



News From Bree

MEPBM Newsletter,

Issue 20

December '02



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Building a Healthy Economy

Part 1: Camp Production & Climate

by Marc Pinsonneault

The foundation of a strong ME PBM game position is a strong economy. In particular, the 1000 and 2950 games start out with small economies, so creating new population centers is necessary for success in both. There are several routes for generating income:

1: Conquering enemy population centers. This has the advantage of both helping you and hurting your foes. Both armies and emissaries can be used. However, building and fielding large armies is expensive and (particularly in 2950) the starting population centers are fortified and the starting armies are small. Emissaries issuing influence other orders can be deadly, but it usually requires both higher ranked emissaries (40+) and several orders to pull it off, it can't be done in the presence of hostile armies, and your emissaries are vulnerable to challenges and agents. This will be your primary tool in the mid-to-late game, but you usually can't rely on it in the first ten turns or so.

2: Game start ruins: These fortifications without population centers have a 50/50 chance of yielding gold, typically 8,000-16,000. This is a nice jump-start at the start, but there are relatively few of these hexes and they are usually visited early. Be aware that there is a 50/50 chance of a hostile encounter instead.

3: Stealing gold with your agents. Again, this is an effective mid to late game strategy; it requires 40+ agents and can be unreliable due to the presence of enemy guards. Camps will yield little gold, while major towns are usually guarded and hard to steal from. Villages and towns with gold production make the best early targets, and once your agents are strong enough you can rake in up to 10,000 gold from enemy major towns. However, even for nations like the Cloud Lord this is an uncertain path in the early game.

4: Gold transfers from your allies. For some positions this is necessary (e.g. the Witch-King or Dragon Lord). However, orders can be mistyped, gold can be stolen, and your allies can refuse to do it.

5: Create your own population centers. Of all of the ways of generating revenue this is the one that is the most under your control. I contend that this last item is the most important one in the early game. Speed is crucial; there is an undocumented

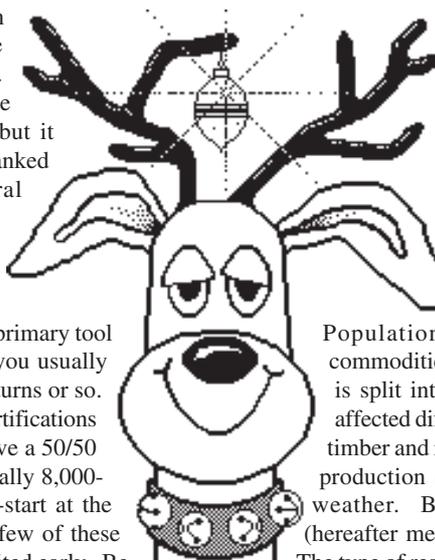
limit to the number of new population centers that can be created (around 200). If you have not built a decent number when this limit is hit (by around turn ten in a typical game according to net information) you will be a second-rate nation. You can get income from taxes, gold production, and from selling other resources. There is a limit of around 20,000 gold per turn on the amount of gold you can raise through resources sales, which varies depending on the overall game economy. In the second article of the series I'll compare tax strategies and resource strategies, but here I'll concentrate on resources. In this article I will analyze the production you can expect to get from camps. The production info is specific to the 2950 scenario, but the climate tables and the overall strategy (in part II) is of general interest.

A Brief Summary of Production in ME PBM

Population centers can produce eight commodities in ME PBM. This production is split into two general categories that are affected differently by climate. Leather, food, timber and mounts (hereafter soft goods) have production that is severely affected by cold weather. Bronze, steel, mithril, and gold (hereafter metals) are less affected by climate. The type of resources that come from a given hex depends on the terrain type. All new hills/rough, mountain, and shore/plains camps will have three different resources they produce. Forest and desert hexes normally produce only two, but there is a 35% chance of a third special production that can be anything they normally do not produce except mithril. Swamp hexes produce no resources. Gold production is especially important; it goes into your treasury automatically and is not reduced in larger population centers.

After the types of resources produced and their base amount is determined, the actual production will depend on the climate and the population center size. The production of all resources except gold is decreased when a population center is larger than a camp; this is offset by tax revenue. The fraction of the base production you get is

Camp	100%
Village	80%
Town	60%
Major Town	40%
City	20%



new games

Waiting List: When I get all 25 (or 24 for Gunboat) nations into the game I will allocate you your choice of nation from the list of nations that you have sent me - please send multiple nation choices. Upto 2 nation game; play 1 or 2 Aligned nations, or one Neutral nation.

Battle of the Five Armies (Bofa) [Game 112]

2week turnaround

Beginners game: 1 available.

1650

[Game 71]

2 week turnaround

22 available. Waiting List game.

[Game 119]

Three Week turnaround

20 available. Prisoners and many postal players involved.

1650 Gunboat

[Game 74]

2 week turnaround

Gunboat 3 nations each. 3 players needed. Waiting List game.

2950

[Game 220]

2 week turnaround

12 nations available. Waiting List game.

1000

[Game 42]

9 DS 8 FP, 5 N. Waiting List game.

(So far most players want LAS, with a few for Normal) 3 More players needed.

Note please ask for variant games we can try to get you opposition for them if you are interested - mostly Grudge teams though - if I get 10 players for any single type of game then I will put it up for general availability below and push it.

Grudge Games

We need opposition for:

1650:

Team 3) David Foreman (6x2)

Team 7) Tom Northrup FP (12 FP)

Team 8) Mark Schweitzer (6x2) - will get team together

2950: None

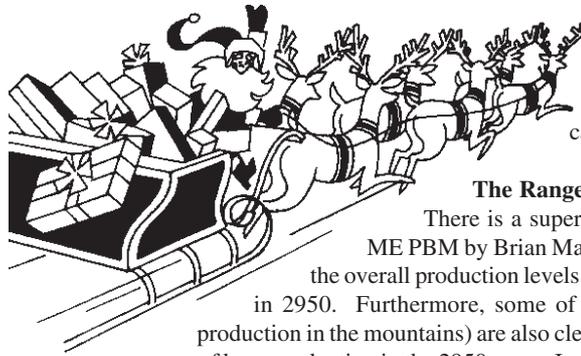
1000: David Ruzic

WoTR: None

Last Alliance: None

World Championship: None

Check out the Front sheet / turn email for all the latest news on positions available!



As a side note, taxes are a valuable source of revenue and one of the first actions you take should be to increase your taxes from 40% to 59-60% BEFORE you start to place new camps. Climate will be discussed later.

The Range of Base Production in TA 2950

There is a superb Mouth of Sauron article on 1650 production in ME PBM by Brian Mason (issue#2, available on the Internet). However, the overall production levels reported there are clearly much higher than you get in 2950. Furthermore, some of the other features (such as always getting gold production in the mountains) are also clearly not the case, at least in 2950. To determine the range of base production in the 2950 game, I put out a call on the net and among the players in the recently completed game #87 of ME PBM 2950. I was interested in two questions: How much production do you get and what are the odds of getting any individual resources from a given terrain type? I assembled a total list of 701 population centers with production information. The population centers were split into two

Terrain Type	Num	Leather	Bronze	Steel	Mithril	Food	Timber	Mounts	Gold
Forest (S)	43	5	1	4	0	43	43	3	1
14/43 Special		12%	2%	9%	0%	100%	100%	7%	2%
Forest (N)	61	4	6	4	0	61	61	4	5
23/61 Special		7%	10%	7%	0%	100%	100%	7%	8%
Hills (S)	56	13	15	19	0	20	22	38	41
		23%	27%	34%	0%	36%	40%	68%	73%
Hills (N)	176	48	54	60	0	63	80	90	133
		27%	31%	34%	0%	36%	45%	54%	76%
Mountain (S)	87	0	87	64	23	0	0	0	87
		0%	100%	74%	26%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Mountain (N)	112	0	91	79	82	0	0	0	84
		0%	81%	70%	73%	0%	0%	0%	75%
Plains (S)	93	93	0	0	0	93	0	93	0
		100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%
Plains (N)	67	67	0	0	0	67	0	67	0
		100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%

groups: those that were present on turn zero (game start pop centers) and those which were not (new population centers). The production base values were determined by correcting for both the effects of climate and population center size.

One important note: I had virtually no data for desert production; only 6 of the 701 population centers were desert hexes. I have therefore extrapolated the results for the other resources to desert hexes, including the special production information for forest hexes.

What Gets Produced

There are some important differences between these results and those in the Mouth of Sauron. First, new H/R and mountain camps are equally likely to produce gold (75% chance); second, game start mountain hexes always have gold production. The MOS article had mountain hexes virtually always producing gold. This either reflects a change in the algorithm or that the MOS article data was based largely on game start population centers. The production mix in game start and newly created mountain camps is definitely different, with the newly created camps looking to follow a simple rule (random three out of four chosen) and the game start ones always having gold and bronze, 75% steel, 25% mithril for the third resource.

