



News From Bree

Middle Earth PBC Newsletter - Issue 4, June '99

"Strange as News from Bree..."

The Lord of the Rings, chapter 9

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Agents: Too powerful?

by Richard Devereux

I'm not saying this just because the Free characters in ME 10 are getting slaughtered. I wrote on this subject in the old Allsorts NL, and haven't changed my opinion. The vast majority of ME games are won by the Dark Servants. The reason is simple: if the game goes the distance, the DS, and particularly the Cloud Lord, can churn out so many super-agents that they can kill and kidnap with impunity. Any that are captured by guards escape the following turn, any that are Doubled can be Countered, or re-doubled by allied emissaries.

I don't object to assassins as such. They have their place to play in the game like any other characters. What I do object to is the way their sheer NUMBERS dominate the midgame and decide the endgame. No nation in history, mythology or fantasy ever churned out agents of such power so quickly and in such numbers as the Cloud Lord can in ME. CL can name agents at rank 40, plus 20 to assassinations/kidnaps, plus the chance of stealth.

NO other nation in Middle-earth can name new characters capable of carrying out Hard orders from the second they are named! This is unfair on ALL other nations, not just the Free. It unbalances the game. Moreover it pushes the Cloud Lord to produce just one type of character. Those characters may be a game-winners, but when you have such HUGE advantages, is playing the position really that much fun? So you win a game playing Cloud Lord, big deal. Win a game as the Woodmen, then you have achieved something!

I suggest CL should name agents at 30 not 40, with plus 10 not 20 to assassinations and kidnaps, but still with the chance of stealth. This is the same level of advantage when creating new characters that other nations have.

Secondly, something should be done to inhibit the way in which companies of up to 9 of assassins can be deployed to hit up to 9 targets in a single pop centre. Again, this has no justification in history, mythology or fantasy. Assassins were and are SOLITARY killers. Show me a single instance where assassins operated as a group. I don't think the word assassin is mentioned ONCE in all Tolkien's writings. So where is the justification for a gang of up to 9 of the bastards in the ME game? I am against making rules that say: you can't

do such-and-such; this irritates players who want to know: why not? It's more intelligent to make rules reflect history/mythology/fantasy. So what can be done to make assassins behave in a realistic, solitary manner? Remember, this has to be entered on a computer program!

How about:

1) Only a nation's highest-ranking agent can attempt an assassination/kidnap? This is explained very easily: the top guy takes precedence. Yes, this is true in criminal fraternities as well as government agencies!

2) Only one assassination/kidnap order per nation per turn? Explained very simply by the need for secrecy, plus the intelligence and logistic resources needed to get the assassin to the right place at the right time, and to make sure he was not intercepted! Or...

3) If a company moves onto an enemy pop centre, the chances of one or more members of the company getting discovered could be multiplied by the number of people in the company. Those discovered should be arrested by the local militia (with appropriate chance of escape to a neighbouring hex next turn). Of course the chance of discovery should also be influenced by the loyalty of the pop centre, and any fortifications (therefore guards). So a pop centre with very low loyalty would offer little or no resistance, but a fortified capital city would be realistically well guarded!

4) Allow mages to cast a one-shot Warding spell on a pop centre, or Guard spell on a character. Such spells would have to be renewed each turn to be continually effective, would only be as strong as the mage's skill rank, and therefore an assassin/kidnapper who was skilful enough or possessed an appropriate artifact would still get through to complete his mission.

On a related subject, the Steal gold order should be chucked out altogether. It is ludicrous that a thief, or even a number of thieves, can steal enough gold to cripple a nation's economy. As for training your agents by having them steal gold from your allies' pop centres, what real-life ally would allow that? Stealing artifacts from enemies is one thing, stealing tons of gold quite another.

Summary: the Dark servants win too often. This is due almost entirely to their superiority in agents. My suggestions are intended to restore balance to the game. If you've any comments or better ideas, send 'em in!

new games

1650

Game 16

Nations Available:

1-2, 5-7, 12-15, 17-18, 20, 24

We have a couple of players for 1650 3 week turnaround - anyone interested?

Game 7

The Long Rider (19) needs a take over asap - it's in superb condition with one careful owner...

2950

Game 23

Nations Available:

1-3, 13, 18, 22-23, 25

1000

Game 45

Fourth Age team pre-aligned Team game. We need ONE (yes that's 1) moreplayer to get this game going. Come on you know you want to...Please get in touch!

