants of Sauron and oppose the corruption of those nations who have not yet chosen to join the Free People of Middle-earth. May Elbereth guide and protect you all in the upcoming time of trouble!

Lord Círdan
Master of the Grey Havens
Noldo Elves (10)

GAME 200

"HOW DARE YOU!!!? To think that my own counselor would be in communication with our enemies. This is treason!"

"I have done as I thought best, my Lord. Now, unless you'd care to make this a point of honor . . ."

"You know very well that I cannot have you killed. But, I can send you on a rather long errand."

Middle-earth™ PBM
circa 2950

GAME 11

Greetings Prince Imrahil,

I sent emissaries to you at the start of this conflict between the forces of Light and the followers of Sauron. You spurned their offers of peace and sent me no word. Well I have now returned your attentions in a more personal manner. Dol Amroth is only the beginning. The true Lords of Gondor have returned.

Sangarunya
P.S. You're next, Ecthelion II

GAME 20

Dear Rhûn Easterlings,

Please note that the murder weapons used to dispatch Hesnef and Kav Makow II were the very daggers you inserted into the backs of the Dragon Lord and Witch-king. My troops ate well at Ursh Iana, please bring salt and ketchup next time. Your horses are bland.

Dendra Dwar

Neutrals--

Mordor is not dead yet--and this looks to be a long-term struggle. Why join the Free just to be yet another face in the crowd, when you can be Evil, join the Dark Side, have lots of fun, and end up as the biggest fish in a smaller pond!

Akhôrahil
The Blind Mage

GAME 25

There are elves in my Master's forest! How can he walk in peace with elven camps nearby? The growing power of Isengard will deal with the situation. As for which side to join, only time will tell.

Baalroc

GAME 26

So far Khamûl has only been a nuisance in and around the wood. Mûrazôr, your army is big but it will be dealt with. The wood shall be cleansed of all vermin.

Zarendarger (5)

GAME 33

Freeps:

A Dark Storm sweeps the land, waves of death crush your pitiful forces. Protect yourselves from the everlasting Darkness.

Neutrals:

Choose to follow Darkness or your fates are sealed in blood. You cannot hide in the Shadows, they pulse with Burning Black Hearts. Choose soon or our cold steel will send you into the abyss.

Storm Bringer

Scene: The upper room of a darkened tower, late at night.

"Only the strongest of my servants would dare speak so to me. Since this matter is so important to you, I hereby charge you with solving it. Take this as an emblem of authority. Now go."

"I shall not fail you, my liege."
"Good. Your life depends on it."

The Real Winners in ME-PBM:
Alternatives to Victory Conditions
by
Greg Schooner

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, to provide recognition to some ME-PBM players who don't always make the top three "victory list" at the end of the game despite being outstanding players. Second, to give some alternative viewpoints to how victory might be assessed in ME-PBM.

With enough interest and feedback from other players, perhaps GSI will consider these viewpoints the next time ME-PBM is due for a major overhaul. To lend some credit to what I'm about to say, let me state up front that I have served as an expert in performance measurements in the U.S. Armed Forces. Victory conditions are just that: measurements of the performance of nations in order to recognize and reward the victors. In this article I will discuss three options for doing this.

OPTION ONE: KEEP THE CURRENT VICTORY CONDITIONS

To give GSI credit where it is due, the current victory conditions are not all bad. They do provide a certain level of excitement and competition to the game, and the individual victory conditions provide the additional variety of political objectives.

However, we've all seen some of the ways in which the current victory conditions can detract from the game as well. Who among us does not remember a game where other nations sat around for half the game doing nothing more than improving population centers, training characters, raising armies with no intent to use them, and raising taxes while the rest of us were taking losses and winning the war? Who has not seen the game prolonged into boredom while nations on the winning side manipulate the system to obtain a winner's certificate? What about the team games where several teams (of the same allegiance) transfer most of their population centers and gold to one of their nations to ensure a placement in the top three? Surely in a fantasy wargame we should be glorifying those who fight the hardest, not those who manipulate their domestic affairs!