The chance for special production in forest hexes appears to be the same in game start and new camps. When the two are combined for more accurate statistics the number of hexes that produce leather, bronze, steel, mounts, and gold are 9, 7, 8, 7, and 6 out of 104 respectively. This suggests that there is an even chance, within the statistics, to get any one of these. Similarly, the resource mix in hills/rough appears to be about the same in game start and newly created camps.

I have therefore reconstructed below what appears to be the odds of a producing a given resource from a terrain type. For mountain hexes the game start and newly created population centers are listed separately.

Terrain Type	Leather	Bronze	Steel	Mithril	Food	Timber	Mounts	Gold
Desert*	100%	7%	7%	0%	7%	7%	100%	7%
Forest*	7%	7%	7%	0%	100%	100%	7%	7%
Hills/Rough	27%	29%	34%	0%	35%	44%	56%	75%
Mountain (S)	0%	100%	75%	25%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Mountain (N)	0%	75%	75%	75%	0%	0%	0%	75%
Shore/Plains	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%

* There is a 35% chance of special production in forest (and presumably desert) hexes; the odds of this are evenly split between the 5 resources other than mithril that these hexes do not ordinarily produce.

stand-By positions

Drop-outs available - don't forget you get a **free turn** for taking these up!

E [Early] = 0-10 turn,
M [Midgame] = 11-20,
L [Late game] = 21+,
[A = Aligned if a Neutral, N = not aligned if a Neutral]
P = Postal and Email game,

BoFA None
1000: Neutral (e)
2950: None
1650: Northmen (e 1w) South Gondor (l), Dwarves (e 1w), Sinda Elves (l), Easterlings (n-e)
Gunboat: 6 (e), 1x2 nation (other dead) (m)

CHECK OUT THE FRONT SHEET / TURN EMAIL FOR ALL THE LATEST NEWS ON POSITIONS AVAILABLE!

Flagship

*The Magazine
for Gamers*

Bi-monthly, not-for-profit, magazine covering PBM and a wide variety of other gaming (including computer games, web gaming, tabletop roleplaying & boardgames).

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We welcome comments on games from everyone, not just subscribers: all comments received go into a hat and may win the writer a free copy of the magazine! Send your thoughts on Middle Earth to: carol@pbmgames.com

News From Bree

We're looking for strategy articles to publish in these pages. More material on fourth age would also be welcome as there is a Fourth Age Special being planned.

If you feel inspired, please write to ...

bree@timewyrm.co.uk

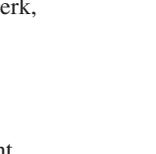
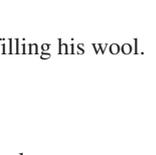
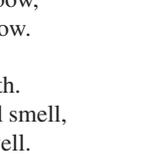
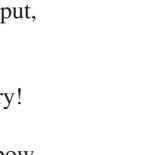
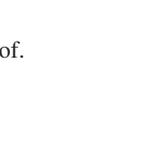
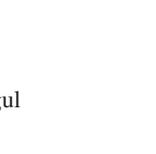
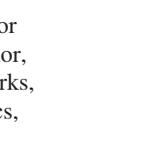
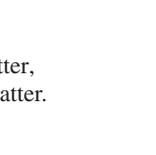
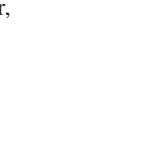
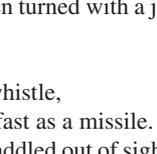
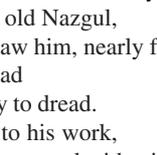
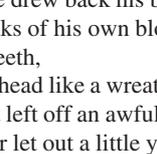
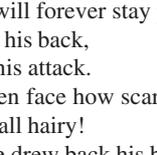
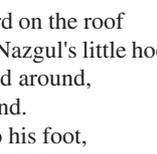
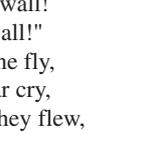
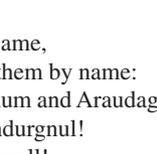
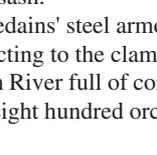
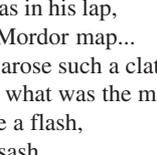
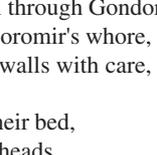
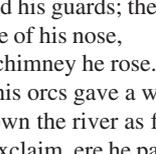
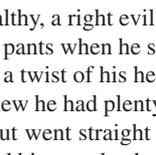
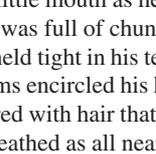
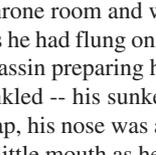
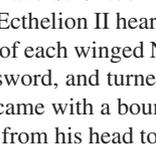
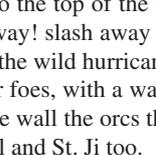
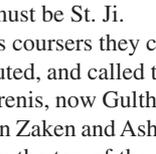
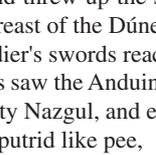
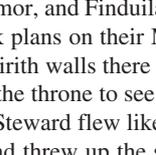
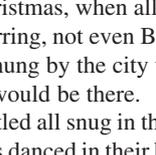
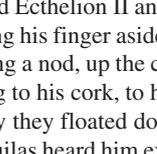
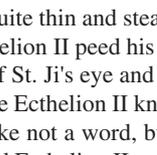
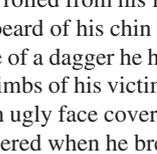
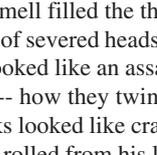
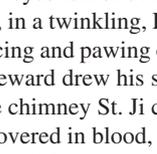
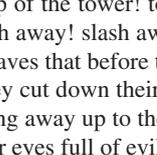
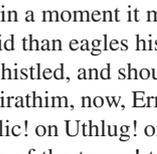
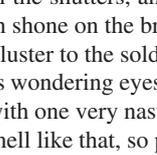
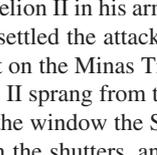
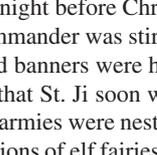
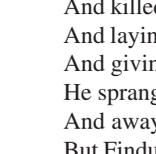
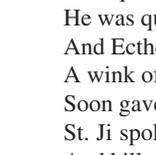
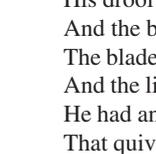
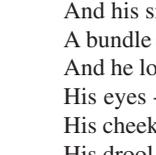
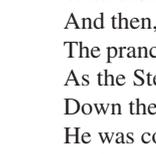
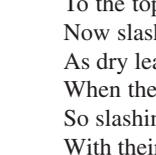
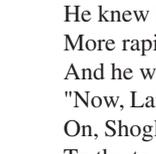
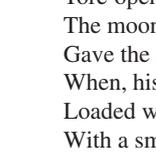
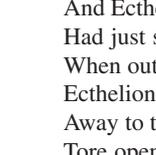
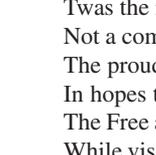
Endgame reports for the Hall of Fame are always welcome!



A Middle Earth Seasonal Tradition

by Christopher Montgomery

Twass the night before Christmas, when all through Gondor,
Not a commander was stirring, not even Boromir's whore,
The proud banners were hung by the city walls with care,
In hopes that St. Ji soon would be there.
The Free armies were nestled all snug in their bed,
While visions of elf fairies danced in their heads,
And Ecthelion II in his armor, and Finduilas in his lap,
Had just settled the attack plans on their Mordor map...
When out on the Minas Tirith walls there arose such a clatter,
Ecthelion II sprang from the throne to see what was the matter.
Away to the window the Steward flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters, and threw up the sash.
The moon shone on the breast of the Dúnedains' steel armor
Gave the luster to the soldier's swords reacting to the clamor,
When, his wondering eyes saw the Anduin River full of corks,
Loaded with one very nasty Nazgul, and eight hundred orcs,
With a smell like that, so putrid like pee,
He knew in a moment it must be St. Ji.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
"Now, Lairathim, now, Errenis, now Gulthum and Araudagul
On, Shoglic! on Uthlug! on Zaken and Ashdurgnul!
To the top of the tower! to the top of the wall!
Now slash away! slash away! slash away all!"
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they cut down their foes, with a war cry,
So slashing away up to the wall the orcs they flew,
With their eyes full of evil and St. Ji too.
And then, in a twinkling, Ecthelion II heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each winged Nazgul's little hoof.
As the Steward drew his sword, and turned around,
Down the chimney St. Ji came with a bound.
He was covered in blood, from his head to his foot,
And his smell filled the throne room and will forever stay put,
A bundle of severed heads he had flung on his back,
And he looked like an assassin preparing his attack.
His eyes -- how they twinkled -- his sunken face how scary!
His cheeks looked like crap, his nose was all hairy!
His drool rolled from his little mouth as he drew back his bow,
And the beard of his chin was full of chunks of his own blow.
The blade of a dagger he held tight in his teeth,
And the limbs of his victims encircled his head like a wreath.
He had an ugly face covered with hair that left off an awful smell,
That quivered when he breathed as all near let out a little yell.
He was quite thin and stealthy, a right evil old Nazgul,
And Ecthelion II peed his pants when he saw him, nearly filling his wool.
A wink of St. Ji's eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave Ecthelion II knew he had plenty to dread.
St. Ji spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And killed Ecthelion II and his guards; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.
He sprang to his cork, to his orcs gave a whistle,
And away they floated down the river as fast as a missile.
But Finduilas heard him exclaim, ere he paddled out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and I'll come for you next night!"