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Bored of the Rings?

By Anon (found floating around on the internet)

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the second 'Middle-Earth' novel to be published under license to GameQuest Inc., creators of the ever-popular *Realms of Middle-Earth* fantasy role-playing game system. Enthusiasts of the game, many of whom were somewhat disappointed by the first novel, *The Hobbit*, have awaited this long-touted 'sequel' with some anticipation: but unfortunately, *The Lord of the Rings* proves not to have been worth the wait.

For one thing, someone should point out to Tolkien that in 'series' novels of this type, readers get to enjoy a particular cast of characters, and want to read more of their adventures. Those who enjoyed Bilbo Baggins in the first book will be disappointed early on: the titular hero of *The Hobbit* disappears out of the story about half-way through the first chapter, and while he does make the occasional appearance thereafter, he is in no way the hero of this one. Nor are any of his dwarf companions from *The Hobbit* much in evidence: Gloin does make a brief appearance, but also not for long, and in any case Gloin was never a particularly interesting character in the first novel (where the adventure party consisted of altogether too many dwarves, most of whom were indistinguishable from one another.)

The only characters who do provide any continuity between the two novels are the slimy subterranean Gollum (whose character has here undergone a major transformation;) the half-elven loremaster Elrond, as extraneous to this novel as he was to the first; and Gandalf, the wizard who was mostly absent throughout *The Hobbit*, and whose character is one of the major faults of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien just doesn't seem to understand how characters generated by a role-playing game system work, particularly wizards. Gandalf has at his disposal precious few of the spells detailed in the *Realms of Middle-Earth* 'Thaumaturge's Tome.' Count them: he has two First-Level Wizard spells - a Make Magic Fire spell, and a Strike Evil Forces With White Lightning spell (both of which he uses twice - the only time spells are used more than once;) and two Second-Level Wizard spells: a Reveal Secret Doors spell, and a Bind Great Horses To Your Service spell. That's it: the sole sum of his magic, it would appear. In particular, just about anyone who's ever played a *Realms of Middle-Earth* game would hope that Gandalf has an Immunity From Corruption By Evil Magic Items spell, particularly since that would make the plot so much simpler.

The story-line concerns the discovery that the magic ring found by Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, and now belonging to his cousin Frodo, is actually incredibly corrupt, and that it must be destroyed before the Dark Lord Sauron gets hold of it. If only Tolkien had read through the list of spells contained in the 'Thaumaturge's Tome,' he could have given the ring to Gandalf to destroy then and there, and thus spared us much of the interminable plot which follows.

Hope in fact does flicker that Gandalf will learn a few useful Third-Level spells when, a few chapters into the book, he sets off to meet with Saruman, head of the order of wizards: unfortunately, this turns out not to be the case. In fact, Gandalf discovers that Saruman has turned traitor, and is held captive by him; which raises another problem. Enthusiasts of the role-playing game would be forgiven for thinking that Gandalf was a Second-Level Wizard, just out of his apprenticeship, but no: with blatant disregard for the rules of the role-playing game, Tolkien expects us to believe that Gandalf is not only a member of the White Council, but ultimately a more powerful wizard than Saruman.

Unfortunately, this kind of silliness is compelled by Tolkien's plot, which has been plagiarised, almost incident by incident, from that masterpiece of modern fantasy, *The Blade of Bannara* by Jerry Crookes. In fact, the legions of Crookes fans throughout the world will quickly be able to predict what is going to happen on the next page of *The Lord of the Rings*, because they've read it all before. The courageous diminutive hero who flees his rustic home with his friends, pursued by the servants of the Dark Lord; the enigmatic man who helps them and who is revealed to be the heir to the long-deserted throne of a great kingdom; the battle between the wizard and an evil spirit of the underworld which ends in the wizard's death (Gandalf is later resurrected, more powerful than before - except, of course, in regard to the spells at his disposal); even the sub-plot of the traitorous Saruman and his downfall: all of these and many, many more are incidents in *The Lord of the Rings* which will provoke a feeling of *deja vu* in readers of *The Blade of Bannara*.