While prolonging a game may seem at first glance attractive to GSI from a money-making standpoint (more turns played=more fees paid), in the end a prolonged boring game makes for lost player interest at the critical point when old games end and players consider paying for new ones. This is obviously important because GSI (after hearing concern from the players) recently took action to discourage unnecessarily prolonged games.

It seems appropriate to mention that some players are happy with the current system. The system as it stands encourages a somewhat adversarial relationship with one's allies. It rewards those who manipulate others into fighting the wars while quietly attending to their domestic affairs. It also rewards those who can foresee when the game will end and make that one moment in history the moment when the game will end and make that supply of gold, armies, populace, and skilled characters.

For the players who enjoy competition against friend and foe alike, the current victory conditions serve fairly well. They force us to make compromises between the goal of winning the war "at all costs" for the forces of good or evil versus self-interested goals (although there is some overlap between the two objectives). Some players may like this compromising position.

I would like to argue that there is another type of player as well; which is perhaps the majority of players. This other type of player enjoys the thrill of conquest, an exciting game, and the pleasure of team camaraderie. Speaking for myself and several of my gaming colleagues, many of us are willing to wait weeks or months to coordinate a new game so that all positions can be filled with known "team players". Otherwise, we have to take the risk of obtaining frustrating allies.

A separate issue is realism. True, a nation ending the game with a large standing army, powerful characters, many population centers, and lots of gold is likely to find itself in a powerful position. But surely, the "powers that be" in either allegiance (Sauron or the wise among the free peoples) would give some favor to their most effective and devoted servants who turned the tides of war, regardless of how decimated their forces had become. These nations would certainly be the ones most quickly rebuilt after the war, the ones provided with the most additional resources, and the ones most in favor with the supreme powers of their allegiance.

One doesn't have to look too far in military history to find examples of supremely talented generals who returned from battles again and again with decimated forces, only to be resupplied with the largest remaining army (and the most resources!) because they were recognized for their talent, loyalty, and efficiency. Of course, the general who was previously in charge of that large army was relieved of the command, not rewarded for sitting around with a large army.

Likewise, rulers are not likely to be rewarded by the "powers that be" for running around hoarding the holdings of their allies (either by deceit or by design from fellow teammates) to the detriment of focusing on the war effort. Yet these behaviors are currently rewarded as victory.

An alternative measure of victory might then reward those who efficiently remove their enemies from the board and win the war for their masters. This could be approximated by taking the current victory conditions and altering them to reflect damage done to the enemy. That is, the conditions might look something like this:

OPTION TWO: VICTORY BASED ON DEFEATING THE ENEMY

POPULATION CENTERS: Total number and size of population centers taken from the enemy (only once per hex; no bonus for taking, losing, and retaking the same population center), whether it be by army or emissary.

ARMIES: Total number of enemy troops destroyed (troop type, training, weapon, armor, and morale rank). This would include destruction in battle, and possibly also destruction by eliminating or capturing an army's last commander via challenges, assassination and kidnaps, curses, etc.

CHARACTERS: Total number of enemy characters destroyed, and the combined skill ranks of each. This should also include characters held hostage. For international "curses squads", the points could be divided among the nations on the basis of health points inflicted.

WEALTH: Total gold stores stolen from the enemy, possibly also production stores sabotaged and production stores captured when a population center is taken or an enemy army disbands and abandons its baggage train.

The latter criteria, wealth, is one I especially have difficulty with in the current system. Gold stores are a temporary phenomenon, which can easily be taken away, rebuilt, and manipulated in the short term. Gold stores do not

necessarily indicate the (long term) economic strength of a nation. The potential revenues of a nation (plus production, perhaps) are a more accurate estimate. For example: revenue at 100% tax or at current tax rate, plus gold production and perhaps other production values.