Battle of the Five Armies

Head to Head!

by Jeff Dobberpuhl & Scott Moyes

'Gandalf looked down at the two men before him. He knew that the fate of northern Greenwood depended on him, for he had heard news that shook his bones and these people were worried about treasure.

"Gandalf, why did you bring us here?" Bard asked. He was tall, and easily the match for anyone with the longbow as his shot against Smaug had proven.

"Yes Gandalf, do tell us why we should be listening to you instead of getting our share of the treasure under Lonely Mountain." This was Thranduil, titular spokesman for the Elves of Greenwood.

"Where is your patience, young Elf? And you Bard, are you in such a hurry to kill those Dwarves?" Gandalf asked.

"No hurry old man," said Thranduil while looking at the ground before his feet.

"Well then, I had best tell you why I brought you here, as it is clear you would rather be somewhere else. I tell you this from sure knowledge; I tell you that the easy foe you see before you at Lonely Mountain is not the enemy. I have seen the Necromancer; he has taken up residence in Greenwood. Thranduil, I know that the Elves have felt his presence" Gandalf said.

Thranduil nodded, he had felt it, all Elves had felt it. The gradual change in the air, the ground, in the very trees. How the Lakemen of Dale could live and not feel the difference was a mystery to him.

"Furthermore, the Goblins and Warg Riders have massed armies. You see, the Necromancer has many spies in the wild. The spiders, flees and ticks all answer to him. He knows of the death of Smaug and the vast treasure under Lonely Mountain. Do you for a minute think that the lure of that treasure will not draw him here?"

Bard answered this one, "Gandalf, I doubt not what you say. But, what do you suggest we do?"

"That is a question for you to answer. I will only say the old Gondorian proverb 'He who waits for the sword to fall, will surely lose his head.' Furthermore, I know that the Dwarves of the Iron Hills are marching west as I have told them of the Necromancer, they are marching now and none march as hard as they."

Both Bard and Thranduil looked hard at Gandalf and nodded, they knew what had to be done.'

Thus begins the epic battle of five armies told by J R R Tolkien in *The Hobbit*.

J R R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* ends with a climactic battle which this new **Middle Earth PBM** scenario recreates in a brand-new game of ten turns, **Battle of the Five Armies**. For this demo game of Battle of the Five Armies, Jeffery and Scott play against each other with multiple positions, instead of just one each as usual. Scott plays the Free Peoples with the Elves, the Dwarves, the Northmen and Bilbo Baggins. Jeffery plays the Dark Servants with the Warg Riders, the Goblins, the Necromancer and Gollum. But which side is going to win?

First thoughts

Scott Moyes: This is a condensed full battle game with non-stop action from turn 1. With the condensed rulebook, the game is easy to understand, but hard to master. The possibilities are endless: should you attack, defend or manoeuvre? Each and every turn will tax your planning skills and you'll eagerly await the arrival of your next turn report.

Jeffery A Dobberpuhl: Being a big Hobbit fan, I was excited to see what kind of forces were going to be used in this game. The first thing I did was go to the www.middleearthgames.com website and downloaded all five nation sheets. Every game starts with the same turn zero (first turn), so both sides get to see exactly what they are up against. I was going to be the Goblins and the Warg Riders, my opponent was assigned the other three: The Dwarves, The Elves, and the Northmen. These nations start out *tough!* You get great characters, big armies, and lots of resources. I almost fell out of my chair when I saw The Necromancer was going to be one of my characters! This was going to be a very interesting game.

The goal of the game is fairly straight forward: take out your enemy. You have ten turns to do this. This was going to be tough because my opponent gets three nations to my two. I decided to look at the big picture of what was going on so I downloaded the Scenario Map from the website and printed it out. What a great resource! All the nation population centers and armies are clearly marked out. This was a great move for me, because it showed how consolidated my forces were, while my opponents were scattered. A plan began to form!

The Goblins: The Goblin nation is a nifty infantry-army driven nation. Commander after commander is at your disposal. Since the goblins get to hire new armies for free, I decided to use this to my advantage. I decided to send out my initial three armies to do battle, and reserve as many commanders as possible to hire new armies for the next wave.

First, I checked my economy. Despite some great starting gold, my nation was already spending more than I was making. I quickly decided to sell off some extra resources and had two of my characters sell off gold and mounts. That gold would come in handy later.

Second, I looked at the map. There was one enemy town just one hex away, and it looked to be owned by the Northmen. Ha! They would be my first victims! I issued orders to my commanders to move two armies into hex 3105. Next, I saw the Lonely Mountain sitting at hex 3107. One of my special victory conditions is to try and hold this at the end of the game. I can see why. It sits right next to a crossroads. If I can control it, maybe I can control the flow of enemy armies. I issue orders to my other commanders to march on 3107.

Finally, I rechecked my turn. I had hired new armies, made some gold, and marched on two enemy population centers. Good enough. I typed up my turns in the Automagic program (a nifty Excel spreadsheet program available from the website) and sent in the turn.

The Warg Riders: I took a look at the Warg Riders startup sheet. This is a nation that focuses on wizards and wolfriders (heavy cavalry). It doesn't get as many commanders as the Goblins, but it really doesn't need them. If the wizards get a chance to use their battle magic in combat, it could get really ugly for the enemy. Also, wolfriders are about as tough an army as you can make in this game. They have speed, strength, and a hardy defense that will make them tough to take down.

First, I checked my economy. Just like the Goblins, this nation



The goblins were caught unprepared by the Elven Carol singers

starts out with lots of gold, but also operates at a loss. I decided to sell more food to pay for my military operations.

Second, I checked out my wizards. All of them had the ability to conjure mounts out of thin air! This would be useful as a single wolf normally costs 30 gold and I would need hundreds of wolves to be successful against the enemy. I ordered three of the wizards to conjure more wolves. Then I let loose a maniacal laugh. I think it helps to cackle evilly when filling out a turn sheet for a nation of wolf conjuring wizards!

Third, I checked out the map. I found that I could bring more armies to 3107. This would give me a *huge* stack of resources for the next turn. I could strike at the Elves, the Northmen, or the Dwarves, depending on what my enemy threw at me. I issued orders to bring more armies to the Lonely Mountain. Then, I saw that I had one army at Sarn Goriwing, right in the middle of Mirkwood, that would not be able to make it to 3107. However, there was an elf town just three hexes away and it looked undefended! I decided to charge into the pesky elves and see if I could take it next turn. This was a bit of a risk, because the elves have a big army just two moves away from Sarn Goriwing. I decided to laugh at the puny elves and throw caution to the wind.

Fourth, I saw that the Necromancer has the ability to see what an enemy character is doing! I decided to use him to track the movements of Bilbo. After all, Bilbo has the One Ring, an artifact that increases an agent's stealth by 40 points! Since most skills are ranked on a 1-100 basis, 40 points is a healthy increase. I'm hoping to get lucky and find myself in a position to get the ring back from Bilbo.

Finally, I decided to send Gollum out to steal enemy resources. Gollum is a 20 point agent with a 40 stealth. Stealth makes agent actions work better, so I'm hoping he can steal some gold or something from a Northmen camp next turn. I have him guard the population center he is in (to increase his skill) and then move to 2910.

I double check my turns and send them in. What will happen next? I can't wait for my next turn sheets!

Turn 1

Scott Moyes: Tactical maps were neatly spread out over the solid gold table. Neat lines of the advancing armies, both good in blue and evil in red, were already on the maps. The Burglar, Bilbo Baggins, was tasked with making the marks on them and he was darn good at it.

Thorin Oakenshield then said, 'Bilbo, what does all these pretty marks mean?'

Bilbo looked up from the charts and said, 'What all this means is that most of the planning you put forth has come to pass. The Elves are hard pressed in a couple of places, but overall, it is as you planned. There are a couple of surprises, though. Would you like a more complete briefing?'

The Dwarves, Elves and Men gathered folded their arms, leaned forward and all nodded.

