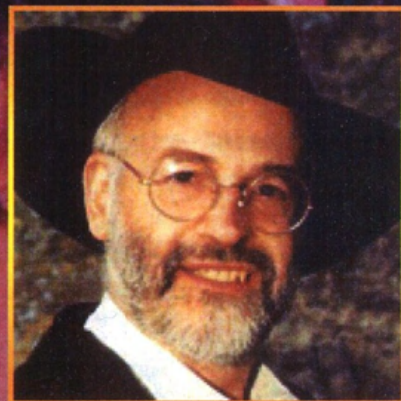


Zweihander

A SUTEKH PUBLICATION



TERRY PRATCHETT
INTERVIEW



THIS YEAR'S FILMS
PREVIEWED



SUTEKH'S
FAVOURITE COMICS

ISSUE 1, 2003

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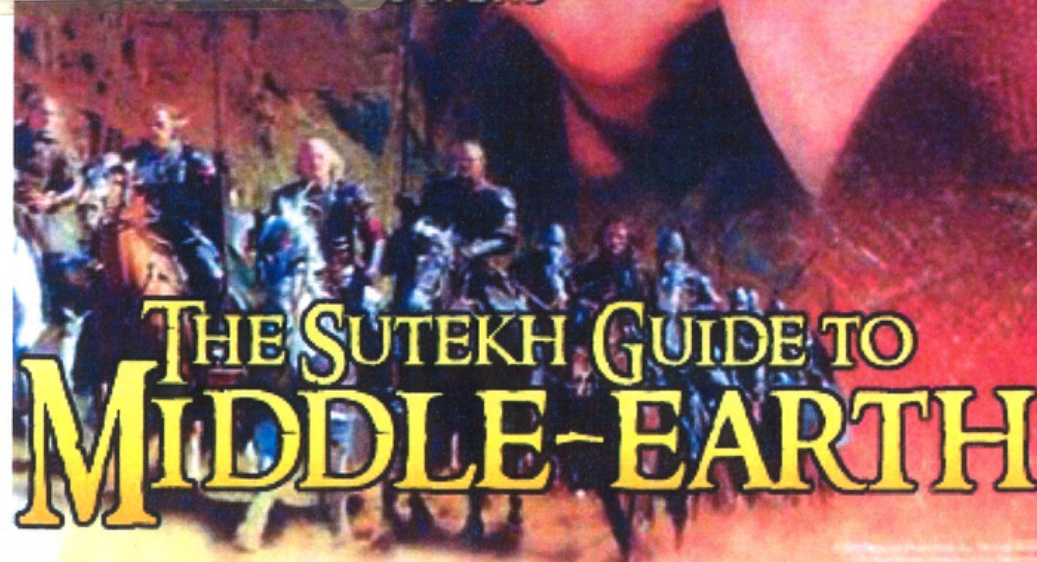


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THE SUTEKH GUIDE TO MIDDLE-EARTH

ZWEIHANDER 1, 2003

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EDITORIAL:

So you've joined Sutekh for another year, or possibly your first. What does being One Of Us mean? Well, hopefully you've got your shiny membership card featuring the sci-fi/fantasy/cult icon of your choice (I'm giving preferential treatment to people who got a Xena or Lara Croft card). You've got *Zweihander*. Depending on what we've come up with for the showbags, you may have a postcard with Hugh Grant, a baby and a stupid saying on it.

But what you've really got is a way in to Sydney University's most oddball collection of intelligent geeks, interesting cynics and borderline-sane pop culture fanatics. If you've ever despaired that most of the people around you are trend-following sheep who've never thought an original thought in their life, rejoice, for this is the club for you. If by some chance you *are* one of the sheep... well, give us your money.

A big thank-you goes out to all the people who helped populate this issue of *Zwei* with articles, particularly the role-playing ones that I couldn't just make up by myself: Chris, Edwina, Boots, Owen, Jaime, Rhiannon, and the committee. See you all next issue. Mrowr.

- Chris Cook



One of the prototype membership cards, reprinted here because it's cute.

WELCOME TO SUTEKH 2003

"You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy."

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Welcome! Welcome my friends, to *Sutekh*, the world's greatest pop culture/sci-fi/gaming conglomerate! 2003 looks to be perhaps the greatest year in our club's history, as we have an executive team who I can trust as far as I can throw (and that's pretty far in all cases but Chris Adams – such a thin bunch!), members who want to make things happen and a wild year in the biz.

For the Gamers, we have *D&D* redux coming soon, not to mention new stuff for *Spycraft*, and the release of – get ready – the *Conan the Barbarian* RPG. Yes indeed, many laughs ahoj. And Sydney is set to take over as Australia's biggest L5R city, with the Kotei tournament slated hopefully to appear at Con*Descending in June. At the movies this year, superhero is the word, kicking off with *Daredevil*, then working our way through *Hulk*, *X²*, *Bulletproof Monk* and finally onto *Spider-Man 2* early next year! Not to mention that piddly little film that I'm sure no one but me cares about, *Lord Of The Rings: The Return of the King!* And you'd better believe there will be group outings to see these cinematic offerings. Indeed, we here at the *Sutekh* offices are always on the prowl for exciting things for our members to do. I suggest you stay tuned for some flights of fantasy the likes of which this university has never seen before, and remember that it's *Sutekh* who puts the Pop in Pop Culture!

- Jaime Lawrence

FOR THE NEWBIES

Traditionally, *Sutekh* has always been a rag-tag bunch of very disorganised students, more like a single social group than any real club. It's been said many times before that we are an exceptionally difficult group to break into. The constant in-jokes, the relatively small amount of core mem-

bers, the fact that our portfolio (roleplaying, sci-fi, fantasy, CCGs etc) is commonly viewed as being socially unacceptable, these points all combine to work against us in expanding the society and drawing in new membership. However, this night we are determined to change that for the next year, to make things better.

As a club we had a surprisingly broad membership for 2002, something like 120 guys and gals who turned up to our stall at O-Week and paid the membership fee. Unfortunately very few of these people have actually been involved

in club activities. How can we fix this? How do we keep new members? For anybody, trying to integrate themselves into a new social group is always intimidating, and many people find it almost impossible. Let's face it – gamers and pop-culture fans aren't usually that extroverted. So what can we do to make it easier for you people out there who would actually like to be a part of *Sutekh*, but are prevented from making this effort for some reason or other? This year we plan on running more functions, especially at the beginning of the first semester. Movies, popular series and junk food, games nights (boardgames and CCGs), trivia nights, that sort of thing. More newbie orientated roleplaying games. A friendlier and more accommodating attitude from current members.

I think it's a real shame that we don't see as many new faces as we could in *Sutekh*, because god dammit, we are a good club. We have a collection of some very honest, clever, nice people, all of whom are interested in similar things and love sharing those interests with others. We might study different things and come from different places, but we all have a sense of humour and want to have a good time. You might not get along famously with all of us, but I can guarantee that you will be able to find someone you can befriend.

- Alan Takayama

MEET THE FEEBLES

An introduction to some of 2003's Sutekh Committee

CHRIS ADAMS

LIKES: James Ellroy, because psychopathic sex killers in 1950s Los Angeles are cool. Star Trek, because you never forget your first geekery. Third Edition D&D, because it's simple. The World of Darkness, because it's elegant. Fucked-up science fiction and horror films, because they're weird, and weird is cool.

HATES: Anime, and you don't want to go there. Card gaming, because you should just say no to flat crack. Badly done fucked-up science fiction and horror, because it's a travesty. Goths who believe that Gothery (not a word) is all about pledging yourself to Satan, because that's half an hour I can't get back. Woodsman's axes, because you can't do *that* with a woodsman's axe.

LISTENS: The Red Hot Chili Peppers, 'By The Way'; Wyclef Jean, 'The Carnival'; The Beatles, 'Rubber Soul'; Eddie Izzard, 'Glorious'.

WATCHES: *L.A. Confidential*, *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie*, *Donnie Darko*, *The Ninth Gate*, *Evil Dead*, *Sleepy Hollow*.

READS: Warren Ellis, *Planetary*; Frank Miller, *Batman: Year One*; Gene Wolfe, *The Book of the New Sun*; Robert Heinlein, *If This Goes On-*; Kim Newman, *Anno Dracula*.

NETS: Dark Horizons, Savage Love, Penny Arcade, rec.games.frp.dnd, alt.games.whitewolf, alt.horror, rec.arts.sf.written, Medal of Honour: Allied Assault, Battlefield: 1942.

Chris Adams is the loud guy with the glasses, and is Sutekh Dysfunctions Officer, 2002-2003.