Since this is fairly similar to the population center victory condition, I would argue that if the current victory conditions are to be kept, we could still remove the "wealth" condition, and either leave it as "population centers" only, or change to the "potential revenue" condition I've just suggested.

Having both wealth and population centers as victory conditions is repetitive to the point that a nation could have a fair chance of placing in the top three positions by doing nothing but improving population centers, raising taxes, selling production, and hoarding gold for the whole game. As it stands now, these duplicative victory conditions state that a nation's economic wealth is as important as both its military force AND the strength of its characters put together!

The option I've just suggested is of course a little more difficult to track than the current victory conditions. That is, under the current conditions GSI only needs to tabulate the current holdings of each nation in terms of population centers, gold stores, armies, and characters. With this option, throughout the entire game GSI would need to keep a running log of population centers taken from the enemy, characters killed, and so on. However, GSI currently does this to track things like "most kills" and "ritual character terminations".

Surely there are many other good but not too complicated ideas out there about victory conditions, of which I've heard a few. Here's one I heard suggested by another player:

OPTION THREE: CUMULATIVE VICTORY CONDITIONS

Start each nation at zero victory points; points are earned for each population center, troop, gold coin, and character point gained past the initial holdings. While this would make it easier for, say, the Woodmen to compete with the Noldo Elves in terms of characters and population centers, it has, in my mind, two main shortcomings.

First, it still doesn't prevent teams from transferring most of their holdings to one nation to bolster victory conditions. This could be prevented by using the idea from option one where points are only awarded for gains taken from the ENEMY, not from allies.

The second problem is that some nations, such as the Witch-king and Northern Gondor, are more or less doomed from the start to take losses from their initial holdings. Other nations, such as the Noldo Elves or the Blind Sorcerer, are in most games relatively secure from conquest and free to build and bask in luxury rather than serve in the war effort, at the whim of the ruler. Surely this sort of behavior would not be rewarded by the higher up "powers that be" at the conclusion of the war, nor would this behavior place a nation in a very friendly post-war political and trade environment with its "allies". This problem could be dealt with by taking this into account for each nation. For example, we might count on Northern Gondor losing hexes 3026, 3028, 3020, and 3716 as a minimum and not calculate these population centers into the initial holdings.

Another possibility could be to provide these "front-line" nations with additional individual victory conditions, or to make the ones that they have more easily obtained. Which brings us to another topic:

ALTERNATIVES FOR INDIVIDUAL VICTORY CONDITIONS: I have no particular quarrel with the individual victory conditions as they stand. However, they would be so simple to modify that it is hard for me to resist the suggestion that there could be more variety in them. The possibilities are endless, and not stating all of them in the rulebook would add an element of interest to the game. This would also make the commonly (but not always) useless "uncover secrets" order more interesting. Individual victory conditions could be added to and modified more easily, I imagine, than the encounters which GSI already changes from time to time.

An even easier course of action would be to basically keep the same individual victory conditions, but substitute (or add) just one "wild card" victory condition per nation to add a little "spice". For example, the Blind Sorcerer could have a "wild card" victory condition related to intelligence gathering (think of all of the Blind Sorcerer's mages with intelligence gathering spells). Another example: the Cloud Lord could have a "wild card" to provide a certain amount of "foreign aid" to allies over the course of the game due to the Cloud Lord's fairly secure position and relatively solid economic base (plus gold thefts!).

As I've just demonstrated, the individual victory conditions could provide additional excitement by being tied more closely to each individual nation. More examples: Cardolan, a coastal and river nation with a fairly small starting navy, might wish the goal to hold the largest navy in Middle-earth. The Woodmen could wish to personally remove the Dragon Lord from his capital at some point in the game. The Noldo could aspire to place, at one time or another, an army of some strength inside of Mordor. The Long Rider might strive to move his capital to some specific (off-map) location deep in enemy territory where he can recruit and move armies without using a navy. The Dragon Lord might seek to maintain his capital and an army on the northern third of the map. The "cavalry nations" (Eothraim, Long Rider, etc.) might wish to hold the most cavalry forces, the most mounts in stores, or the highest production rate of mounts, and so on.