Bilbo went on, 'Well, according to the reports, we are hard pressed in a couple of areas. Somehow Captain Krusnak of the Warg Riders slipped by the blocking efforts of the Elven Armies commanded by Regent Thranduil and Lord Ohtar and they have landed at Hen Gwerion. This is not good as Captain Krusnak has 900 Warg Riders and should be able to take the town. According to our plan, the Elven Commander Argaldor has blocked the eastward movement of the Warg Riders on the Northern Road, but - bad news! - this army is commanded by The Necromancer himself. Commander Argaldor will be but a small block in the road for The Necromancer as he has 800 Warg Riders with him. Elven Hero Dorlas also, according to plan, blocked the Goblin armies from moving south. There are two armies there, a small army under Captain Anglach and a large army under Commander Gashbuz. So, for the Elves, the hot spots are at Hen Gwerion and along the Northern Road. There are bright spots for the Elves: Commander Camthalion has a small army at Mithrond, Lord Legolas has a small army at Crug Abarr, Lord Ohtar has an army at the Warg Rider camp of Lag Slif and Regent Thranduil has an army of Heavy Cavalry at the Northmen camp of Amon Gastal.'

The Elves present shook their heads as visions of the massacre of the North Road armies passed through their heads.

Bilbo went on, 'The Dwarven armies are now in theatre. Commander Bombur has a small army east of the Northmen town of Bur Edhel. Just behind him is the main army of Regent Dain II. Hero Fili and his small

army is the only Dwarven army in battle at this time. The Goblin camp of Lag Deras is just east of us. I don't remember it being there on any maps I've ever seen. Anyway, Hero Gloin is back at Iron Hold with a small army and of course, Thorin, you are here with your small army.'

Bilbo picked up some ale, drank the whole mug, and then went on, 'The Northmen are pressed at Buhr Edhel. There is a small Goblin army under Veteran Angulion. Also, just south of Buhr Edhel, on the north/south road, Commander Girion II and his army ran into a whole bunch of trouble. Well, there is some good news too, Hero Swithwulf and his Heavy Cavalry army is also there. They are facing a huge Goblin army under Regent Duran, a large Goblin army under Captain Ogrid and an army of Warg Riders under Commander Rashkuk. I know they were supposed to meet them at Buhr Edhel, but they apparently went around it. Hero Koldana and his small army is at Nuath.'

'How did all those armies get *south* of Buhr Edhel?' screamed the Northmen representative.

Bilbo replied, 'Don't scream at me, I'm only relaying the news that all your commanders sent in.'

Thorin, staring at the map, then said, 'Well, allies. We can fight this one of two ways. We can fight a defensive battle, which will never end. Or we can go for it. By fighting a defensive battle, the treasure here is probably safe, but if we go for it, it could fall into their hands. What say you, allies?'

'Let us hear more of the second choice...'

Jeffery A Dobberpuhl - Wow! My opponent sure is aggressive. I had hoped to camp out on the Lonely Mountain with a bunch of armies and from there intercept his movements at will. He must have had the same plan. As it is, our armies bumped into each other at a variety of places on the road. Battles will occur at 2805, 3005, 3105, 3106, 2808, 3207 and 3010. Fortunately for me, in most of those battles I have massive army superiority. Because of the way army combat works in Middle Earth Play By Mail, whenever you win a combat, there is a chance you will capture or kill enemy characters. I'm really hoping this will be the result. With both nations, I decided to focus on elven population centers as much as possible. If I can eliminate the Elves, the dwarves should be too far away to really help the northmen.

Goblins: The Goblins seem to have had the best combat placement. From what I can tell, I have a good chance at taking out a number of enemy armies. Further, in a couple of battles, my commanders are better than his commanders. What this means is that I can risk having my commanders issue personal challenges to some of the characters traveling in his armies. Since this comes *before* army combat, there is a chance I will kill off the character commanding his armies, disarming those armies before they even get to fight. We will just have to see how that works out. In the meantime, I purchased some steel at 3104 and then used the steel to armor 400 heavy infantry. I hope these hard-as-nails orcs will help me with the dwarves, with their enormous 3000 heavy infantry, come knocking on my doors!

Warg Riders: Well, last turn, I risked moving out of 2809 (Sarn Goriwing) to kill off an elf town at 3010. I made it to 3010 without enemy interference, but those pesky elves moved next to Sarn Goriwing. Grrrr. This means they might move in next turn and burn the place to the ground. Speaking of burning, I decided to destroy *all* enemy population centers that I can this turn. This is because I don't believe I've seen all the enemy armies yet, and I don't believe I will be able to hold on to these towns. Since in this basic game, we can't make new population centers, I'm hoping to deprive the enemy of as many resources permanently as possible.

The Necromancer (insert maniacal laugh here) used his magic to track Bilbo. The li'l hobbit had decided to improve his agent skills and then move. Since the spell I used doesn't give me where he moved, I decided to switch to Reveal Character. This spell will tell me within one hex of where the thief has moved to - gotta find that ring ...



This article was first published in Flagship www.pbmgames.com, issue 100, where it appears in a longer form. We'll continue the story in Bree next issue.

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news from Bree

My thanks to everyone who has sent articles. I am still looking for more though! Please try to keep your articles to about 900 words (or shorter), otherwise I may have to edit you severely!

Editor: Colin Forbes,
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The Fall of Minas Ithil

Part 2: continued from issue 18

by Richard Devereux

The rush was so vast the militia could not hope to withstand such an assault. The walls were quickly stormed and Orcs and Trolls vanished into the streets and houses to loot, rape and pillage. The gates were thrown open and Ren and his sorcerous apprentice Uthmag entered the town whilst the screams of the townsfolk rang in every street and blood flowed in the gutters.

3,000 died that night, hacked to pieces by the rampaging Orcs, or impaled on the spears of their own cousins lying lifeless outside the walls, used by the Trolls for sport.

Another 3,000 were herded like cattle into the main square in preparation for their enslavement in the work camps of Mordor.

Ren picked out a further 500 for the dubious honour of sacrifice to the Dark Lord in the fiery depths of Orodruin, whilst Uthmag was sent to locate a suitable building as a residence for his master.

Picking his way over the bodies of men, women and children he noticed that the Queen's Palace looked best for a temporary residence for his master. He walked through the doors, now hanging from their hinges, into the entrance foyer only to discover a group of free Gondorian knights desperately holding the palace against all the odds. Uthmag called for assistance, but the breath was knocked from his lungs before he could form the words as a spear drove into his chest knocking the wind from him. The knights left him for dead as they charged into the gardens surrounding the palace protecting the few fugitives who had sought sanctuary in the palace and gained their protection. They fled into the night leaving Uthmag for dead; just one more Orc amongst the thousands. They sought refuge in the shadows created by the flickering of the flames as the houses and mansions of the town's nobility burnt to the ground around them as they slipped through the drunken host; always heading east towards the waning moon. Orcish warriors danced through the flames, the symbol of their victorious master. It was difficult to determine whether their screams were of drunken delight or of pain as none too few misjudged their acrobatics and succumbed to a flaming death amidst the raucous laughter of their spawn-brothers.

Uthmag groaned and looked at the spear he feared had killed him; but by a stroke of luck, his armour, strengthened by the previous magical incantations had taken most of the impact, and the aim of the

caster must have been skewed. Only an inch to the right and it would have pierced his heart. As it was, he feared that his ribs were broken and the wound did not seem too deep. He would count his blessings this night!

Uklurg did not consider himself so lucky. In the frenzy that was the assault on Minas Ithil he had forgotten his craving for Gurthlug. The smell of the blood and the heat from the flames had lulled him into a kind of trance as he hacked into the unprotected knots of people cowering in corners begging for their miserable lives to be spared. What fools they were? Did they not realise that death was better than

freedom? How he hated them for their weakness, how the women pleaded for him to spare the lives of their children – what use did he have for a human puppy. Pahh!!!! He spat, as yet another stroke snuffed out the life of a fair maiden of the town as her aged father looked on in horror.

He looked around for the wolf-riders. He always felt like this after a battle. How could he slate his lust? Where was Gurthlug? He determined to have her at all costs!

"Where are the wolf-riders? Find them!" he shouted to those immediately around him.

"My lord. They have gone!" came the anonymous response.

"What!" howled Uklurg through his misshapen mouth. "Where?"

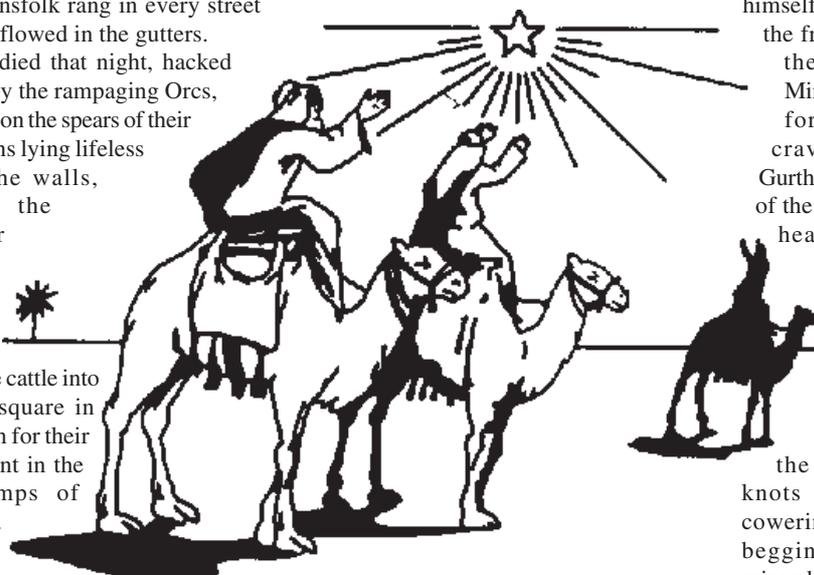
"My lord!" answered one of his bodyguard, "they were seen riding back up the valley to Barad Ungol and to the east".