There's nothing wrong with this, of course, if one is a writer of the calibre of Jerry Crookes: unfortunately, Tolkien is not. It is not only the conventions of the series novel, or of the role-playing game tie-in, which Tolkien ignores: he writes in total ignorance of the kind of thing which readers throughout the world have come to expect from fantasy novels. There are no voluptuous sword-maidens, for example. The only two female characters of any note are an Elvish queen who struggles valiantly against her desire for the magic

what film?

I also would like to contribute to the LOTR-Film-discussion in the News from Bree. I have heard nothing of it before. At first, which company plans the film and who's the director?

About the actors, I have some different opinions than Travis. He seems to think that British actors are the worlds best - partly true, but don't forget the others! Jeremy Irons is clearly a nope for Aragorn! Much too slim and subtle. Let him shave and play Elrond (who was completely forgotten). For Aragorn, I see Kevin Costner or, still better, an unshaven Harrison Ford, with Kevin playing Boromir, then. Sean Bean is ok for Eomer.

But now for the big point. Sean Connery is Theoden, a king, not a Wizard, no doubt there. Which leaves Gandalf open for...Patrick Stewart! Yes, with long hair and beard! Only that he is too small...let's do some CGI-Tricks there!

About most other positions, I could agree with Travis. Let them have Brad Pitt dye his hair blonde and be Legolas, so that we can get our girl-friends into that movie! Rowan Atkinson as Wormtongue could be a real surprise, but he would have to act very, very carefully not to drown the cinema in laughter at his mere appearance. I rather think of Gary Oldman (remember him in 5th Element?), or, really weird - Jim Carrey.

Such people would probably be very costly, but that's not what we are talking about, because the movie is anyway doomed to be one of the most expensive works of cinema history if the important characters are played by good actors and if the special effects should be up to date, Industrial Light and Magic, for example.

Bernd Luehrsen.

ring; and a gloomy mortal princess who falls chastely in love with the King-to-be mortal hero, and then disappointingly weds someone else. Though this latter character does get to trade blows with an evil Wraith in the service of the Dark Lord, she does so in drag, disguised as a male knight of Rohan: so there's no real scope for descriptions of her nubile limbs and heaving bosom during the battle. Adult fantasy fans will be profoundly disappointed.

Tolkien also violates the cardinal rule of role-playing games by dividing his adventure party, ultimately into three groups: there's one that sets about the main quest, and two which go off to sort out various complicated sets of business in the kingdoms of Gondor and Rohan. Even so, it's mostly talk, and not much sword-play: only three massed battles, and a couple of skirmishes between the adventure party and various foes.

The shortage of magic has been noted already: how anyone could hope to win a battle or skirmish without magic is not explained. Instead of real excitement therefore we have a lot of minor characters, and a whole lot of talk about the events of a long-distant past; and lots of dull descriptions of landscapes and characters' thoughts and feelings. To make matters worse, Tolkien pads out the considerable length of the book with extensive appendices. These are not even appendices of the kind you could use to develop a good game scenario, such as weapons statistics or encounter charts. Tolkien supplies us with dull chronologies, and details of the 'languages' spoken by the different races of Middle-Earth. The average Realms of Middle-Earth ready-to-play scenario runs to about one-tenth the length of Tolkien's appendices, and has far more useful information.

Finally, there's little or no wacky humour, Jerry Cratchitt-style. In fact, the novel is far too grim for anyone's taste, and it ends on a depressingly down-beat note. The forces of evil having been vanquished for the time being, readers have come to expect their heroes to return to their homes to await the next call to defend the world from the shadow of darkness in the next book in the series. Instead of this venerable convention, we have the hobbits returning to their native land of the Shire, only to find that evil has sprouted there in their absence. Absurdly enough, this evil resembles some of the evils of our world (a nascent secret police, a remote and autocratic bureaucracy, centralised and collectivised control of the economy, a concentration camp system in its infancy) - as if anyone wanted serious 'social commentary' in a fantasy novel! And even though they defeat this manifestation of evil in a far-too-sombre penultimate chapter, Frodo is too enervated by his struggle to be able to settle down and await the next call to save the world.

He and Gandalf (and the Elves, whose powers are rather pointlessly 'waning') depart for some kind of Avalon across the seas where they can find healing and rest from their labours. The only consolation in any of this might be that we can expect no more dreary sequels, but (judging by the end-papers of the book), Tolkien has already got together a whole volume of 'background mythology' - expanding on those interminable appendices, no doubt - which he's called *The Silmarillion*. Judging by that title alone, I suspect a carbon copy of David Meddings' *The Melgariad* is coming our way.