"ORDER-BASED" VICTORY CONDITIONS

I've also heard players suggest that victory be tabulated cumulatively based on the success and failure of a nation's orders. In this option, most orders placed would result in a variable amount of positive or negative victory points rewarded. For example, attacking an enemy army and winning might be worth 50, guarding a character or recruiting troops might be worth 10, losing a population center in a combat might cost you 65, and doing a nation transport would be worth zero. While this option has probably worked well in some games, in ME-PBM it seems to obviously favor those nations who start with powerful characters. How could the Woodmen or the Harad, who have to slowly train their characters before they can accomplish any difficult orders, hope to compete with the Noldo or the Dark Lieutenants in this regard?

I mention this option mainly for completeness, and do not consider it one of my three major options. However, in some modified form it may have potential. It does do one thing which none of the other options do: it allows for the importance of succeeding in "intelligence-gathering" orders, which could be reward just like all the other orders (see section on intelligence gathering below).

WHAT'S MISSING?

What is missing in all three of these options? Probably more than I immediately realize, but two missing elements come immediately to mind. First, what is the reward for the player who uses the "intelligence game" to great effect in winning the war? That is, the person who is always locating artifacts, characters, capitals, and so on instead of training characters or raising armies and population centers? What Lord of Darkness or Lord of Light would claim that the intelligence-gathering activities in a war are not a powerful instrument for victory?

True, intelligence gathering occasionally helps a nation to accomplish victory under various aspects of the three options discussed here. But often intelligence gathering merely helps the team to win the game while penalizing the individual nation, in terms of victory conditions, for not being more selfish. The truly effective "intelligence players" wield power by disseminating information to the whole team, not by hoarding it to themselves. Therefore, other nations may be the beneficiaries (in terms of victory conditions) of the intelligence gatherer's activities. This suggests the need for one additional victory condition:

INTELLIGENCE: A composite score made up of total number of double agents, number of enemy hostages interrogated, number of enemy characters picked up on "scout for characters", artifacts located, characters successfully "counterespionaged" back from double agent status, reconns and scrys performed, secrets uncovered, and so on. Obviously, this score would be a little "messier" to assess than some of the other victory conditions, but with a little thought a good measure could be developed which at least approximates the worth of a nation's information gathering activities and rewards it accordingly.

The second missing factor in all three options is something I like to call "team play". Just as essential to war fighting as "Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence" (known as C3I in today's military) is the teamwork of those who carry out those commands with those communications based on that intelligence. Where is the reward for those nations who help win the war by strategically giving population centers to allies, coordinating the communications and actions of the team, giving artifacts away to nations that can make better use of them, giving gold to nations in economic trouble, and so on?

Under the current conditions, this sort of effective teamwork is penalized by giving victory points to the nation begging for help, and taking victory points away from the nation providing assistance. Surely in a world political environment, reality is exactly the opposite of this! The weaker nation begging for help would lose favor and status in both the world political environment and (say) Sauron's eyes, and the strong nation would gain favor for showing supremacy via giving aid to a weaker nation!

The problem, of course, with giving victory points based on "team play" is that it is very difficult to assess. I heard one player suggest voting for the team winner, but this, I think, would very likely disintegrate into political manipulation (especially in team games) and uninformed bias. For example, a Cardolan player is likely to think Arthedain is a better team player than the Northmen, because Cardolan usually coordinates much more with Arthedain. Some nations hardly ever need to talk with certain other nations.