"Aaarghhhh!" coughed Uklurg as he sank his axe into another Gondorian skull.

His body quivered as the red sheets of anger clouded his eyes, but his axe had stuck in the bone and gore of the grieving father who unexpectedly, and mercifully joined his daughter; the poor victim of the Captain's rage.

Uklurg stalked off in silence.

The death and destruction had ended. The despoilation of a people had begun!



The Mumak-Riders weren't quite what the Gondorians had imagined ...

Hall of Fame

Game 228 (2950): Khazad rule ok!

This is an unashamedly slanted report on game 228. I played Dwarves & Northmen and later, Khand as well, so I write from their perspective. Please forgive any gloating!

228 was a "War of the Ring" scenario, which is based on 2950, but with the starting pop centres increased to 1650 levels (not necessarily distributed the same), and some extra starting gold & troops for the DS. The Woodies get a character and artifact boost to reflect more accurately the powers of Beorn as Tolkien described him in "The Hobbit". A couple of the overrated Witch-king characters lose a few points in command skill but are compensated in emissary rank.

As 228 was a grudge game, the neutrals had to be pre-aligned. We offered the DS first choice of nation, with FP choosing the next two, and DS choosing one of the remaining two, the unwanted one being dropped. Happily the DS fell right into this first trap we laid for them, predictably unable to resist taking White Wizard as first choice. That enabled us FP to take Duns (agents at 40, double scouting!) and, as a surprise, Khand (so we had a nation which could be, literally, a PIA). The DS took Corsairs as their final choice so Rhun was dropped. Might things have been different if they'd chosen Rhun? Read on, then decide!

A key point of our strategy was to build as many camps as possible as fast as possible so as to deny them to the DS and exert an economic stranglehold. Four Dwarf armies went forth (pun unintentional!) posting camps before most nations had got emis off the mark. Northmen were lucky enough to have both their sole E40 and their A30 start at their capital so named a new E40, A30 and C30 straightaway. The conveyor belt of E40s was to prove decisive and the Nor agents didn't do badly either!

The early game went without a hitch. We planted loads of camps, killed off the Witch-king, and quite cleverly (IMHO) eliminated Dragon lord. Dol Guldur fell to armies, a Nor cav army stormed Lug Gurzun, and Nor emis daringly nicked his final backup whose loyalty had dropped drastically due to the fall of his other MTs.

Even more daring, Kynoden, Nor A50, stole Din Ohtar's best agent artifact and dropped it in the Sea of Rhun! Thanks to Marc Pinnsonault for this and other ideas.

Having killed two DS nations, I thought, this will be a cakewalk now. WRONG! To their great credit, the DS played much more effectively from that point. It was understandable that they used Khand as a punchbag, but they also inflicted such punishment on N Gondor that we launched a premature attack on Morannon, by several nations, none with a backup commander, to take the pressure off him. Needless to say, all but one of our army commanders and their armies were wiped out by assassins! That was the first - but not the last - major reverse we suffered.

Round about this point both teams lost players, ours, unfortunately, due to a personality clash. We recruited a player whom we knew from previous games, split the dropped nations between us, and carried on. This was where I picked up Khand in addition to Dwa & Nor (we had previously agreed that one of the DS could play 3 nations).

Khand had previously sent armies into Mordor and against QAv and Cor burning pop centres but now came under heavy pressure from DS emis and agents. We sent our own best company of agents to go toe-to-toe with the DS, but it was only a partial success, as the local militia foiled half our agent actions! Duh...

Anyway, Khand survived, maybe helped by a Nor cavalry army which charged through Mordor's back door and burned the CL capital!

To be honest, I'm not too clear what was happening elsewhere, except to note that there was heavy fighting everywhere in the Gondor/Rohan area. In the Misty mts, QAv took over some of the WiK pops, presumably in an effort to recruit dragons, but we destroyed such pops



wherever we found them.

A farcical situation arose when I marched a Dwa army to one such enemy pop,

having calculated the food down to the last grain of wheat, only to find that to move into a mountain hex required ONE MORE food unit than the exact number needed to feed the army... AAARGH! I didn't take that pop until the very last turn of the game!

Laurence Tilley put together a plan to co-ordinate our cursers, agents and emis, and this was a major if not decisive factor in our eventual victory. We now started to make a co-ordinated effort, regardless of nation, to knock out DS capitals and other MTs. By brilliant planning (who said lucky? Quiet at the back there) a Dwa army of 8000+ with war machines hit Morannon at the same time as Nor & Khand cav armies charged thru Mordor's Back Door burning anything that had been left standing by previous raids.

We were now knocking over 2-4 DS MTs per turn. Would this be enough? A Khand MT fell to DS emis and a Rohan one to Gothmog. In a clash of the curse squads, the DS got lucky and went first, killing Elrond amongst others. The bloodshed increased as Ranger cavalry trampled Gothmog's army, Balrog and all. On the very turn that Laurence suggested we pulled our characters out of Mordor and sent them to help Rohan and Gondor, the DS finally capitulated due to our agent/em/army pressure on Mordor.

Well done to all on my team, especially Laurence Tilley for the co-ordinated plan, and I must also mention Marc Pinnsonault who gave us invaluable advice before he dropped.

Thanks to all on the DS team for giving us such a good, hard-fought game.

If you are getting tired of same old 1650 or 2950, give WotR a go. It will give you some different challenges at least!

Richard.

The Harp of Valinor

by Richard Devereux

This story sprang from a desire to introduce some more -interesting-artifacts in the Middle-earth game than all those wretched superfluous weapons, and came out as an alternative story of the siege of Minas Tirith.

"The city has fallen!" cried Aragorn in despair.

"No," answered keen-eyed Legolas, "the orcs have only taken the outer wall. Even now, the garrison are making a fighting retreat, and the second wall still holds."

"Ride!" ordered Gandalf. "We must cut our way through whilst the gate in the second wall is still open."

"I cannot fight from horseback!" objected Gimli, who was riding behind Legolas on the same horse.

"Hold fast to my belt," said Legolas, "and wield your good axe with your free hand. If we go afoot we will be too late!"

The little company thundered unopposed across the ravaged Pelennor fields. The only orcs they saw were dead or too badly wounded to fight. Through the breached gate in the outer wall the company charged, only to find their way blocked by a solid, seething mass of orcs pressing through every street and lane towards the second wall.

Without checking his headlong gallop, Gandalf cried out in a strange tongue, and made a throwing motion with his free hand. From the ring he bore flared a huge ball of fire, which blazed through the enemy ranks, incinerating everything before it, and clearing a charred and smoking path to the already-closing gate in the second wall.

The orcs, taken totally by surprise, nonetheless tried to turn and close ranks against the onrushing company. Too late. They fell before Legolas's arrows, the swords of the Men, and Gimli's axe. Through the closing gate the company thundered, and it slammed shut behind them.

The crash of the slamming gate seemed to be echoed by the howl of frustration from thousands of orc-throats. Galvanized into a state of frenzy by their narrow failure to take the second wall, the orc-host stripped the buildings between the walls of every usable piece of timber and began assembling ladders. Others went back to retrieve Grond, the great spellbound battering-ram with which they had breached the outer gate. Busy as ants, countless orcs milled in every street, square and alley. Arrows and stones rained down upon them by the defenders seemed to make no impression on their numbers, whilst the loss of every man felled by return fire was keenly felt by the inadequate garrison.

As dusk fell, the orcs worked on with seemingly limitless energy, burning everything they could not use to give them light to work by. Neither moon nor stars could be seen through the roiling mass of unnatural cloud which overhung the city. The cloud-mass reflected, dully, the orange-red glow of the myriad orc-fires. Those of the garrison still bold enough to peer over the battlements thought they beheld a scene from hell as the orcs toiled by the infernal light of the flames.

Those orcs who were not working kept up a cacophany of savage noise, banging drums, blowing horns, chanting, hooting, howling and beating weapons against shields. Wave upon wave of discordant noise assaulted the defenders' senses, depriving them of sleep, aggravating already ragged nerves, and driving fear deep into all but the stoutest hearts. Men began to slip away from their posts on the second wall, ashamed to go, but without heart to resist further.