MATT CRAMSIE

Matthew Cramsie is one part of the Sutekh Librarianship. He likes bribes in caffeinated beverages, precious stones, or unmarked bills. He likes Lemon Sorbet.

DANIEL BOURKE

My favourite movie of all time this year is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This may (or may not) provide significant clues as to my interests and/or personality. I'm interested in most any books, and librarian-ness is in my blood (this is true, and also counts as taint in some rules systems. Just so you know), so it's very personally fulfilling for me to have the librarian position. Or half of it, anyways. Plus, I have a lockable room on campus. How can I lose? If you wish to borrow books from the Sutekh library, I'll be in the glass room more often than not, or you can email me to arrange a viewing of our *very own hot book-on-shelf* action.

TIFFANY BASILI

Is the Vice-President. Wants to make sure we do heaps of fun things this year. Likes Orlando Bloom. And chocolate. So bribes involving Orlando Bloom and/or chocolate are welcome.

CHRIS COOK

aka Miss Kitty Fantastico, aka The Editor.

LIKES: She-ra, Lara Croft, Xena - do you see a pattern yet? Anything Amber Benson is even tangentially involved in. *Star Trek*, sufficiently to write a thesis on it (first class honours, for watching 300 episodes and calling it 'research'). Alisha's Attic and Heather Nova. Most anything written by Terry Pratchett. Amassing an eclectic collection of action figures with the sole theme of 'Kick-ass Grrls'. Expensive special effects, though not in films like *Battlefield Earth* which could only have been saved by massive editing and the timely death of John Travolta. Genesis as described in *The Dumas Club*. *Witchblade*, *Fathom* and *Tomb Raider*. And *Chicago*.

HATES: Men. Sorry, it's nothing personal. Also, the sound of Nick Cave's voice, all political leaders who are not cute, people who think Jeri Ryan can't act just because she has a silly tight costume on *Voyager*, and dogs (again, nothing personal).

WATCHES: *Star Trek, 24, Angel*, old tapes of *She-ra*.

RESPONSIBLE FOR: Zweihander, membership cards, pretty much any printed material Sutekh makes. Attaching a 'Cleave Me' sign to Haldir's back prior to Helm's Deep. First ever Warhammer 40,000 lesbian fanfic. 80% of all stupid photoshopped images in Sydney University. The Emperor's Children legion (though I hasten to point out that I will not *take* responsibility for anything they do). *Star Wars Episode III: Yoda Goes Nuts and Hides in the Swamp*. *The Rocky Horror Slayer Show*. Uber-Tara. You're welcome.

ONLINE: *8-bit Theatre; Angels 2200; The Kitten, the Witches and the Bad Wardrobe*; Jennifer Government Nationstates (the Queendom of Lady Aria); *Artemis* (www.netSPACE.net.au/~alia/) and *Through the Looking-glass* (www.iprimus.com.au/ottago/).

IN GENERAL: Is a safe, stable person. This state of affairs will last exactly as long as it takes me to figure out a way to assassinate people who annoy me without being caught. Will accept bribes of *She-ra* action figures, Alisha's Attic CD singles, and any issue of *Witchblade* I don't have yet. Bribes will be honoured, but do not automatically ensure removal from kill-list.

THE SUTEKHERS

Zweihander is not produced without help. Mostly this help consists of Sutekhers with something to say sending all sorts of articles in to me (alia@netSPACE.net.au). If you've got anything at all that needs saying - or that doesn't *need* saying, but is amusing - send it in and keep an eye out for the next issue of *Zwei*, where your words of wisdom may appear.



terry pratchett

There are few names in fantasy literature as big as Terry Pratchett. Each new addition to his *Discworld* series shoots straight to the top of the best-seller charts. Book signings create queues that stretch out of bookshops and around the block. Plays based on several of the books are regularly staged in his homeland of Britain. Legions of fans baffle non-readers with their cries of 'Ook!', and renditions of The Hedgehog Song. In this exclusive interview, *Zweihander* talks with the man himself, about *Discworld*, working in the fantasy comedy genre, and what's in store for the future:



"The book was a sort of personal memorial to my grandfather, who fought all the way through WW1."

Zwei: In the introduction to *The Carpet People* you described the change in perspective you'd gone through between first writing it and coming to revise it. Certainly the *Discworld* has gone through similar changes – how have your feelings on *Discworld* changed since *The*

Colour of Magic? How differently do you approach a new story now, compared to the way you did in the earlier books?

Zweihander: The Watch books have become a sub-genre within *Discworld* themselves – when you were writing *Guards! Guards!* did you have the possibility of revisiting the characters in mind? Or did you just, later, find Vimes and his people to be enjoyable to work with and/or full of potential?

Terry Pratchett: "The simple answer is that cops are useful. They have a licence to be nosy. They transcend class, by and large. We're all interested in them. No, I didn't have the sub-genre in mind, but when I saw what it I got I realised that it had, as we say in lit'ry circles, legs."

Zwei: Looking back on the considerable number of books you've written – *Discworld* and others – what are you most proud of having done?

TP: "*Johnny and the Dead*. This may come as a surprise, I was pleased that *The Amazing Maurice* won the Carnegie, but I'd rather have won it with *JATD*. Mind you, I'm told all authors say they've won awards for the wrong book.

TP: "I have to be more careful in some ways, because DW has filled up. I can't invent countries at random any more. And if someone runs across Ankh-Morpork, there will be some fan with 'net access who will check the distance on the map to see if he could have done it in the time! Oddly enough, this isn't that much of a drawback – edges and barriers make better stories.

"My approach must have changed over the books, but I'm damned if I know how. It's *evolved* and since it's all been gradually changing in my head it's hard for me to see it."

Zwei: Despite the quality of stories and characters, *Discworld* still sometimes gets pigeonholed as 'comic fantasy', which I'm sure can be frustrating. Have you ever been tempted to write a novel without the comic or fantastic elements (either to experiment, or just to make the critics shut up)?

TP: "What on earth for? And do you think for one moment they would shut up?"

"I don't know about the Oz situation, but here and in the US I generally get good, fair reviews,

and if they are 'bad' it is in a fairly constructive way (like the posh critic who thought *Night Watch* was okay but not as good as *Thief of Time*, which they'd loved.)

"What does happen sometimes, though, is that you get erased from the picture. I'll have a book at #1 in the hardcovers and yet there are shops that won't put it on the best-sellers shelf because it's fantasy; I'd bet if you asked a dozen literary editors about the 2002's best-sellers, they'd talk at length and avoid mentioning that the #1 fiction hardback was, yes, *Night Watch*. Those sort of things do annoy me, because they're about numbers. I don't aspire to the Booker, but best-sellers lists are just that: lists of books that have sold well. No one pretends that this is the same as 'the best books', so to somehow decide that an author who has stacked up the numbers is nevertheless not 'best-seller material' is unfair and dumb.

"Things have got better, though. I've been around for a long time. It's amazing how that can work in your favour."

Zwei: Are you working on (or tempted to work on) another Discworld for younger readers novel?

TP: "I've done it. *The Wee Free Men* is out in May."

Zwei: And speaking of younger readers, how did you approach the task of writing towards a different audience? (Or to put it another way, is there more to writing for youngsters than making all your main characters either children or animals?)

TP: "You'd be amazed how much a part of children's writing that aspect is! There

are differences: attention to vocabulary (not necessarily making it simpler) care with references, possible greater attention to small details... but really, it's all a matter of spin."



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SILVER SCREEN GEEKERY

by Chris Adams

SHANGHAI KNIGHTS

April 3, 2003

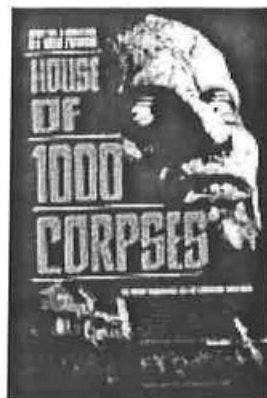
The sequel to the kung-fu Western *Shanghai Noon*, Jackie Chan and Owen Wilson reunite in turn-of-the-century London on the trail of a killer and a conspiracy that may bring down the British and Chinese empires. You can expect more fun action sequences and a lot of comedy; for my money, Wilson is a better comedic partner for Chan than Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour* and its sequel. Besides, martial-arts action in historical settings is a cool concept – of course, when they tried to do it in *The Musketeer* it sucked harder than a supercharged Hoover, but *Shanghai Knights* will definitely be worth seeing.