A final note: the book is too long. There's so much good fantasy out there that no one's really going to want to wade through a thousand-odd pages of this kind of second-rate derivative stuff. It's hard to know who GameQuest Inc. thought would shell out money for this waste of good paper. Fans of the Realms of Middle-Earth game will find *The Lord of the Rings* too inconsistent with the role-playing system they know and love, while those who don't know the game won't be inspired to buy the rule-books. GameQuest Inc., if they want this series to continue, should dump this Tolkien guy and get one of the people who write for *WyvernSpear* to do the job instead.



There are several things that people wanted to know, or have not been accurate on, in the last issue of Bree. I hope you find these comments useful.

Firstly, the Game HAS been ended by the ring. I played the Ice King in a team game of 2950 (game41 under Allsorts). We were winning handsomely when the Noldo found the ring, so we decided to park a large number of assassins and two curse squads on Mt Doom the turn after. My contribution was to provide the challenge man - Hoarmurath (nickname H.) slotted in at 210, having 5 artifacts. We located the ring on Glorfindel, so I slew him in one blow. The Curse squads and assassins took care of Elrond and the rest of the Noldo characters. Unfortunately, Hoarmurath was enamoured by Lorglin, Glorfindel's ring (lower numbered than the ONE ring), and so the ONE ring was dropped!!!! (6 artifacts max). An undignified scuffle ensued, with about 10 high-level mages looking for it. The QA player managed to pick it up, and we won by giving the ring to Sauron.

I have never known anyone to get the ring in FA. I am fairly sure it moves around with Bilbo Baggins, and so is almost impossible to get hold of. Certainly, my only FA end of game report said it was in his possession.

Secondly, I have been part of team efforts as the Noldo in game 28 1650 (in the old GAD games days) and as South Gondor in game 1 2950 (Allsorts again). In the former case, we strangled out the last few enemy nations by systematically taking places while keeping the map on the maximum population limit (I ended up with over 90 pops). This meant that the Cloud Lord eventually was going to run out of "back-up capitols in the middle of nowhere", conceding at last when he was down to 1 MT and 4 or 5 smaller population centres. In Game 1, we had more active players. Several DS nations want bust, but most of the rest were eliminated by well-coordinated army and emissary operations taking out all the MT's in Mordor (Credits to Mark Seward).

Lastly, I would have you know that when I won Game 41 FA1000 (yes, I have played in two "game 41's"), I was playing as the Wainriders Good-aligned nation, NOT the Noldo!!! Dave Tomley came second as the South Kingdom, NOT the northmen. The game I won as the Noldo was game 28 mentioned above (about 3 years ago). My other outright victory was as the Rhun Easterlings in (I think) game 115.

PS Maybe one day, I'll even get some winners certificates!!!! :-)

David Slatter.

The following night Leonora awoke with a jump as someone brushed against her tent. Rolling to her feet she unlimbered "Durcrist" and stood ready. Into the tent stepped a woman, dagger in hand dripping blood on the rug. Quick as a flash Leonora brought the axe down on her wrist severing the hand. Gasping in shock Leonora managed to pin the other woman to the floor. She recognised her from the description given by Faile as being the agent who was guarding Noltep last week. The cut she had given Faile had almost killed her, fortunately the High Lord had skilled healers, Leonora would not liked to have seen her sister die quite yet!

"What is your name bitch?" shouted Leonora. "Elexxa" spat the Golteck assassin twisting fiercely under Leonora's bulk. Suddenly Leonora was flying through the air and Elexxa was gone into the night. "Tricky minx" thought Leonora as she picked up Elexxa's severed hand from the rug. "For once I hope Faile succeeds tonight!"

Meanwhile Dermont strode openly through the City. He spotted Silion sitting casually outside an inn, over the road from the east gate of the city. Everyone was celebrating the famous victory of the previous day. Everyone except Silion.

He could not believe that he had been posted to this dump of a city.

"Protect the Goltecks & obey Noltep" was all he had been told by his Skargnakh commander. "Paah" he thought, "I am too good for this. I should be sneaking into the mountain fortress of Agia Castelli and killing the cursed Freep commanders."

An aging bald man sat down next to him. "Wine?" he offered.