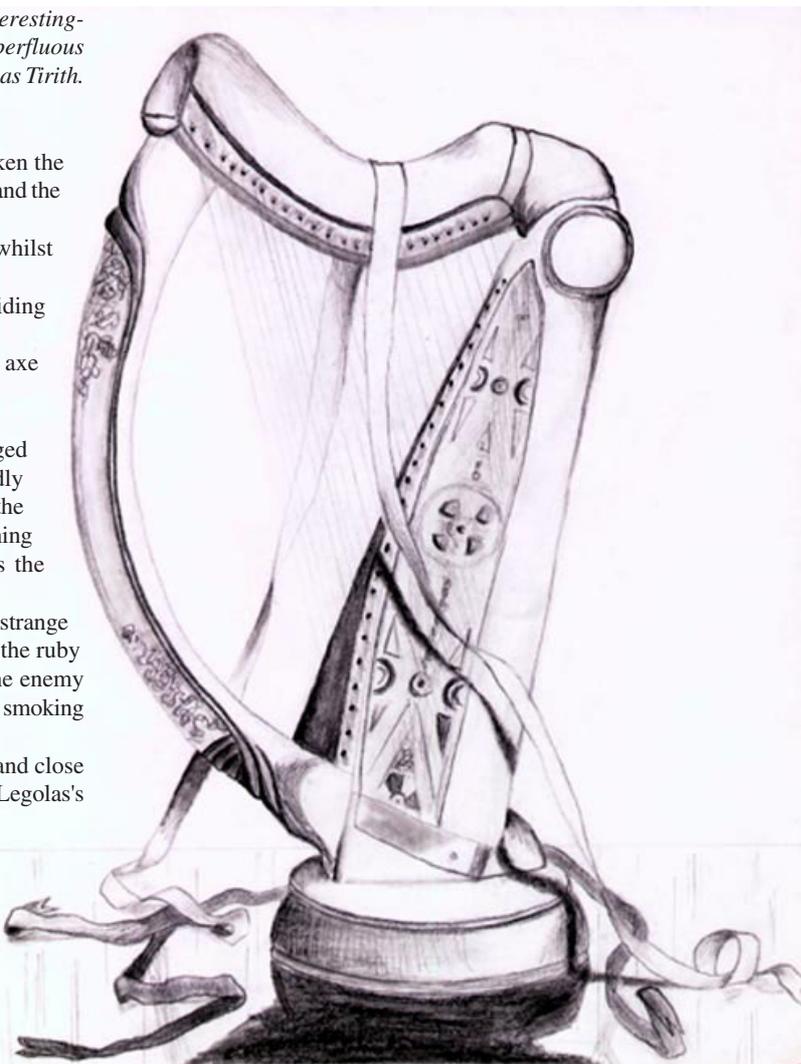
"I can do no more," sighed Gandalf. "That fireball spell exhausted me. Must be getting old." He slumped against the battlements and his eyes closed.

"If Mithrandir cannot help us, what can we do?" asked Legolas.

"Die like men," rasped Aragorn, clashing the hilt of his sword Anduril.

"Maybe they will make a song about our last stand," growled Gimli with grim humour.

"A song," exclaimed Bard, "is exactly what we need."



The others looked at the least-known member of the company as if he were daft.

Ignoring their cynical glances, Bard carefully removed the magical harp from her case. Legolas marvelled at the wondrous craftsmanship; Gimli's jaw dropped at the sight of gems more precious than any to be found in Middle-earth. For the harp was a gift from Galadriel, who had brought it from the Undying Lands. The gems, however, were the least of the harp's wonders. Always perfect in pitch and tone, she remembered every song which had ever been played upon her. Moreover, she enabled her rightful owner to sing any such song to perfection, even at the first attempt. So now, Bard strummed a few notes, random but sweet, as he searched their collective memories for the song of power he needed, shutting his mind to the cacophany from the other side of the wall.

The words came to Bard in an unfamiliar tongue. He played a powerful, defiant chord which caught the attention of his companions despite the racket from outside, and began to sing in his strong, clear bardic tenor. Legolas gasped in astonishment.

"Quenya," he softly explained to his companions, "he's singing in the Ancient Tongue - the language of Valinor."

Though he understood not the words, Gimli felt his heart and mind uplifted by the Song. He found himself joining in the chorus, his powerful baritone complementing Bard's tenor. He noticed that the other companions were singing too. The colour had returned to faces that had been tired and pale, and now they stood tall and proud where moments ago they had slumped.

On either side of the company, along the wall walk, weary men of the garrison turned in amazement to hear music and song. It was a small

sound yet against the din made by the orcs, but one which cut through the discord clear and true. They felt their fears fall away, and new strength course through their veins. Instinctively they took up the song, though they knew not what they sang.

In the street behind the second wall, lights were lit, as sleepless folk peered out, wondering who would dare make music amidst such a desperate siege. Into the streets they came, weariness falling away before the inspiration of the song. Those who had musical instruments took them up, whilst those who had none joined in the singing where they could. The song swept the length and breadth of the city. Men who had fled their posts strode back, handling their weapons purposefully. Men, women and children, poured into the streets armed with whatever they could find. One and all, they marched, singing to the second wall until warriors filled the wall walk, whilst all who had horses massed behind the gate.

When they first heard the singing, the orcs were amazed. How COULD the defeated and weary men sing? The orcs actually fell silent for a moment, wondering if their ears deceived them. When they realized that the citizens were indeed singing, in fury they redoubled their own noise to drown it out; but however much din they made, the orcs could hear, clean and keen and strong, the Song cutting through it, and growing in power minute by minute.

For the orcs, hearing the Song was like being lashed by a whip of poisonous serpents. The Black Captain, enraged, ordered his troops to assault the second wall immediately, ready or not, so as to silence the Song which was inflicting such pain. Though he knew not the words, he recognized the ancient and holy power which lay behind them, and he was desperate to overcome with noise and violence an emotion he had never felt before - fear.

By the hellish orange-red glow of the flickering orc-fires, reflected by the roiling, unnatural cloud-shapes above, the frenzied orcs rushed to the assault carrying whatever ladders they had been able to make in the time. As they reached the foot of the second wall, they came under a hail of missiles from the packed battlements. When the warriors ran out of arrows and slingshot, the women and children pulled up paving slabs and cobblestones, and tore slates from roofs, and made human chains to pass this makeshift ammunition up to the wall walks.

Scores of orcs went down under the hail of missiles from the battlements. Casualties mounted rapidly as more orcs pressed forward and the rain of missiles continued undiminished, constantly replenished from the streets and buildings behind the second wall. Not a single orc reached the battlements alive. In a few frantic minutes, every ladder was smashed or buried under a mound of corpses. Driven on by the will of their Master, the orcs milled about beneath the battlements, howling in rage, pain and frustration and dying beneath the incessant bombardment from above.

The ground beneath the orcs' clawed feet turned slick, bumpy and treacherous. Suddenly they realized that they were treading on a carpet of corpses, as thick as shingle on a beach. Above them the Song resonated, stronger than ever. Flesh and blood could stand no more; the orcs broke and fled, at least out of missile range, and the bolder ones tried to regroup.

But the assault with ladders had been no more than a feint by the Black Captain. Whilst the defenders were preoccupied, he had brought up Grond, the mighty ensorcelled battering-ram, wielded by eight enormous trolls. Behind the trolls marched in good order the Black Guard, an elite regiment of trolls and uruk-hai, and behind them, countless more orcs rallied from broken units.

There was a strange, momentary lull in the battle as the last surviving orcs from the ladder assault fell back and rallied behind the Black Guard. As the eight huge trolls bore the spellbound battering-ram towards the gate, the orcs could plainly see, silhouetted atop the battlements, a harper leading the singing. Many an arrow was loosed at him, but all fell short or wide. He seemed to be surrounded by an aura of golden light emanating from the harp.

Bard was in his element. Behind him on the wall walk was now a whole orchestra and choir. Bard had sung the entire Song three times now, but he continued, translating verses into Westron so that the Gondorians could understand it, and improvising new verses in true bardic fashion.

Grond was now within striking distance of the gate, and the trolls drew it back ready to deliver the first blow. But what was this? With a creak, the gate opened. The trolls, unable to stop their impetus, hurled

Grond forward. Grond hit thin air and swung back, sending all the trolls sprawling in a heap. From behind the open gate, a mass of archers loosed volley after volley, pincushioning the trolls as they got up. One fell, roaring in agony as it tried to pluck a shaft from its eye. The others, stung beyond endurance by countless pin-pricks, turned and fled. They crashed straight into the ranks of the Black Guard, scattering them. Too late the Black Captain screeched at his crack troops to open ranks. The pain-crazed, panic-stricken trolls batted orcs aside like flies, heedless of how many they slew in their frenzy to escape.