DAREDEVIL

March 20, 2003

Despite being an adaptation of a fairly obscure Marvel Comics property, *Daredevil* looks set to be one of the most exciting superhero movies to hit the screen since... well, *Spider-Man*. Nevertheless, it promises to be excellent – a talented cast led by Ben Affleck as blind lawyer Matt 'Daredevil' Murdock, and Michael Clarke Duncan as Wilson 'The Kingpin' Fisk. Making the Kingpin a black crime lord was mildly controversial, but realistically Duncan is the only man in Hollywood who can credibly pull off the sheer size of the character. In Marvel continuity both *Spider-Man* and *Daredevil* fight crime in New York City, but the two film franchises are being kept separate – even if they were not, however, the difference in tone between the two would serve to keep them distinct. *Daredevil* is firmly rooted in the Hell's Kitchen slums that Murdock works in, down at street level, and the character has always been a low-key, believable kind of figure. It should be a very interesting take on the superhero film.



HOUSE OF 1,000 CORPSES

Release date TBA

Don't expect too much of rock musician Rob Zombie's directorial debut; despite the controversy surrounding the decision by Universal not to distribute this film and its having languished in nowhere-land for two years until Lion's Gate picked it up (a situation rumoured to have been caused by the hardcore horrific tone of the film), it would be a smarter move to expect nothing more than a visually interesting supernatural slasher, so that one can be pleasantly surprised if it turns out to be more.

BULLETPROOF MONK

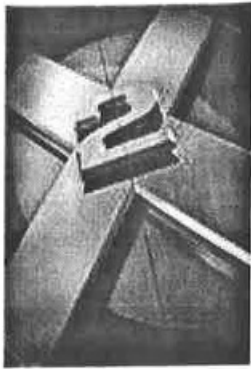
April 17, 2003

Chow Yun-Fat as an immortal kung-fu master sounds good. But Seann William Scott as his street-kid mentor in modern-day San Francisco sounds a little dubious. Opinions will have to be reserved on this one until it hits the screen, but at the very least we'll get some pretty funky kung-fu action.

LIKE HELL: JEEPERS CREEPERS 2

Release date TBA

The original *Jeepers Creepers* was released in a storm of controversy (what is it with all the controversy?) because it was the directorial comeback of one Victor Salva, who had been sent to prison for several years for sexual abuse of the young star of his film *Clownhouse* (what is it with clowns?). For those of us who managed to conquer our reluctance, *Jeepers Creepers* was surprisingly good, if a little raw. The sequel likely will deliver more of the same – possibly a good time to be had.X2



X2

Release date TBA

Frankly, probably The Big One in this list (excepting my own excitement over *Daredevil*). Apparently, this eagerly-awaited sequel will involve an investigation into Wolverine's past, and the villains are all somehow

connected to that mystery. Ian McKellen returns as Erik 'Magneto' Lensherr, this time likely fighting alongside Charles Xavier and the X-Men. Fans of the Marvel Comics series will be excited by the appearance of Nightcrawler, Beast, Colossus, Gambit, and Jubilee, albeit that some will have more of a role in this film than others. Should turn out to be better than even *X-Men*.

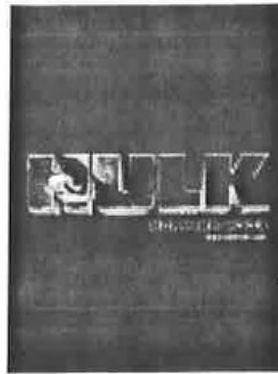
THE MATRIX: RELOADED THE MATRIX: REVOLUTIONS

Reloaded: May 15, 2003

Maybe *this* is the Big One, for some people. It's been a very long wait for fans of *The Matrix* to finally have their sequel; with most of the original cast returning, plus some new faces (you have to love the idea of silver-clad albino twins with straight-razors, even if they do have bleached dreadlocks), and three years' worth of improving technology no doubt under the Wachowski



brothers' belts, these two sequels, shot back-to-back in 2002 and due to be released six months apart this year, promise to be some of the most fun we'll see on the silver screen all year.



THE HULK

June 26, 2003

The final entry, *The Hulk* is also the last good SUTEKH film of the first half of 2003. Ang Lee, better known for rather sophisticated character-driven dramas like *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm* (even *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was a fairly cerebral film), is bringing this Marvel Comics property to the big screen. Eric Bana, who proved his acting ability in *Chopper* but is probably most familiar to U.S. audiences for his small role in *Black Hawk Down* stars as the gamma-irradiated Dr. Bruce Banner, whose suppressed inner rage breaks forth to transform him into the green behemoth we know and love (well, Jaime loves him, at least), with Jennifer Connelly as his love interest Betsy Ross. All the word I've heard about this film makes it sound like a truly intelligent, psychological comic-book adaptation; my own hopes are very high.

To round out this article, I'd like to muse for a moment. There are no DC Comics adaptations coming to the screen in the first half of 2003. Considering that Marvel characters have been making successful cinematic showings for three years, ever since *X-Men* (five, if you count 1998's *Blade* as the beginning of the trend), it seems a real failure on the part of Time-Warner, who own the DC properties. True, the degenerate end to the Batman franchise might well have put them off for a time, but *Batman and Robin* made its limp appearance in 1997, and the time is well due for one of DC's characters to return to the screen.

Unfortunately, there has been so much bullshit thrown about concerning a Superman relaunch, a new Batman film, Wonder Woman, et cetera, that it seems no-one has any idea how to capitalise on Marvel's success. Between Nicholas Cage and the congenital idiot Jon Peters ("Hey, Kevin Smith! Your Superman script is *okay*, but don't you think what it *really* needs is a big giant spider for Superman to fight?"), Superman's path back

to the cinema has been very rocky indeed. First it's Wolfgang Petersen's *Batman vs. Superman* (a tragic idea if ever there was one), then J.J. Abrams turns in a bizarre pitch for a Brett Ratner-directed effort that leaves Krypton intact, gives Superman 1337 martial-arts skills, and makes Lex Luthor another Kryptonian (he arrived in 1947 in the Roswell crash), posing as a human and working for the CIA.

Cue the entirety of geekdom: "Riiiiiiight."

Thankfully, it seems this was a real out-there impress-the-honchos bullshit pitch, and the real script will be a lot more worthwhile. Still, hopes aren't exactly encouraged to be high. With the Petersen team-up movie dead, it seems Darren Aronofsky's *Batman: Year One* adaptation with the original comic's author, Frank Miller, might get the go-ahead; they'll likely have to wait for both the Superman situation to resolve itself and for Aronofsky's own sci-fi movie *The Fountain* to find a home, since Warner has backed out and Aronofsky wants to do it first. A shame, since the idea of a *Year One* film faithful to the original

comic as a means of relaunching the franchise is terribly attractive.

Leaving behind DC's abysmal showing, I think it's worth noting that the next few years are possibly even better for SUTEKHers, as far as movies go, than we were saying 2002 was going to be this time last year. Not only are the *Matrix* sequels coming out, as well as *X2* and *Daredevil*, but there will be near-infinite life for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* with sequels aplenty to follow. Keep going down the line and *The Amazing Spider-Man* rears its head, along with *Star Wars Episode III*, *Terminator 3* and even *The Fantastic Four*. Throw in more sequels – maybe to *Daredevil* or *The Hulk*, even another *Star Trek* movie if we're lucky (at least I think it would be good).

They will be very rewarding, these next couple of years.



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INSIDE THE TWO TOWERS

Shieldmaiden Edwina Doran, on how the master kept his promise:

"I loved it, I just loved it. I must admit that I had read all the spoilers before I waltzed into the movie theatre, so any shocks that others may have felt were lost on me. This meant that I was insulated against anger at the changes to my most beloved character in the books, Faramir. That said, I wasn't going to be overjoyed at watching David Wenham play Faramir as a suspicious b*****. However, my fears were not as realised as I felt they might be.

"Firstly, the beginning – who can say they were not excited by the opening of this movie? I feel that my predictions from the last *Zwei* were totally fulfilled. I found this scene to be edge-of-my-seat entertainment, and pure Peter Jackson. And I can't help feeling both amused and overjoyed at seeing Gandalf kneeling on the Balrog's chest whilst slicing into it. That scene was so satisfying, it was almost as though I was on the thrill ride through the abyss, tormenting my enemy.

Ahhh! And Smeagol!!! He was funny, and sad, and pathetic – and that scene where he is talking with Gollum (with the nasty hacking cough) and tells him to "Go away and *never* come back!", and then the funny little dance of joy. My heart really went out to that sad little character. Full kudos to Andy Serkis and the team of animators, they have taken the standard of Jar Jar Binks, ground it into the dust and speared their own into its remains. The arguments with Sam were also very well done – especially the scene where Gollum is learning that hobbits don't like to eat their meat raw. I cannot wait until the end of this year, when we see the confrontation between Frodo and Gollum at Mount Doom.