Silion drank deeply. "Good stuff this" he replied.

Later, Dermont walked away from the inn smiling. He had enough blackmail material now to prevent Silion from ever venturing near the Curunir again, he hoped. An evil little man with bizarre perversions. Already a pigeon was heading back to the Skargnakh capital saying that Silion had been unable to breach the tight security around the Curunir camp. Dermont new different, but let Silion make up his own lies to his commanders.

Faile flexed her left leg cautiously. Not a twinge of pain left. Those healers new their stuff alright. She wondered who the woman had been. She had very nearly gotten to Noltep when that woman tried to hamstring her. If it hadn't been for the Ring of the Wind she doubted she would have gotten away at all.

That was another matter. Back to the game in hand. Leonora's little party had failed to take the city so now she got her chance again. It rankled her that the High Mage didn't appreciate her talents more. Tonight she would prove herself.

She dispatched the two tower guards nonchalantly. "Amateurs" she thought. Climbing the tower stairs she used the ring to avoid the two traps and slid under the Mage's study door. No surprises awaited her, just Noltep asleep, next to a flask of wine. She wasted no time in cutting his throat from ear to ear and removing his gold ring from his finger as a memento.

"All too easy." she thought. "I wonder where that woman is? Stupid to leave your guard post just because you got lucky last week!" She pinned the note "COWARD" onto Noltep's back and left the way she came.

The following day High Mage Yeogi Lanstorm called his council together. Things had not gone as smoothly as he intended. Noltep was dead and Silion converted, but his army was not inside the city. In front of him were reports of two Hyaroth armies baring down on his position.

Metlorg with 1400 men and Saran Teroth with 300 men. He hoped they didn't bring more assassins. News that Garack of the Goltecks remained at the city of Treetop to his South East recruiting, now 2200 men, was a relief. Zoltan of the Goltecks was also recruiting in the City to the west, now 1000 men. They had him caught in a vice. To the east lay possible relief in a Free People army but his reports did not say how big or how strong. Unfortunately they would not be here soon enough to intercept the Hyaroth forces. Worse still he new he had been careless. Officially he was still on neutral footing with the Hyaroth. He hoped his message had gotten back to Durthang and that Austin would declare war on them, or else he may be in trouble. He was still waiting on the Wainrider scout to get back with the info on who was with these armies.

What to do now? Relief troops would take too long to get here from Durthang and the Hyaroth would be able to march straight inside the Castle walls to defend the city from further assault. If the Hyaroth came out he thought that he could beat them, especially of this Metlorg would meet him in personal combat, however he was not going to assault those walls defended by real troops.

It was time to address the Free People council and seek advice.

Editors note: My apologies to Jason for wrongly crediting part one of the above story to Dave Tomley in the last issue!

poetry CORNER

With a desperate but strategically unimportant battle coming up in game 10, I was reminded of the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava. Apologies to Alfred Lord Tennyson and true poets everywhere!

The Charge of the Five Hundred

From the army which stormed
Kal Nargil
Camlin's cavalry were sundered,
Gondor's best, they rode 'cross
the sands west,
Noble five hundred.

Jug Rijesha they stormed,
Jug Rijesha they plundered.
Orcs died 'neath the hooves
Of the victorious five hundred.

"Is that sandstorm before us?"
To his scouts, Camlin wondered.
"No, my lord, but an Orcish
horde,
And we but five hundred."

"There is no way by, we must win
or die.
Charge!" Camlin thundered.
They spurred their steeds to do
great deeds,
Fearless five hundred.

Orcs to the left of them, orcs to
the right of them,
Bearing shields with the Eye of
red,
Into the horde, with bloody
sword,
Charged the five hundred.

Theirs not to reason why, theirs
but to do and die.
Though by orcs and trolls
outnumbered,
With bloody blade their foes they
slayed,
Gallant five hundred.

No truce was asked and none
was given,
The sands ran red with the blood
of the dead,
The ranks of the Orcish hordes
were riven,
By the five hundred.

*To be continued when the result
of the battle is known!*

A Fourth Age Review

by Gavin Kenny

There are two main problems with the earlier versions of GSI's Middle Earth games, that of imbalance between the nations and the amount of start-up information that an internet user can glean, which can give them a significant advantage over those that don't have access to such information.