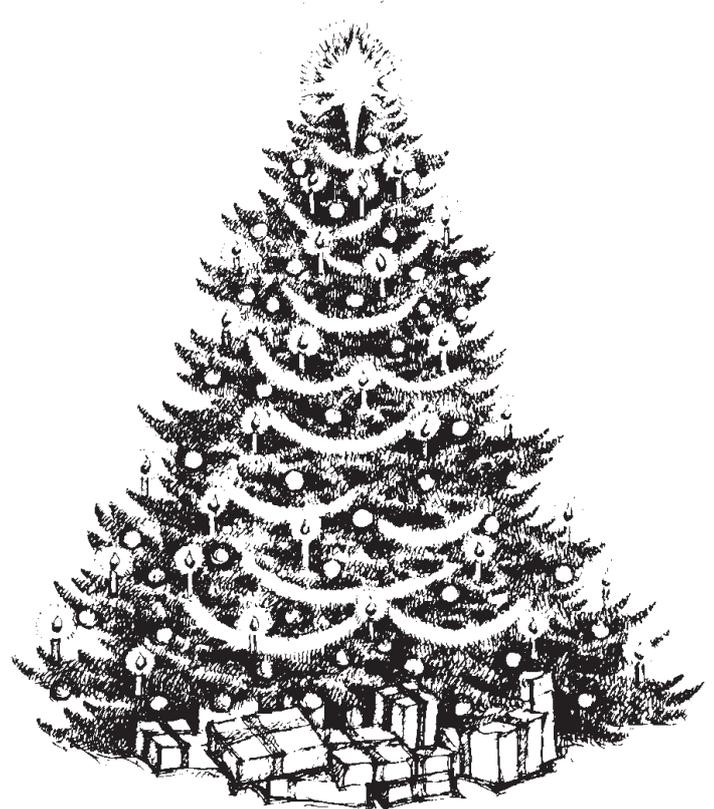
With a final heroic crashing chord, Bard brought the Song to an end. As if by the power of the Song sung full-hearted from so many voices, a breeze arose, breaking up the unnatural red clouds above the city. A bright, full moon shone through, greeted by a shout of joy by the Gondorians, but by a cry of dismay from the orcs, for whom the moon's light was scarcely less painful than that of the sun.

In the gateway a horn blew a signal. The ranks of archers parted like curtains, and through the gap rode Aragorn and Prince Imrahil at the head of his knights of the White Swan. Behind them rode the mounted warriors of Gondor. Side by side, Aragorn and Imrahil led the charge. Behind them, the knights fanned out into a wedge formation. With their leaders at its point, the wedge drove into the ranks of the Black Guard, already broken and disordered by the panic-stricken flight of the trolls through their ranks. With the full weight of horse and rider behind them, the knights' lances spitted trolls and uruks alike. Watchers on the walls saw a line of flickering pale fire along the front of the wedge as swords were wielded in the moonlight.

Orcs and trolls fled, pouring out of the gate in the outer wall, or being cornered and spitted by Men who were in no mood to show mercy. The Black Captain himself was carried away in the rout - even his sorcerous powers could not turn the tide this time. With a screech of fury he drove his mount to outrun the pathetic scum who used to be his crack troops, and wondered how he was going to explain this to Sauron.

Upon the wall above the gate in the second wall, Bard was mobbed by the grateful, joyful citizens until Gandalf shooed them away. "That was quite a song, Bard," he exclaimed.

For answer, Bard held aloft his wondrous harp. It flashed golden in the light of the rising sun, as Bard proclaimed, "Behold the Harp of Valinor!"



Middle Earth PBM

The Flagship PBM Awards 2002

by Colin Forbes (Flagship assistant editor)

The 100th issue of Flagship magazine has recently come out, replete with a Harlequin CD featuring details on Battle of the Five Armies and loads of other stuff besides. As usual at this time of year, Flagship publishes the end of year PBM Awards. Middle Earth put in another strong showing this year, though could not hold on to the Best Wargame crown won last year, possibly due to the large number of votes cast, which tends to lower the average figures slightly. MEPBM's performance over the last three years is illustrated below.

Flagship PBM Awards: Summary for MEPBM 2000 - 2002

Year	Antic	GMQ	Depth	Int	Vfm	#Votes
2000	8.02	8.26	6.88	7.98	6.79	42
2001	8.29	8.39	7.24	7.70	6.90	43
2002	7.80	8.18	7.68	7.90	6.80	76

All Ratings are given out of 10; Anticipation, GM Quality, Depth, Interaction, Value for Money, Number of Votes

I find it interesting that the Value for Money figure has remained more or less constant despite the rise in prices earlier this year. Perhaps some of the views expressed when this happened aren't actually that representative?

Brendon McGoldrick writes ... *I did however vote low on the value for money. I'm in way too many positions (It was 8 positions last week but now it's 7!). Yes I know it's my fault and that no one twisted my arm but I was hoping that by generating that amount of cash each month, that a small discount by running over X number of positions. I fear it might be slightly unworkable though.*

Clint replies ... *We try to keep it straight across the board for everyone. Not sure how to reward player loyalty - it's something that I can look at in the future as we aren't able to make any more changes to the accounts program (it's over-run by a year for creating all the bits and pieces as it is). I am interested in hearing what you voted if you wanted to make it public (or in touch just with me off-list).*

I'd suggest that the rise of the Depth figure may well be due to the variants, though a cynic could also point to some of the other very popular PBeMs out there, by comparison to which MEPBM compares very favourably in terms of depth.

Clint writes ... *Yes - as a player I am still surprised how such an apparently simple game as Middle Earth has such a depth of play.*

It would have been interesting to see a Depth figure for Legends, but it looks like Legends players don't vote. :-)

Clint writes ... *From playing it and having GMed it a little I would say 9.5 for Legends - it rightly deserves it's "most complex" wargame "title"! Don't play it if you want to have a hard time but if you want a rewarding game and like working the game then it's great. The only reason I don't play it right now is time.*

The GM Quality rating is pretty good for a computer moderated game (the really high GM ratings usually go to GMs of hand and mixed moderated games) - for instance Harlequin's game "Exile" won it's GM a rating of 9.33 (the second highest score in the whole poll). It should be noted that Harlequin have consistently scored higher than their predecessors as MEPBM GM's (in the UK). Personally I would have no quarrel with this: not only is inputting of higher quality (thanks no doubt in part to Automagic) but the overall range of services and dedication to the game is incredibly high.

Clint writes ... *We're very happy with the GM rating! Constantly in the 8s is fine with us.*

The only thing I don't understand is the drop in anticipation - this, with the comparatively low Value for Money, cost MEPBM the title of Best Wargame (which went to Huinky Monkey's 'Civilisation' style game, *Prometheus*).

Clint writes ... *Still overall very happy and thanks to the 10% of our players who did vote. Very much appreciated.*

Brendon McGoldrick writes ... *I'm a little shocked by the dropped in Anticipation as well. 2 weeks is already too long to wait for the next turn! :-)*

Maybe next year MEPBM will strike back? With a new ratings system coming in, there's everything to play for! If you'd like to see the full details of the Flagship PBM Awards for 2002, you can subscribe via www.pbmgames.com or write to the editor carol@pbmgames.com and ask for a free sample copy. Finally, you can now vote for your favourite Board & Card Games of all time for the first annual **Flagship Board & Card Games Awards**, sponsored by Leisure Games. All voters will be entered into a prize draw with prizes including free copies of flagship and £50 worth of credit to spend at Leisure Games' online shop www.leisuregames.com.

Your views on MEPBM

Flagship publishes comments and views on all sorts of games, PBM included. Issue 100 saw a bumper crop of comments about MEPBM, reprinted below with permission. If you'd like to comment on the game, please write to colin@pbmgames.com - let us know if you're not a Flagship subscriber and we'll make sure you get a copy of the issue.

Mike Absolom - 'I remain in two 1650 games, one as a member of the Free People and the other as Dark Servant. Contrasting fortunes and experiences so far. Although the game is a delight, and Harlequin's GMing exemplary, my experiences prove the adage of, "who you play with is more important than how or what".

I am enjoying the Freep game immensely, and this is undoubtedly because of my cohorts. Lots of interaction, chat and wackiness. The same cannot be said of the DS game. And this increasing sense of disaffection raises my only concern. And let me stress, this is my only concern! For with turns being on the expensive side, whereas in a cheaper game I would probably "hang on in there" and "work through the issues", I must admit that in MEPBM I am sorely tempted to drop and restart. And this leads me to speculate upon the nature of drops in MEPBM and how many are caused by disaffection with cohorts rather than problems with the game or Harlequin? And it also leads me speculate upon whether this is an issue or not?

Colin Forbes - 'Third Age: 1650 scenario: This is still the most played of all the Middle Earth scenarios. It's fast, it's furious and well-balanced (honest, it is!). Team play has become of increasing importance over the past couple of years, to the point where most teams have a dedicated website, mailing list, interactive colour maps prepared each turn by team members and simply hundreds of emails fly about every turn.

Interesting to note that the two most recent games I've started have mostly consisted of new players or players that haven't been in the game for a number of years but have decided to come back. If you're one

of the latter, I'd seriously consider giving Middle Earth another go. Harlequin's service is superb and they are putting a lot of work into new scenarios and software to help you write orders and so forth. The existing Automagic software (based on Microsoft's Excel spreadsheet, so not everyone can use it) now imports all the data directly from an emailed data file - though of course you still get the regular turnsheet.