"I remain firmly committed to closing my eyes during the scenes with Shelob.

"The return of Gandalf was wonderfully done – exactly the way I remember it being done in the book (give or take a word), and I loved the way



his voice and features were presented, so that they seemed to be Saruman's. If I wasn't such a spoiler fiend, and hadn't read the book ten years ago, well, I would have been completely taken in!

"Was everyone else as creeped out by Wormtongue as I was? (*Yes -Ed.*) Just the thought of him looking at you... shudder. A powerful bit of acting for Brad Dourif.

"Meduseld and the Rohan peoples were exactly the way I pictured them. Though the exorcism of Théoden might not have been, it *was* fun – and it is nice to see Saruman learning that polishing floors with... parts of his anatomy might not have been quite as fun a game to play with Gandalf as it was last year. Another piece of satisfying viewing.

"The battles were wonderful, and jaw-droppingly exciting – I'm eager to see how they can top this for the next movie. I'll admit that I'm more turned on by the numbers side of the battles, rather than the actual sword-work of the different combatants, yet how can I complain at seeing Legolas showing off his surfing action? I mean this – considering the sheer number of my female friends who love Legolas, it would be fatal to criticise. I also appreciated the humour that was in this movie – especially the "can I get you a box" line. It helped to lift scenes that could very easily have been depressing.

“For me, I found the character who I connected most strongly with was actually Frodo – and that is not because I am a fan girl of Elijah Wood (well, I am, but that is not why). I was actually wanting to pass the mantle over to Faramir, as



per my favouritism in the books. Yet I found myself almost aching with Frodo’s pain and anguish. I feared his temptation by the ring and applauded his need to redeem Smeagol, as a way of proving he can redeem himself. Frodo knows that he has already started down Smeagol’s path – admittedly his journey did not begin with the murder of his cousin – yet Frodo’s obsession with the ring has grown to the point where he is attacking his friend (and gardener) Sam. I found Elijah Wood’s eyes to be so expressive during the final scenes in Osgiliath that it became my favourite part of the whole movie. And considering the overall quality of the movie, and the emotional resonance of most of the scenes, that does say a lot. I find it hard to believe Ian McKellen’s comments that Elijah Wood’s acting becomes even more heart-breaking in the next movie – as I am not sure I would have felt more for him than I did here.

“Of course, I felt every other actor did exemplary work during this film. I believe that each Fellowship member had truly become their character – and I welcome the new ones, especially Éowyn and Faramir. I have read the scriptwriters’ reasons for changing Faramir, and I do appreciate that the movie medium is different from the book, yet I shall wait for the next movie before delivering judgement about these changes. Besides, from what I have heard, his future romance with a certain female character will be enlarged, and how can I be disapproving of that?”

And now Nick Irving, angry bearded guy and Tolkien fanatic, on how the master betrayed us:

“I was asked whether Jackson’s new movie was a masterpiece or a hatchet-job. I’m throwing it in with the ‘Hatchet job’ camp. Why?

“Firstly, I strongly disagree with his depiction of Helm’s Deep. Not only did he feel the need to exaggerate the odds (to 300 Rohirrim vs 10,000 Orcs), but he also erroneously painted the castle itself as a poor defensive position. This, in a world of medieval armies and low-tech weaponry, even for the period: no pikes, no plate mail, all leather, spears and chainmail. In this world, Helm’s Deep was a souped-up Celtic Hillfort, and as such, did its job very well. His final and most inexcusable mistake was to then throw a bunch of elves in there: he didn’t at all explain how they managed to get there *before* The attacking Orcs, even though they would have had to a) get through the besieged Westfold and b) *must* have left well after Saruman’s invading army.

“Secondly, and perhaps less forgivably, he has butchered the epic scope of the whole saga. Rohan, far from seeming the massive political entity that it is, appears to be one hick village and a very small city on a hill, that can raise a grand total of 320 warriors, most of whom are children and old men, and the cream of which are banished. The skirmish with the Warg riders, far from feeling like a clash between the outriders of two large hosts, felt like just a small-scale raiding party. The various shots of the camp followers assisted in this small-scale feeling – for a people that are called the ‘horse lords’, they didn’t seem to have many horses... The 10,000 strong Orcish horde could not only have not fit inside Isengard, but would have eaten it bare in a day, taken three weeks to reach the Deep, and the sheer size of it would have destabilised Middle-earth’s balance of power entirely, considering that all the forces of good have is a mangy cavalry unit and two hobbits. While I know that the story is basically a ‘struggle against huge odds’ one, that doesn’t mean you have to up the odds to a stupid level. Other faults: the army also marched off from Isengard with no

siege weaponry, but *Lo!* there it was, right when they needed it. And with Theoden's bagging out of Gondor, how is Jackson going to organise the ride to the Pelennor Fields? One final gripe – when did Eomer's 30 riders suddenly metamorphose into a huge army? And where was the end of the battle? The Orcs just pissbolted and that was it. Oh, that's right, 10,000 Orcs can not only just appear instantly at the director's whim, but they can disappear just as quickly. Talk about Deus Ex Machinas.

“Thirdly, I have one very important question, O mister geographically-challenged Jackson: Exactly *how* did Faramir and his cronies cross back over Anduin (which forms the frontier between the Orcs and Gondor), and then *how* did the Hobbits and Gollum get back across a second time after the Nazgul attacked?

Fourthly, I don't care what anyone says, Elijah Wood should be imprisoned, tortured and then shot. He has three facial expressions (I'm happy! I'm Sad! I'm Scared! And that's pushing it, as the last two are almost identical) and the most wooden eyes ever. However, his portrayal of the effects of the rig as being similar to those of heroin was inspired, and earns him a small amount of forgiveness.


“Fifth, Peter Jackson loves Elves to the exclusion of all other races. Apart from not being able to resist putting them into a movie that they had no part in whatsoever (Lorien being besieged by this stage), has anyone noticed that he's basically genocidal? He denies the existence of Dwarves altogether, only grudgingly allowing Gimli into the story as the comic relief. Why the aloof, asshole elves just *suddenly* decided to turn up in Helm's Deep, but the Dwarves haven't yet sent a detachment to Gondor is beyond me – oh, that's right, Peter Jackson is just committing the closest thing Middle-earth has ever seen to a holocaust. Basically, although the Elves are leaving en masse for Valinor, they can spare a detachment from the defence of their homeland, but though the Dwarves are similarly besieged and similar distances separate them from Men (and vastly more numerous and better defended by geography), they will not appear in Jackson's

world. And if I see one more ridiculous fucking trick from Legolas I will hunt down both Jackson and Bloom and put them very roughly to the sword. With a vengeance.

“Now, enough griping, here's what I actually liked about the movie:

“Firstly, the simplified version of the Ring's allure – the fact that it has but one effect on everyone – the desire to possess and then the radical behavioural changes to compulsive and possessive actually makes more sense in a narrative way, especially for cinema. And Gollum. Though he shouldn't have been 'cute', he nevertheless rocked. What was very nice about both the Ring and Gollum's changes from book to film was that while they were not facsimiles of Tolkien's characters, they somehow lived up to them while being very different. Neither was a 'better' Gollum, but both were excellent. That doesn't mean I like Faramir's character change, which I think is rubbish.

“Secondly, the Ents. Though it makes no sense at all that he labours the point that the Ents are not at all hasty, *then* makes them *suddenly* decide to smash Isengard at the behest of a Hobbit (hardly likely since they thought he was an Orc to start with, wasn't it lucky that they were all just hanging around at the southern edge of the forest just when Treebeard called?), they looked spectacular and just somehow *right*. Although, as Billy (a friend of mine) said in the cinema, for a twentieth level wizard like Saruman, that was one *hell* of a time to forget how to cast a fireball.”



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MIDDLE-EARTH IN DETAIL

THE RINGS OF POWER

The three Elven rings were never touched by Sauron, and thus remained free of evil. Nenya, the ring of water, was given to Galadriel. Vilya, the ring of earth, was given to Gil-Galad, lord of the Elves during the Last Alliance, who gave it to his herald Elrond prior to the battle in which he died at Sauron's hand. Narya, the ring of fire, was given to Círdan, master of the Grey Havens. Upon the arrival of the Istari in Middle-earth, he gave it to Mithrandir.