The Fourth Age scenario fixes both of these problems. Since you can now design your own nation to have the special nation abilities you want, start with the characters you want, and try and start in the place you want, you have a lot more flexibility in forging your nation's destiny.

Additionally you can no longer simply download a starting strategy from the internet and rely on someone else's prior experience to see you through the opening moves like a chess game. Since in 4th age you can ally with members of the opposite allegiance and attack your own, your friends may well seem to be your enemies and vice versa. Careful diplomacy must now be made rather than instantly expecting members of your allegiance to be on your side.

Fourth Age is far more about information gathering and diplomacy than the previous scenarios. A neutral allegiance victory has become a possibility allowing for thrilling three way games. New orders that allow you to move your map are also a welcome addition to the game, which again provides you with more strategic choices during your turn.

This scenario has two large giant nations (North and South Kingdom) that dominate Middle Earth now. Both nations are more powerful at start-up than the other 23 nations, but can easily be picked apart by a co-alition against them. So the Kingdoms must trade information and use diplomacy to prevent themselves being picked apart for the valuable Strategic population centres they possess. In my experience, if the Kingdoms make the right alliances at game start, then potentially they should end up near the top three at game end.

Dragons (akin to a nuclear missile in the old game) are now gone. No longer can you rely on raising 100 MA and getting a dragon to defend your capital against 4000 opposing troops. This has made the game more realistic and given more prominence to recruiting armies to attack the enemy. I would like to have seen a scaled down version of recruitable creatures to maintain the flavour and bring some benefit to seeking out encounters.

Artefact numbers are now randomised which has made locating artefacts more of a hit and miss affair. No longer can you expect

to try and locate the Ring of Wind (+40 Agent artefact) on Turn 1. Instead you have to trawl through researching many random numbers before finding the gems amongst the dirt. This requires a nation to have some dedication to mages to be able to find the gems, and stops the mad dash for the good artefacts at game start.

Although you can choose where you would like to start your nation, the popularity of certain particular spots may mean that you get moved to your second or third choices. A player mapping out their strategy to take this into account should not be bothered by this, however it may catch the unwary player out. Certainly in my experience placing in the hills and rough and mountains in the south will provide you with a better economy. However it will also provide you with more neighbours who you will have to deal with diplomatically or through military force. Starting in a less popular area can give you the time and effort to be able to build your economy up ready for a surprise attack.

The game does have its downsides. By taking the game away from its Tolkienesque roots, much of the flavour of the old game has been lost. This is particularly evident in some of the new encounters that I must confess are bland at best. It would not take GSI much effort to update these to bring back the Tolkienesque flavour of the game, and with a little more policing of nation and character names this whole Middle Earth flavour could once again be brought out.

The new scenario gives the player greater freedom to design the nation that they want to play rather than restrict the player to replaying the same old tried and tested nation. It brings more fairness and balance to the game and is a refreshing approach to the core game for old and new players alike. I feel there are further additions and improvements that GSI could still make to the game, however the inbuilt game balance in fourth age has made it a much more challenging scenario than the two earlier ones in my opinion. In fourth age, even more so than the earlier incarnations information is the key to victory.



European Championships

I'm pleased to announce that the European Cup / World Cup is here. I am looking into it having other countries outside of the UK as well. The system is 1650, with a League set-up. Points will be allocated for a win (5), and also for the difference between the teams players in the end game. So at the end of the game (52 turns maximum) the number of the nation in the winner's team minus the number of active nations in the loser's team (generally zero). This will mean that you are encouraged to stick with the game to help your team. As this will take a while to play out you are allowed to swap over team members if need be. One team gets to choose good or evil and then for the return match then they swap teams. Teams of 12 required with Rhudaur and Haradwaith evil, Dunlendings and Corsais good.

We now have a South American team on the way - but as yet no British team although feelers have been put out. I am investigating a Spanish team and then we may go further afield again and turn it into the world cup. The Germans and Scandinavians are ready to play in the first match.



News from Bree

My thanks to everyone who has sent articles - it has not proved possible to fit them all in this time. I am still looking for more though, and in-game messages would be most welcome! Please try to keep your articles to about 900 words (or shorter), otherwise I may have to edit you severely!

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From out of the West

A Comedy of Errors

It has been oft-claimed, sometimes with justification, that we make errors when inputting turns. And yes, we freely admit that this is the case. However, what is less frequently admitted is the fact that we are not the only ones to do this. As such, then, we took time out from our arduous task of running Middle Earth to examine the turns received for one turn one game. Around one error per turnsheet (we aim for 1 per game - which is around 00.03%). We found the following errors...