The option I've suggested, "victory based on defeating the enemy", while it may not directly reward team play, is at least neutral to the issue. To the contrary, the current victory conditions often penalize a team player for supporting his or her allies, while boosting the victory conditions of the nation receiving the support.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS: Hopefully this article has served to encourage ME-PBM players to congratulate the "real winners" among us, and to not assume that those with the most victory points are worthy (and vice-versa!). Most players probably recognize the truth of this, and some may play the game according to their own ideas about victory.

However, as we say in performance measurement, "Tell me how you measure and reward your people, and I will tell you how they will behave". Measuring and rewarding people (and nations!) in an unrealistic manner will always drive unrealistic behaviors and result.

I can only ask that players and GSI give thought to "victory based on defeating the enemy", "cumulative victory conditions", the problems with rewarding wealth twice (gold stores and population centers), and the difficult issues of rewarding "intelligence gathering" and "team play". I also hope that more players will make their thoughts known to GSI, and that GSI will solicit more and more the feedback from the players.

As far as actually inciting a GSI-sponsored reconsideration of victory conditions, obviously it is easier to critique someone else's efforts than to design and implement a whole new system into the already existing larger system of ME-PBM. GSI will decide what is worth its effort; hopefully (for the sake of both GSI and the players) their decisions and actions will reflect the desires of the majority of ME-PBM players. Some of these options would certainly be easier than others to implement. In any case, major changes cannot be expected overnight, so until then:

A salute to the "real winners"; your reward is in the pleasure of playing and in the minds of those who recognize you for who you are!

(With special thanks to GSI, Scott Baltes, Dena Kiker, Bobby Rigel, Mike Pace, Jeremy Richman, and others who helped to develop these ideas; and thanks to Smeagol (aka Slinker and Stinker) my pet ferret who helped me by pouncing all over my keyboard as I was typing this).

Erkenbrand's Rescue

by
Dave Rossell

A shout, then a babble of noises arose from the street outside the window.

Oh gods, thought Erkenbrand, not another bread riot. That would make the third one during as many fortnights of captivity. Erkenbrand glared at his three guards, each of whom looked back sullenly.

"And to think there is an agent of the Enemy and his henchmen operating just outside Minas Tirith, and Ethelion doesn't even know, never mind mount a rescue operation for the man who had recruited the ents and saved Osgiliath."

The three guards sneered at these words and one of them walked toward the window to see what all the commotion was about.

It took him a couple of heartbeats to see all he needed to see. He darted over to his companions for a furtive conference. Moments later, they were heading out the door, bolting it behind them.

"Now what scared them?" muttered Erkenbrand as he rose to check the view for himself. "Well, well, well, no wonder they ran." Standing there, bold as a stallion in Spring, was Argirion of Gondor with his retinue. He strode up to the front of the seedy inn where Erkenbrand was imprisoned while the poor formed a nervous half-circle around him and his soldiers. Feet wide apart, arms crossed, he bellowed, "I understand that there is a cowardly, scum-eating character named Ufgamog staying at this pathetic rat-trap you call an inn. If he doesn't come out now, I'll burn the place down around him and his henchmen. The building is surrounded, there will be no escape. He has a choice, he can face me in personal combat, or cook like a bug in a fire."

As if on cue, some Gondorian troops broke out pitch and began smearing the walls with it. Other soldiers lit torches. Very impressive display, Erkenbrand thought. They must have rehearsed it. Argirion did indeed seem perfectly willing to burn down half of Osgiliath, especially the poor quarter, in order to kill one of Ji Indur's agents and a few of his henchmen.

Very interesting, thought Erkenbrand. He opened the shutters wider and leaned on the sill. At least I have a good view. And I can always try to climb down if Argirion really does fire the place. For a while, it looked as though that was going to happen. Then the inn door opened and Ufgamog staggered out, clearly pushed from the inn by the other residents (and maybe some of his henchmen). Ufgamog recovered some of his aplomb by spitting on Argirion's boots and drawing a sword.