The seven rings given by Sauron to the Dwarf-lords turned their hearts to greed, yet the tough spirit of dwarves was such that Sauron could not control them, nor were they turned to wraiths. Four of the Seven were destroyed by dragon-fire when dragons and dwarves fought over the treasures, and the remaining three were eventually recovered by Sauron's servants and brought back to him before the War of the Ring.

The nine rings, which turned the Men who held them into the Nazgûl, were held in Barad-dûr, where they and the remaining dwarven rings were most likely destroyed.

NUMENOR

The men who allied themselves with the High-elves against Morgoth were rewarded by the Valar. Though they could not travel to the Undying Lands, as the Elves could, these men were given the land of Númenor, an island within sight of the Undying Lands, where they built a great and powerful nation. Compared to the men of Middle-earth, those of Númenor were more powerful, longer-lived and far wiser. The Númenoreans returned to Middle-earth in force to challenge Sauron, but in taking him captive they sealed their doom.

During his captivity, Sauron used his skill at deceit and manipulation to play on the pride of Pharazôn, the King of Númenor, and within fifty years was his chief counsellor, and urged him to make war on the Undying Lands of the Valar and wrest from them eternal life. When the men of Númenor presumed to set foot upon the shores of the Undying Lands Númenor itself was destroyed.

After the loss of Númenor, its few survivors founded the Realms-in-exile on Middle-earth, Gondor and Arnor. Among the few works that survived the fall of Númenor were the Palantíri, the seedling of the White Tree of Gondor, the sword Narsil, and the Ring of Barahir, a symbol of friendship between men and elves which was carried by the ruler of the North-kingdom of Arnor (now worn by Aragorn). Though the people of Númenor

intermarried with the people of Middle-earth, their bloodlines still produced great men and women in the ages that followed.

SAURON

The Dark Lord was once the chief servant of Morgoth, a Valar (the equivalent of angels) who turned against his fellows and tried to seize mastery of Middle-earth. Sauron was a Maia, a demi-angel, who escaped Morgoth's downfall, and slowly began to craft his revenge against the Valar and the High-elves. By concealing his true nature and appearing as a noble Maia, Sauron was able to move among the elves, and so he learned the craft of ring-making from Celebrimbor, and together they forged the various Rings of Power. Upon forging the One Ring, Sauron's treachery was revealed, and the elves launched a war against him, in which they would have fallen were it not for aid from the men of Númenor, who eventually broke Sauron's armies and took him prisoner.

When Númenor fell (see *Númenor*, above) Sauron's body was likewise destroyed, but his spirit endured and fled back to Middle-earth – though when he regained physical form he could do so only as a Dark Lord, terrible to look upon. He tried to exterminate the last remnants of the Númenoreans in Middle-earth, but they formed the Last Alliance with the Elves and defeated him in the battle before Mount Doom, where the One Ring was cut from his hand.

BEREN & LUTHIEN

Beren was the son of Barahir, a great lord of men during the war against Morgoth. He met Lúthien, daughter of the elf-lord Thingol Greycloak, after straying into the elvan lands, and earned her trust by calling her by her elven name, Tinúviel ('Nightingale'). Despite being a mortal man and ageless elf, the two fell in love and were betrothed to each other.

During the wars against Morgoth, Beren was captured by the enemy's soldiers, and imprisoned and tortured in Morgoth's realm of Angband. Lúthien went alone into Angband and rescued her love, and together they recaptured the Ring of Barahir and one of the three Silmarils, which Morgoth prized above all things. They returned to their own lands, but Beren was slain by a great wolf, sent from the gates of Angband to exact vengeance. He died in Lúthien's arms, and she surrendered her own immortality, so that she could die and follow where Beren had gone. For her great sacrifice, it was granted to her descendants that her bloodline would never fail. Among Beren and Lúthien's descendants are Arwen and, distantly, Aragorn.

EYE CANDY

An introduction to some of Sutekh's favourite comics.

By Chris Adams and Chris Cook



PLANETARY

There was a lot of popular culture produced in the last century. A lot of it – giant monsters, bad sci-fi movies, and, above all, superheroes – is still floating around just below the surface of our collective awareness. *Especially*

if you're a geek, of course. *Planetary* is an organization which brings the detritus of an entire century of popular mythology to light. They're mystery archaeologists uncovering a century of weirdness. *Planetary* is written by Warren Ellis and drawn by John Cassaday.

It's not just about the weirdness, though. *Planetary* is a three-man team – Elijah Snow, Jakita Wagner, and the Drummer – and the global organization is funded by the Fourth Man. Who is the Fourth Man? You'll find out. In the meantime, you'll see what happens when the pulp heroes of yesteryear meet the superheroes of today, and who's left alive at the end of it. You'll see the graveyard of giant monsters. You'll see what killed the dinosaurs, and why it needs six people to volunteer to take it home.

Planetary is so full of ideas, they're spilling off the page. It helps if you've read Warren Ellis' previous work on *Stormwatch* and *The Authority* – all three series are, nominally at least, set in the WildStorm Universe – but it's not necessary. Read *Planetary*, if for no other reason than that it proves finding out the answer to a question doesn't necessarily mean you can stop looking.

WITCHBLADE

One of the more successful modern comics, and largely responsible for turning producer Top Cow from a minor player in the comics world to the maker of many popular titles, and numerous one-off and mini-series books. *Witchblade* is the queen of Top Cow's line, and (rightly) gets the lion's share of attention, even going on to become a TV series starring Yancy Butler, which amassed quite a following among comic fans, and many former Xena-watchers searching for a new subtext-y heroine.

The comic follows the difficult life of Sara Pezzini, second-generation homicide detective in New York, and thanks to the mysterious workings of fate, the wielder of the *Witchblade*, an ancient supernatural weapon of devastating power. On top of her usual diet of murderers, drug dealers and gangsters, Sara also has to deal with strange demon-worshipping cults, all manner of psychic unrest in the city, the malevolent billionaire Kenneth Irons (think Lex Luthor with a full head of hair), and the aggressive and amoral spirit of the *Witchblade* itself, which throughout human history has always, in the end, abandoned its wielders when they failed to master it. So far Sara has remained in control, though sometimes barely.

Witchblade could easily be accused of being



an eye candy comic, but this is not the whole truth. Granted, it *is* eye candy: Top Cow's artists specialise in drawing beautiful heroines, in the stylistic tradition of superheroes of old – they're responsible for the Tomb Raider comic series, which should give you some idea – and Sara is just one of those girls who always looks good, no matter what she's been eviscerating. Where the TV series made Sara a practical, no-nonsense girl, the comic never fails to give her an unwavering sense of style that suggests that she's somehow managed to hire a fashion consultant – on a police officer's salary, too. Until the Witchblade comes into play, protecting her with nigh-indestructible living metal armour, giving her any amount of shields, blades, claws and razor-edged tendrils – the art of the Witchblade in action owes a lot to H.R. Giger.

But Witchblade isn't *just* eye candy (though I won't pretend that tendency isn't appreciated). The writers and artists have a fine sense for the epic, and – though the storylines tend more towards adventure than epiphany – they often turn up moments of stunning impact and mythological grandeur. One thing the comic never is, is workmanlike – never content to merely support the writing, the artists always add a layer of visual excitement to their work, which is really what separates comics from other literature in the first place. Quality, imaginative art and storytelling is integral to Witchblade, such that each issue is always more than just an illustrated novel.

BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE

The Joker is one of the Batman's most enduring villains. He was probably the first 'weird' villain the original Batman faced back in the 1940s, and certainly the most memorable both to that generation of comics readers, the generation afterwards who know him from the campy 1960s television show, and even the kids of today who might first have seen him in Tim Burton's 1989 film. But whether you remember him from the comics or as Cesar Romero or Jack Nicholson, *The Killing Joke* is a dark and provocative look at how – maybe – the Joker came to be what he is. *The Killing Joke* was written by Alan Moore



and drawn by Brian Bolland.

The Killing Joke gives us a Joker who believes that all any ordinary person needs is one bad day – just like one he seems to recall himself having, long ago – in order for them to become as much of a monster as he is today. So he's

going to prove it – using Jim Gordon as his test subject. Of course, the Batman sets out to stop him, and in the process the hero and the villain both discover something about themselves, and how alike they just might be. It's a classic tale, by now, but if you are at all interested in whatever tropes of heroism and villainy might exist in the superhero genre then *The Killing Joke* is a must-have.



PREACHER

It's interesting that most of the writers I love in comics are British. Ellis, of course; Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman are others. Despite the fact that they're British, however, many of these writers have a fascination with the United States in both

its beauty and its horror. *Preacher* is an example of what a British writer can produce in his imagined Texas, with God, the Devil, angels and demons, the secret Dynasty of Christ and its Church guardians, and much more. *Preacher* was written by Garth Ennis and drawn by Steve Dillon.