- * No security code and/or turn number and/or game number. Probably around a third of turns received are missing at least one of these things.
- * The wrong security code and/or turn number and/or game number. More awkward than the last version, as it leaves us wondering whether it is the character names or the turn/game numbers that are wrong, or in the case of the security code, whether it is a very late or a very early turn.
- * Wrong/missing/extra character names/i.d.s. Another awkward one, as the question is raised as to what characters the orders are actually intended for.
- * Orders given for captured characters. This doesn't work!
- * 430 orders given with no troop type. Another common one this, and contrary to popular opinion giving no troop type isn't the same as saying HI, though we generally translate it this way.
- * A 780 order with extra information such as a hex number or troop type. Strange but true.
- * 3 and 5 digit hex numbers given for move orders. 3 is understandable, perhaps, but 5 is pretty bizarre.
- * 870 orders given with no character i.d. A very common one this; not vital, as the character will still move, but character i.d.s are not something we can just guess at.
- * 850 orders with no directions. And, more annoying for us, 850 orders with a hex number instead of directions. Not only does this take us time to work out, but we have to guess at which route you wish taken. Which also applies to 830 orders.
- * 610 orders with no character i.d. Commonly altered to 605 orders, but this isn't much consolation to the commander lying dead in a pool of his own blood.
- * 810 orders with no hex number, 810 orders with directions instead of a hex number, and 810 orders with hex numbers that are off the map. This can also apply to 820 orders, though none were found in this game.
- * 2 skill orders given for the same skill field. Which leaves us with the conundrum of which you want to attempt. Sometimes easy to deduce, but not always so.
- * 360 orders with no character i.d. given, and the same for 355s and 780s.
- * 948 orders with only one hex number given, and 847 orders with two. These tend to be important orders, especially the 948 ones, so getting them wrong is not advised.
- * 949s with no character i.d. Guaranteed to annoy your erstwhile ally.

Eight of the Best...Common Errors and Problems

1. If you do not tell us of problems with your turns until the last minute, it may well be too late to deal with them. Please then let us know of any problems that you might have as soon as possible; the more time you give us, the greater the chance that we can solve them.
2. If you submit orders for one character which are both command orders, both agent orders, both emissary orders, both mage orders or both move orders, only one will be processed successfully. We will attempt to choose the most important order, but such a decision is not always easy.
3. 947 and 948 orders are often mixed up. To clarify: order 947 collects a percentage of goods from all your population centres and deposits this into one population centre. The order 948 moves a specific amount of a store type from one population centre to another, including centres belonging to other friendly nations. This also works for gold, but since gold can only be kept at a capital, the order can only be used to move gold from one capital to another.
4. 4th Age start-ups require players to give three possible locations for their capitals, which must each be ten hexes away from the others. If they are closer together, we are forced to choose which locations to leave out, which can lead to disappointment.
5. If a character attempts to 705 orders (research spell) for different spells, the computer randomly selects which goes first. If then you attempt to research two spells, one of which is the prerequisite for the other, there is a 50% chance that they will be researched the wrong way around, so that you do not have the appropriate prerequisite for the higher level spell.
6. We are able to deal with most problems that occur. However, this is made much easier if you remain calm. In other words, please don't shout (SHOUT in email parlance) at us too often, even if we do deserve it!
7. Order 725 (create character) gives a maximum of 30 points to spend on a character's skills. Orders 728, 731, 734 and 737 allocate 30 points to the appropriate skill (which can rise to a maximum of 40 if the nation has an appropriate special ability).
8. The rulebook states that you can give either number codes or letter codes for orders. However, as a rule we work from the numbers, checking them against the letter codes if there appears to be a discrepancy. If possible then we appreciate it if you use numbers codes, and would recommend that you use both to minimise errors (if you do not use both, that means we have no way of checking your orders). All things being equal, if there is a discrepancy we will use the number code. If we notice that one appears to make more sense than the other, we will of course use it, but generally, the number code will take precedence.

Pubmeet news

Provisionally we will be holding a pubmeet near to Reading train station on the 7th August - early afternoon onwards. Hope to see some of you there.

HARLEQUIN
GAMES