"Only in Gondor," said Erkenbrand shaking his head slowly, "do they apprehend criminals by challenging them to personal combat. Why not just surround the place with 100 troopers, and break in with another 50? None of this silly grandstanding. Hm. But maybe this is supposed to impart some sort of lesson to the poor. Or maybe he intends to burn the place anyway as part of some sort of city renewal project."

The clang and scraping of blades clashing ended Erkenbrand's musings. Ufgamog clearly didn't have a chance. Argirion cut and parried like a master, taking only glancing blows in return. After just a few moments Ufgamog was bleeding from more places than Erkenbrand could count.

"I don't suppose Argirion knows the virtues of merc--, guess not," Erkenbrand said as the Gondorian beat aside Ufgamog's blade and plunged his own sword into the agent's chest.

The calls and cheers stopped, and a hush fell over the street. Beggars and laborers looked at each other and shuffled their feet a bit. Blood everywhere. Buckets of blood, gallons of blood, it seemed, welling out of Ufgamog's body, flowing over the cobbles.

Eventually, the groundlings stopped staring at the body. Only then did they see Argirion's lieutenants, all with drawn swords, all encouraging them to cheer. They cheered. Loudly, wildly. Argirion, who had been waiting patiently to acknowledge their accolades, smiled and waved his hand as the crowd dispersed back through the warrens and alleyways of Osgiliath. Erkenbrand could see Ufgamog's henchmen slipping away with the upstanding citizens of Gondor.

Meanwhile, Argirion just stared at the inn, gnawing his lip. "By the Valar!" said Erkenbrand. "He's thinking of burning the place down anyway!"

Well, enough was enough. Erkenbrand called out, "Lord Argirion, I thank you for slaying my captors. Do you suppose you could free me from this cell before burning my prison?"

Argirion looked up in amazement. "Erkenbrand, is that really you!? We had given you up for lost, thought you were halfway to the Dark Tower by now!" He gestured to his men, and they rushed inside. Moments later, Erkenbrand was free, embracing his rescuer in thanks.

"Now, you weren't really thinking of burning down the inn, were you," said Erkenbrand sotto voice. Argirion grinned. He looked much older up close, but the smile almost erased the lines etched by worry and weather.

"Of course not," he said loudly. Then softer, "But it doesn't hurt to grandstand a bit. You know, show a little bit of the sword, the strong right arm of Gondor. Then over the next few weeks, clean up this district, send in food and clothing, fix up buildings, and we will have won over the hearts and minds of the populace."

Erkenbrand shook his head and grinned back. "We men of Rohan are a bit more straightforward in our methods." They turned and walked back toward the army together, aides and lieutenants in tow. Erkenbrand rubbed his nose and glanced sidelong at the Gondorian. "You, ah, did know I was there, didn't you?"

Argirion's grin turned absolutely wicked, but he didn't say a word.

(CONTINUED FROM INSIDE FRONT COVER)

There have also been a number of requests from players to send their turn results to their friend's email address. Unfortunately, we will not be able to do this. Just as we do not mail regular turns to a friend's address, we cannot do so with email. The possibility of someone abusing this to play more than one position in a game is considerable and, as game moderators, we have to guard against such an occurrence. We understand that getting your turns quickly is very attractive, but we have to insure fair play is maintained for everyone.

I'd like to take some time now and discuss personals. Many people have asked what the deadline is for personals, as they say they sent in a personal but it did not get run. The problem then arises when a second personal is sent in the following month and both personals get run. The deadline is the 15th of each month; sometimes it extends a little longer (depending on what day the 15th falls on), but if we receive a personal before the 15th of the month, it will be run in the next issue.

If you send a personal close to the deadline and you do not see it in the next issue of *Whispers*, it's a pretty good bet that the personal did not arrive in time. If this is the case, we will hold onto that personal until the next issue. You can request that we NOT publish any previous personals if this has happened; when you send in the new personal simply request that any old personals be pulled. We will then pull any personals previously submitted and discard them. You can do this even if you are unsure as to whether your last personal ran or not.