Jesse Custer is a reluctant preacher in a small Texas town, until the child of an angel and a demon comes down and joins with him, giving him the Voice of God. His ex-girlfriend Tulip is a reluctant assassin. When they meet, sparks fly – and throw in an Irishman of dubious virtue and

nature, Jesse's evil inbred family from Hell, the fact that God Himself wants Jesse Custer stopped, and pretty much everyone they meet in the whole of the USA being as fucked-up as they can possibly be, well... suffice it to say that *Preacher* manages to be at once a great old Western full of action and gritted-teeth heroism as well as some pretty profound thoughts on love and faith.

You also have to give Ennis and Dillon credit for some screwed-up visions of America at its worst, too. *Preacher* comes collected in nine volumes, with a few spin-offs filling in the backstory: *Cassidy: Blood and Whiskey* being the most notable. The others (*Saint of Killers*, et cetera) are actually collected in the fourth volume of *Preacher* itself, *Ancient History*. Read *Preacher*, if for no other reason than that you'll laugh yourself sick one minute then be struck dumb with surprise the next.

TRANSMETROPOLITAN

I'm aware that I talk about and write about Warren Ellis a lot. It'd be more embarrassing if he weren't so damn good. *Transmetropolitan* is his epic, chronicling the adventures of insane gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem (a not-so-thinly disguised Hunter S. Thompson) in a futuristic world so caught up in itself that it has no idea what year it is, and can only date the past by how long ago it occurred. It's a future where getting high can change your flesh into machinery, where it's a valid lifestyle choice to become a sentient cloud of nanite robots or a Transient half-alien hybrid, and where children thrill to the adventures of Anthrax Cat and the Sex Puppets. *Transmetropolitan* was written by Warren Ellis and drawn by Darick Robertson.

Spider Jerusalem, his trusty bowel disruptor in hand, is forced to return to the enormous City which sprawls across the eastern United States and start writing a weekly column once again. His first is written from a rooftop looking down on a riot in the Transient slums, telling the story of its brutal suppression by police for the whole City to hear. After that, you follow Spider through five years' worth of political scandals

and general mayhem, at times alternately deadly serious, wildly hilarious, and even sometimes very touching. The City is not a good place to live, but it's irresistible all the same.

Transmetropolitan is the kind of story that really makes you appreciate comics as an art form beyond superheroes in silly tights and the adventures of Japanese schoolgirls and their pet bears. It's something which could only be told as a graphic novel – without the millions of details which fill nearly every frame to bursting, it just wouldn't be the same. As such, it is not only an incredibly gripping and insane political/journalistic thriller, but also a brilliant example of what can happen when a great artist flexes his muscles.

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WHAT IS ROLEPLAYING?

Owen Macindoe explains the basics of Sutekh's favourite hobby

So you've picked up a copy of *Zweihander* and are thinking about joining Sutekh, but you're wondering what this roleplaying shenanigans is that keeps getting mentioned. Perhaps you have visions of nerdy nose-bleeders sitting around tossing dice and fingering their pocket protectors nervously, of sinister cultists thumbing through occult tomes and muttering about sacrificing babies to Beelzebub while knocking back the Cheetos and Mountain Dew, or of Homer Simpson declaring that he played *Dungeons & Dragons* for three hours, but then he was slain by an elf. Popular culture has played a great part in belittling and stigmatising roleplaying without really giving any insight into what it's all about and why anyone would want to do it, which leaves it to people like yours truly to try and justify their hobby in the face of overwhelmingly bad press. I'll give it a shot:

Roleplaying is a kind of improvisational acting. Everyone in the game takes on the persona of a character, describing the character's actions and providing the dialogue for that character. The players collaborate together, with no script, to create a story involving their characters. The structure of the story and the supporting cast that the characters interact with are provided by one of the players called the storyteller or gamemaster, who takes on the personas of the supporting characters, describes the game world, and works out the results of the actions that players describe for their characters.

Stories are fun and rewarding in themselves, but being a part of an improvised story with other people can be even more fun. That's what the main appeal of roleplaying is. If you've ever felt when you were reading a book or watching a film, that the characters did something really dumb or out of character and wished you could reach over, grab the authors typewriter and fix things up, then you'd like roleplaying because it empowers the participants to change the story. Its appeal is that it's an interactive storytelling

medium, rather than one which you just accept the story passively. Also it's a fun social activity that lets you enjoy yourself with a bunch of friends and even make new friends.



Types of Roleplaying:

Okay so now you know that roleplaying is basically improvisational acting and that it's fun because it lets you take part in an interactive story with a bunch of other people, and hopefully that story is interesting and you can stand to be around the people. That's not the whole story though, there are different types of roleplaying to suit different tastes and purposes:

Tabletop Roleplaying – This is the bread and butter of roleplaying. Tabletop roleplaying is played sitting around a table with the other players. It uses dice and game mechanics to work out whether the characters succeed or fail in their actions. The majority of commercial roleplaying games are made to be played in this style. Tabletop roleplaying's strength, and its weakness, is its reliance on game mechanics. The dramatic tension created by the uncertainty and non-arbitrariness of the game mechanics can be good. On the other hand, dice tossing and rules referencing have a tendency to spoil the mood of the game.

Systemless Roleplaying – This is an avant garde style of roleplaying. Systemless games are generally played in the same manner as tabletop games except that they have very few or no rules. Roleplaying in this style is heavily dependent on the storyteller's judgement in arbitrating whether characters succeed or fail in their actions. The strength of systemless roleplaying is its pure focus on storytelling and characterization. The biggest weakness of systemless roleplaying is that, as there are no game mechanics, the storyteller has to decide whether characters succeed or fail at the critical moment arbitrarily, which can be unsatisfying for the players.

Freeform Roleplaying – This style of roleplaying is best suited to large groups of players, say 10 to 200. Freeform games are usually light on rules. The players generally don't remain seated for the whole game and instead wander around interacting with one another. There is usually more than one storyteller in order to deal with the large number of players, and the storytellers spend less time playing the supporting cast and more time resolving conflicts between characters. The strength and weakness of freeform roleplaying is the number of players it can support. Freeforms are great for playing out diplomatic conflicts between lots of people from many small factions. On the other hand, it's easy to be a small fish in a big pond in a freeform because, since there isn't the traditional focus upon a small group of characters, not everyone necessarily gets an equal share of time in the spotlight.

At Sutekh we generally play tabletop games and the occasional systemless. We have games running on a weekly basis that tell ongoing episodic stories. At the various roleplaying conventions throughout the year we scrape together a team of interested people to play in the games on offer there. That's where the more avant garde systemless games and freeforms are usually played. If you're interested in trying out roleplaying, if you're an old hand at it already and want to jump in a game, or if you're interested in running a game yourself, come along to the O-Week Sutekh stall and have a chat with us. If you miss out on that, visit the Sutekh website mentioned in this copy of *Zweihander* or worm your way onto our mailing list and ask for information on games that are currently running.

RPG MUMBO-JUMBO 101

Roleplaying has an impenetrable language all of its own. Here are some basic definitions to help the neophyte work out what the hell everyone is talking about!

RPG: Role-Playing Game. An improvisational acting game or interactive storytelling game depending on how you want to look at it.

GM/DM: Game-Master/Dungeon-Master or Storyteller. The person responsible for playing all the supporting cast of an RPG, for working out the results of character's actions, and for directing the plot of the story. The term DM comes from *Dungeons & Dragons*.

PC: Player Character. A character played by one of the players.

NPC: Non-Player Character. A supporting character played by the storyteller rather than one of the players.

Adventure: An episode of a story involving the PCs.

Campaign: A series of adventures linked together by an overarching plotline.

Setting: The fictional world in which the events of an RPG take place.

System: The game mechanics of an RPG for determining the abilities of characters, the effects of events in the game world on those characters, and whether the actions of the characters succeed or fail.

D&D(3e): *Dungeons & Dragons* (3rd edition). The latest edition of the grand-daddy of roleplaying games, and still one of the most popular games out there. D&D was greatly loathed by many roleplayers during the late 90s but now it's back stronger than ever (and it remains to be seen whether this is a good thing).

D20 System: D20 means a 20-sided die. In general, a DX means an X-sided die. The D20 system is the rules system owned by Wizards of the Coast that D&D3e uses and that now every man and his dog has written a game for. It's called that because the main game mechanics involve rolling D20s. They're imaginative people these RPG writers!

Storyteller System: The rules system which games written by White-Wolf use. It involves rolling a lot of ten-sided dice. White-Wolf's

games are famed for attempting to create an RPG market for mature audiences and succeeding (to some extent). They include Vampire: The Masquerade, Mage: The Ascension, and Trinity.

GURPS System: Generic Universal Roleplaying Playing System. The rules system developed by Steve Jackson games that can be applied to any given genre (though it works better with some than with others) and allows for relatively easy crossover games. It involves rolling a lot of six-sided dice and has possibly the most flexible character creation system of any RPG.

LOT5R/L5R: Legend of the Five Rings. An RPG setting based on a mish-mash of Asian myths which is also the setting for a card game of the same name.

The valley Bellarosa, nestled high in the mountains, is snowed in for five months of the year. Every spring, the snow melts from the passes and life slowly returns to the sleepy valley as merchant caravans and travellers begin to trickle through again. But for a handful of the valley's inhabitants, this spring will be a very different sort of awakening. This spring, a group of restless youngsters on the brink of adulthood will abandon the well-worn paths travelled by the farmers or merchants they grew up amongst and embark upon:

THE ROAD OF ADVENTURE

A new D&D 3rd ed game for 3-5 players to be run by Altin Gavranovic every Friday (probably from mid-afternoon to early/late-evening but this is negotiable and, in any case, dependant on room availability). This will hopefully be something in the way of a light-hearted beginning to an epic fantasy campaign. Knowledge of roleplaying games or the D&D rules by no means a prerequisite and new Sutekh members especially welcome. Expressions of interest or questions are welcome at alting@tpg.com.au but please bear in mind I won't for a variety of reasons be taking reservations for this one.

A WORD ON CONVENTIONS

by Rhiannon Donaldson, Shadow Gamer,
former Necronomicon organiser.

So you've joined Sutekh? Great! Go wild! Play in a Friday afternoon campaign. Become a denizen of the Glass Room in Manning. Make your anecdote about the lemur, the priest and the +3 ring of strength part of Sutekh lore. But while you are enjoying all that the club has to offer, don't forget that there is a wider world of roleplaying in Sydney. What am I talking about? Conventions.

Conventions are an important part of the gaming community, providing gamers with opportunities to meet new people, play new game systems and have a huge amount of fun. Because convention games run for 2½ to 3½ hour sessions, you can fit a lot of games into one weekend. Always wanted to play Call of Cthulu but couldn't find anyone to run it? Chances are they'll be at least one CoC game at a con during the year. Getting a little tired (although you would never admit it) of playing that campaign where all the characters are bards? Let off some steam and bash things up in one of the fantasy games. Want a chance to dress up in costume and be a bit more dramatic than usual? Play a freeform – they aren't often run outside of conventions, because it is difficult to get enough people together.

There are cons held all over Australia, and these include four main Sydney conventions. A non-profit roleplaying organization called Shadow Games runs two conventions every year. Sydcon, held at the University of New South Wales with the co-operation of their gaming club, runs over the Easter long weekend. At the moment the site has forums running, and blurbs will be going up soon (www.sydcon.net). Necronomicon, held at Newtown High School of Performing Arts, runs over the October long weekend. The other cons are Con^descending, usually held at UNSW but rumour says will be at Sydney Uni this year, which runs over the Queen's birthday long weekend in June, and MacquarieCon, held at Macquarie Uni in mid-December.

There are many Sutekh members who go to cons, and even run games at cons, so don't worry, you will recognise a few faces. You'll quickly get to meet new people in games and during session breaks. Conventions can be great social events once you know a few people. Once you've run a game at Sutekh, you might be tempted to bring your GMing skills to a wider audience. If you have a good concept, submit a blurb to convention organisers. They are easy to spot – during the con they will be stressed, and during the after con party they will be the ones asking people 'so, do you want to run a game next year?'. Conventions are also a chance for you to represent your club, as the Inter Varsity challenge needs a game from each of Sutekh, UNSWGamers and MURPS in order to run.

So while you are enjoying being a part of a fun club like Sutekh, don't forget that Sutekh is part of a much bigger community – and it has just as much to offer you!

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KICKING OFF

Getting an idea for a new campaign is easy; inspiration is everywhere. But once you've reached the beginning, what do you do with your players? An old hand at Gamesmastering, Jaime 'The Prez Sez' Lawrence, looks more deeply at where a beginning ends and a campaign starts...

"Irongrom Longbeard looked around the tavern, his keen eyes attempting to pick out something of interest. It was a common misconception that adventurers came to taverns because they liked them. The actual reason was to kill time between adventures. His eyes alighted upon an Elven man in robes sitting in a darkened corner. Elves in robes usually meant trouble, but even if this one didn't have some fantastic quest for him, he could still be a bit of sport..."

Altogether too many games start with phrases like "You're sitting in the Tavern" or "You're called into the chief's office". By doing that sort of thing, you're denying the players a valuable game opportunity, and denying yourself the pleasure of seeing the characters grow. Especially if you are starting a long campaign, these formative times are important. The stranger that enters the tavern, drawing everyone's attention, should be a player. Let the other players deal with him. Let them really flesh out their characters and their relation to others by experiencing it first hand. Let's face it; in a fantasy setting, no-one is going to go into a combat situation with a thief they've just met – it's dumb. Thieves steal things. They can't be trusted. And yet, apparently, if you've shared a mug of mead, he's as trustworthy as your own brother. No, the tavern is too hackneyed for words. Consider starting your adventure with an event that forces the players together, some catastrophe or being hand-picked as a fellowship. But don't expect truly great character banter to come from a pub – nothing good ever does.

"Jason Race looked at the naked form that lay beside him, a smooth hip uncovered by the tangle of sheet, a pert breast barely concealed beneath a tanned arm... He wished he had more time to stay, but England had called, and he could never

refuse her. He gently placed the note on the bedside table, and moments later, was tearing down the freeway in his black Aston-Martin.

He pulled into a quiet London side-street and entered a grey building, proceeding via the elevator to the 15th floor. He entered the briefing room, and was momentarily surprised by the occupants. He was used to solo missions. Looking around the table as he took his seat, he recognised Charles Ream, a CIA operative with whom he had worked many times before, and of course the chief of staff, Noir, smoking his signature Brazilian Cigar. The other two were a mystery though. One, a young woman, was smiling at him under freckled cheeks and a shock of red hair, the other, a brute of a man with a long scar on the line of his jaw, sat impassively, staring into space.

'Good morning, agent Nighthawk' said Noir, 'We were beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten us...'

Another compulsion that many gamesmasters feel is the need to start all the characters off together in one place. This is understandable, as it can be a bad thing to leave most of your players sitting around chatting while you're off talking to one in particular, but often you'll find the players appreciate it more if you take them individually. Not only does this allow the player to get into character, but it allows you to find out a little more also. No character is the same on paper as he is when played; roleplaying, by its very nature, is about the creation of new individuals from the imagination, and those individuals change and grow as your players do. You don't have to run mini-epics and you can skip the part where the character has breakfast, shaves and does the dishes, but a little solo time goes a long way. One of the worst questions I've ever heard asked is "Ok, so how close to on time does each of you get there?" This not only assumes that the character is totally in control of his actions, but that he thinks especially hard about these things. If a player wants to be at a meeting-place early to search for traps or whatever, let them tell you that. And don't forget, even superspies and superheroes have to perform mundane tasks sometimes. Roleplay them going to work, doing their normal duties, and then tease them into the

adventure just as they look to be getting bored. The realistic touches you add will be useful to the players in defining themselves.

"Datur had practised the ritual movements of cleansing every morning since he was old enough to handle the Quatir pipe, but never had it been more difficult for him. His mind weighed heavily on the summons from the council of Tavec'norar. It was rare for them to summon one of their own kind, but even more infrequent to call an outsider, even a member of an allied tribe like his own. Perhaps the war against the Skyraiders was going poorly in the Tavec'norar provinces, and they sought to incorporate some warriors of balance and clear-mindedness, having found their own magical defences inadequate. It did not matter really, his Creche-leader Navot had told him to go. 'It is of vital importance' he had said. 'In exchange for your contribution to the Tavec'Norar, we receive that we need the most from them – Starstone. Do as they require, Datur.' The gods knew they needed the Starstone. As if the Skyraiders weren't bad enough, the Tnedi alliance had declared war last year, and splitting our warriors to fight against those who should be our allies in repelling the invaders to our world was taking its toll.