Another way to handle this is to write on the personal what month you want the personal published in. You can also write "Do not use if received after deadline for (enter appropriate month)" on the personal. This way, we will know when the personal should be run. Since we are now accepting personals via fax

and email, this will hopefully alleviate some of the problems with the lag time between games being run and personals being run.

Finally, summer is upon us and that means conventions! We are attending two conventions this year, GenCon and Origins. We will be having two seminars at GenCon and one at Origins. The GenCon seminars will be on Friday, August 11th from 8 PM to 10 PM, and on Saturday, August 12th from 8 PM to 10 PM. The Origins seminar will be on Friday, July 14th from 6:30 PM to 8:30 PM--it is event #1176. Yours truly will be attending GenCon and I will invariably be at our booth and at the seminars. I look forward to meeting those of you who can come down. I'd love to hear your opinions about *Whispers* and our games in general, so make sure you stop by and say hello.

That's the long and short of it this month (more emphasis on the long), so I'll talk to you all in 30.

Stuart

The Oracle Speaks

Got a question about your game you can't seem to find an answer to? Ask the Oracle!

MIDDLE-EARTH PBM

I have a company commander who I want to have join another company. The Join Company order has nothing in it stating that a company commander cannot join another company. My question is, can a company commander give a Join Company order?

The answer to this question is no, a company commander cannot give a Join Company order. Just as an army commander cannot give a Join Army order, a company commander cannot give a Join Company order. He can give the Transfer Command order, which will transfer his company to the other company commander. It will also give him the option to join the company, accomplishing the same thing as joining the company.

Address any questions you may have about your game to "The Oracle Speaks". Printed inquiries may be signed or anonymous but please include your name and game number when submitting.

The Hall Of Heroes

Game #142 - The Dark Servants: #22, #25 & #19

Sauron chuckles with malicious glee and welcomes the Haradwaith, Easterlings and Long Rider as his regents in Middle-earth. All now bow to the new rulers and, in bowing to them, they bow to their ultimate master--Sauron, the Lidless Eye, the new overseer in Middle-earth. Final standings are as follows:

#22 Haradwaith - 2250

#25 Easterlings - 2100

#19 Long Rider - 2050

Top Free People: #4 Arthedain - 750

Interesting Notes:

Highest Challenge Rank - Shabla/Haradwaith: 320

Highest Net Commander Rank - Dûran/Dragon Lord: 190

Highest Net Agent Rank - Úvatha/Long Rider: 170

Highest Net Emissary Rank - Úrzahil/Dark Lieutenants: 122

Highest Net Mage Rank - Shabla/Haradwaith: 251

Most Mithril - Blind Sorcerer: 1007

Most Artifacts - Cloud Lord: 23

Most Kills - Dog Lord: 15

Congratulations to the Dark Servants!

Game #162 - The Dark Servants: #17, #15 & #18

The Lidless Eye gazes over the war-torn land and feels a deep sense of satisfaction. Knowing that three of his own Servants--the Quiet Avenger, the Blind Sorcerer and the Fire King--now rule in his name makes his victory over the sniveling Free even more delicious. His rule over Middle-earth now begins in earnest. Final standings are as follows:

#17 Quiet Avenger - 2000

#15 Blind Sorcerer - 1800

#18 Fire King - 1759

Top Free People: #23 Dunlendings - 1208

Interesting Notes:

Highest Challenge Rank - Elrond/Noldo Elves: 168

Highest Net Commander Rank - Hallas/Cardolan: 115

Highest Net Agent Rank - Gerond/Woodmen: 121

Highest Net Emissary Rank - Abby/Fire King: 92

Highest Net Mage Rank - Shoglic/Cloud Lord: 122

Most Mithril - Dwarves: 813

Most Artifacts - Noldo Elves: 22

Most Kills - Cloud Lord: 42

Congratulations to the Dark Servants!