Datur was disturbed from his reverie by the sound of a deep horn being blown – the call of the council. Tucking his Quatir pipe away safely, he strode purposefully towards the great hall of Rona City. Upon entering, he was shown to meeting hall and told to enter. He did so and took a seat. At the far end of the hall, the Tavec'Norar elders sat inside beams of white light, looking impassively on their visitors. As he opened his mouth to announce himself, a voice inside his head said 'Do not speak. Be still, and patient, as is the way of your kind. Others have yet to arrive'.

Things seemed to move in slow motion from that point on. He heard the heavy doors swing open, and turned his head to see who entered. He stood as he saw the armed Tnedi Warrior enter, standing seven feet tall, a greataxe at the ready, its blade gleaming with starstone, and no doubt with the blood of his people. In an instant, his starpistol was in his hand and the Tnedi's snarling head was in his sights.

'So much for being a warrior of balance and clear-mindedness', said the voice in his head 'Put down your weapon before you shoot your new companion...'

Factionism can often cause a problem in games, and it is not an easy one to escape – factions are in almost all RPG's today, even if you disregard the setting. How can one maintain a party that contains a Cleric of Pelor and cleric of Nerull? A Phoenix and a Dragon? A Ferengi and a Klingon? A Gangrel and a Ventrue? The list goes on. Writers provide us with fascinating backstories, full, rich worlds from which we draw inspiration for our campaigns and players draw inspiration for their characters. None of us is above it – I'll always be a settite/Order of Hermes/ Crab Clan/ Biokinetic/ DC comics/ Egypt-loving/ Boccob-worshipping kind of guy. We all have our favourites. So if your game is set entirely in the lands of Clan A, exactly what are characters of Clans B, F and R doing there? There are many ways to settle such disputes. The most commonly used is telling the players 'create your character as a member of clan A, B or C only'. While this works, it is generally bad to restrict people's choices and creativity – I know I make a good herald of the imperial families, but I make a much better Crab magistrate. Your NPC's can be of paramount importance here, telling the PC's that a member from each of clans A, B, C, and X are needed to complete this mission, or that representatives from Group Q are here

in order to further relations, but this is a technique best left to long campaigns, not mission-based games. For when the mission ends, people are always left asking "Hey, I know that Toreador saved my life, but shouldn't he be getting back to Chicago now before the prince has him served on toast?"

In the end, you can leave it all up to suspension of disbelief, but both you and your players get so much more out of the game if you take the time to answer the whys of party formation. After all, let's not forget that there has never been a tale that started without a beginning...



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CONCERNING KARMA :

I had an interesting thought earlier, which I thought I'd share for the benefit of those of you interested in the state of your eternal souls.

Proceeding from the following assumptions:

- 1) Your soul is reincarnated into a new physical being when you die.
- 2) This happens to everyone, every time they die, so souls are continually being recycled (with perhaps some sort of ethereal waiting room for times when Planet Earth has frozen over or been hit by a meteor, and doesn't have as many life-forms as usual).
- 3) Souls are interchangeable between species. A human need not be reincarnated as a human.
- 4) The 'status' of the physical being you return as is dependant on the karmic worth of your soul's previous life. So a soul that has just finished living a good life will be reincarnated as someone like Amber Benson; a soul that has just finished leading a bad life will be reincarnated as a bug, or possibly the guy who wrote The Eye of Argon.

And then reasoning thusly:

- i) Humans are not the only living things on the planet, not even a majority. Let's take a conservative estimate: for every human being, there are 999 other souls inhabiting various other life-forms (cats, dogs, sheep, cockroaches, Christina Aguilera's image consultant, whatever).
- ii) The karmic worth of your soul's life should not, in all fairness, be influenced by the type of creature you have been. So a sheep, having lived a life of exemplary goodness that nonetheless achieved nothing (I mean, what can sheep do?) is still considered karmically ahead of a human who achieved some good things (giving to charity, running a homeless shelter) but also did a few nasty things as well (running over a puppy and not stopping once, buying a Brian Lumley novel knowing full well what it's like). (The other option, that species with greater avenues available for karmic enhancement win out over the ones stuck with low karma potential, means that sheep would never achieve anything higher than sheepdom. Whereas there are *certainly* any number of humans who fully deserve to get shunted down the species ladder when they die, meaning that the system would be unstable, and the number of humans would be dropping, not rising as is the case.)
- iii) Now, using the figure that humans are 0.1% of the planet's population, and that humans are the top of the karmic ladder (as everyone assumes), that means that

only the top 0.1% of souls get to be human in their next life.

- iv) While it is true that a sheep can't really achieve much, even if it is a good karma-abiding sheep, the sinful earthly pleasures available to a sheep who decides to be a bad sheep are pretty limited as well. Whereas, for a human who decides karma can take a hike, the world is his/her mollusc in terms of sinful pleasures (say what you like about the human race, we're really *good* at coming up with novel ways to enjoy ourselves – what other species would actually produce a group of people who derive sexual pleasure from the notion of being swallowed whole by a python? And I'm not making that up).
- v) So, if you're going to be evil and self-indulgent, it's better to do so as a human than a sheep, or any other lower life-form for that matter.

Conclusion – the karmic benefits to a soul can be maximised thusly:

- a) Be born as a human. Most of us manage that somehow.
- b) Forget karma, and just have a hell of a time. 99.9% of humans are headed for sheepdom when they die, so unless you're *really* sure you're in the top 0.1%, you won't really have lost that much.
- c) Be reborn as a lower life-form.
- d) Be a really *good* lower life-form. If you had a real good time with the sinful pleasures, you'll have been shunted into some crappy punishment species, like cockroach or SciFi Channel accountant. There's no way you can gain any pleasure from that sort of life anyway, so just concentrate on racking up the karma. Seeing as you deliberately boosted your prior evilness, and didn't just end up as a roach without trying, you shouldn't have much trouble reaching the top 0.1% of your species, as all the other roaches will be evil-minded gits. Note that this means that, the nastier a time you have as a human, the easier a time you'll have beating your fellow lower life-forms to the top karmic spot later on.
- e) Be reborn as a human. Repeat.

There you go, the uncertainties of life and death solved. Who says a university education's no good?



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WHO KNOWS WHAT EVIL LURKS IN THE HEARTS OF MEN?

(www.shadowradio.org)

The Shadow knows... Long before the mildly forgettable Alec Baldwin film a decade or so ago, the Shadow was a radio play, among the grandfathers of modern superhero adventure. The Shadow's unique gift for hypnotism gave him the ability to cloud men's minds, and so become completely invisible. Week after week the Shadow's haunting laugh, echoing out of the darkness, would strike fear into the hearts of criminals, whose downfall at the hands of this mysterious nemesis demonstrated for listeners that Crime Does Not Pay.

The Shadow Radio Theatre updates every week with a new 25-minute episode of The Shadow, in MP3 and RealPlayer formats.

STRAIGHT TO VIDEO...

It's somehow comforting to know that a film doesn't have to be a *Sixth Sense* or *Usual Suspects*-style masterpiece to get made. (On the other hand, when you've just paid \$14 to see *I Spy*, it can be a pain in the eema.) Here's some of the more mock-worthy tapes that your local video store probably isn't advertising too well: What can you say about *Jason X*? Well, for a start, it's crap. Far from the searing political commentary I'd expected - the similarity of the title to *Malcolm X* was, it seems, purely coincidental, so the issue of monstrous psychopathic killers having to sit at the back of the bus remains unresolved - this is a good example of why there should be some sort of oversight committee to prevent pointless sequels. Anyhow... a team of medical students (huh?) travelling on the cargo ship *Grendel* (who names their ship 'Grendel'?) decide to exhume the cryo-frozen body of Jason Vorhees (are you insane?) from the remains of the ecologically-devastated Earth (oh, so it's environmental commentary now?) and sell him to a travelling freak show (you people deserve to die so much). This film is notable purely because, once bullets fail to slow Hockey-boy, our heroes actually have the initiative to get a bigger gun rather than just give up on firepower completely. Also worthy of note, though I haven't dared watch it, is *FemAlien*, which is one of those films you just *know* was not made for its plot. Basically: a race of super-advanced aliens, who have evolved into being of pure energy and thus can't make with the humpy anymore, send one of their number to Earth in the body of a low-paid soft porn actress, in order to discover the secret of this thing Earthlings call 'love'. Now sci-fi soft porn isn't a new idea (*Species*, anyone?), but it's definitely worthy of note that a film, a whole damned film, could be scripted, shot and produced, that nevertheless has a worse plot than pretty much every smutty *Star Trek* fanfic ever written. If anyone sees it, let me know if it's really as mind-numbingly bad as it sounds.