FA: 1000 scenario: I am ashamed to say that I just can't seem to get the hang of this scenario. It's a shame as in many ways it's a really attractive version.

You get to design your own starting position by spending a set number of points in a variety of ways and this really personalises the game. However, in three starts I just haven't got to grips with the instant death nature of the game. Because positions are not spread about the map in a fair and balanced way (as with the 2950, 1650 and Battle of the Five Armies scenarios) you can easily get jumped on by three nations at once on turn 1. I wouldn't recommend this version of the game for new or even returning players - and if possible, go into one of these games with at least one person who has played it several times before.'

Gunboat scenario: Firstly, there are no Gunboats! Essentially these games are based on either the 1650 or the 2950 map and starting positions. The big difference comes in the gameplay. It is forbidden to have any communication with any of the other players - not that you know who is playing which nation anyway. Those readers who have been involved in the Diplomacy hobby will be familiar with the gunboat concept. In each of these games thus far, each player controls two nations - I don't think this version of the game would work with only one nation. In some of the games the GM informs you at regular intervals which nations have been knocked out, whereas in other games you have to work this out for yourself. The non-communication rules cuts out all the frantic emails and team co-ordination, replacing it with a healthy dose of paranoia and a fascinating new aspect to the game - information gathering. In one game (obviously I can't say which) a player has gained a significant advantage by discovering certain things which appear unknown to some other players. Once the first game comes to an end and the player list is revealed, it's going to be enormous fun swapping stories with the other players. Can't wait! Again, this version is recommended for experienced players only.'

Dan Barnaby - 'I want to talk about MEPBM in the 2950 scenario. Most people will rant and rave about the 1650 scenario, and it is good! Man, have I had fun in playing it, but I have found that as fun as that one is, the 2950 version is even better! Here's why I like it.

It's not all about giant armies running around trying to conquer countries and or burn them to the ground. It is so much more intense than that. The economies are much smaller and your armies are smaller, you just can't go striking into someone's homeland and be sure that you

can raise another army to follow the first. It takes cunning and skill beyond that of anything else I have ever played. And what fun to talk to someone else around the world trying to figure out the best way for your team to win and do it so you are not destroyed in the process! In this version you have to struggle with gold and food and armies and agents and the list goes on!

All I can say is that I love playing this game and will for a long time to come. I recommend this to anyone wishing a challenge and what better place then to do this with this company. They have the best customer support that I have seen in a long time and are more than willing to help, while being totally courteous! Thank you MEPBM, you have given me a new passion!

Adam Waters - 'I first started playing PBMs in 1984 at the age of 14. The game was called Earthwood and was run by a little company in Florida called GSI. Years later they launched MEPBM and I played

that too, game after game, starting with the 1650 scenario, then 2950 as it came out, and finally FA1000. I loved the combination of character development and traditional wargaming they'd achieved and was of course thrilled by the Middle Earth setting. No other game provided such excellent rules, fantasy, and especially competition in one package.

Now, 16 years after I first started, I'm back playing the game with Harlequin Games and I can only say it's gotten even better over time. Harlie have done a lot towards automating order in-put to reduce errors and increase efficiency, which is a huge help when you've got 21 characters and three pages of popcenters to manage. Also, their ever-friendly and enthusiastic attitude as GMs is just awesome to work with. These guys are true wargamers, love the art form and the way they run their company shows it. Overall I heartily recommend MEPBM and Harlequin Games to any wargamer who's up for a challenging yet accessible experience. Just be sure to strap on your mithril helmet, because MEPBM is a wild ride!

Mark Mills - 'Just wanted to add my two cents to the comments on PBM games. I have been playing MEPBM for 10 years, under GSI, then Deft, and now Harlequin. Harlie have been by far the best moderator of the game, both in terms of responsiveness, customer service, and general quality of play.

I have been particularly pleased with a variant called Gunboat, in which players take control of two nations, either Dark Servants or Free people, with the normally neutral nations are prealigned. No diplomacy is allowed with either allied or enemy players, and no actions can be taken against allied nations. The game allows for a lot of freedom of action, with play much looser and more unpredictable than normal because you cannot coordinate with your "teammates". All in all, a great variant, and worth a try, especially for those with limited time for diplomacy.'

Colin Hughes - 'ME 1650 has always been by my favourite PBM.



The game has changed considerably since its inception and change from Rhann Games to Allsorts to Gad to ME Games. When it was run as a straight postal game it was rarely a team game, merely a selection of individuals. Most games were won by the DS and if you were the last DS against ten Free you could still win if you had agents - just track down all their top characters kill them and they would drop. Games could go on for ages, players would tend to train their characters and sit around.

The influx of the internet has changed this - Middle Earth is much more of a team game and the co-ordination and information available is immense. As a result, 1650 games are hot blooded affairs dripping with tension and blood-letting and many games end earlier. There is a wide range of people from different countries with different attitudes. Some teams are a joy to play with.

ME 1650 is by far the most personal and alive game I have ever come across. You really think you are there - I don't know why this is, whether it's the "honeycomb maps" or the great characters and portraits. There almost seems a strange psychology in Middle Earth, where each position has a personality which you tend to take up. You can choose different styles of play and customise your position so it's a bit like a RPG.

The Middle Earth staff are friendly and helpful. Turns are regular and hitches are solved promptly. Considering turns were £3.50 in 1992 and they're now £3.90 I wonder how the GMs make a living.'

Andrew Schultz - 'Being an old roleplayer from way back when Cosmic Encounters was the latest craze, I was interested to hear about this Middle Earth PBM game that a few old friends of mine had been playing for years. I was invited to take part in a team game as they were a player down. You start in pre-aligned teams, 12 DS and 12 Free, both roughly even in abilities and strengths. The neutrals get 1 bonus character at the start of the game to ensure your 175 Change Alliance order goes through automatically: this character then retires and you are on your way. The strategies vary and the team play is far more organised in this scenario, as there is no real aim at being the top dog as the only outcome that matters is the end result for the team. Being a newbie I found it a steep but not impossible learning curve and playing against an organised opposition ensures you try to squeeze the maximum out of each set of orders, which is an art in itself!

The game mechanics are simple to master after a short while and the new AutoMagic import makes setting up for the new turn a breeze (no more typing!). It will also let you know when you have messed something up. I don't know how many times this has saved me from making an embarrassing mistake.

We are at turn 13 in our game and it is a real arm wrestle: no side has a clear advantage yet, it will go down to the wire. I can't wait for the return match.'

Gary Hood - 'I've been playing Middle Earth for about 10 years, with various moderators, and I guess with Harlequin Games aka Middle Earth Games for what must be the last 4-5 years. In some ways this speaks for itself - a game that you can play for ten years and not get bored of.

With reference to the game, I have mostly been playing the 1650 variety. I have not yet quite played all of 25 different nations available. The blend of character actions, strategy and tactical army play make this game superior to many of the PBM games that I have played. The game is also a team game, cooperation gives big advantages to your side. However, you can still do your own thing too.

My personal preference is for the 1650 version of the game since it can be all action from turn 1 (some may prefer the more gradual buildup of the 2950 version) and I also like that the 1650 sides are more clear cut at the game start (some may prefer to forge their own alliances and sides as per the free form, user-defined 4th Age version of the game).

With reference to the current moderator. I must say that some very good changes and developments have been made. To give some examples: - A variety of different game set ups for the 1650 version are available. Middle Earth Games have always been open to new ideas and set-ups. Aside from the standard 10 Free peoples, 10 Dark Servants and 5 Neutrals, there are games where the neutral nations are pre-aligned Free or Dark. There are other games, such as Gunboat where you cannot communicate with the other players on your side and have to second guess their movements. You can join the game as a team or with a bunch of strangers. Joining as a neutral and selling your services to the highest

bidder can also be fun.

- The company has done a lot of work organising international team games, where you can pit your wits against the world's best players. I have lately been playing the Brazilian team.

- Email submission of turn orders and e-mail turn results have been developed by ME Games. The Automagic order entry tool on Excel has more than halved the time it takes to get my game orders out on email. It also stops me making a lot of idiot order entry mistakes.

To wrap up, I think I will definitely have a few more years enjoyment out of this game.'

Bryn Lloyd - 'I've been playing PBM for 16 years now; and MEPBM for the past eight. It is still a very enjoyable game, with strategies still to be explored and anticipation still flies high. But what makes MEPBM work (for me) is that all the players know almost everything that needs to be known; the game therefore becomes more of a game of chess, with the dynamism of chess. Okay, albeit with 12 v 12 players (pre-aligned team games). So the team with the best well-oiled machine, often comes out on top. This makes for a game of real skill, manoeuvring your nation and characters in sync with other allied nations and characters to the better good of the whole team in selfless determination!

Harlequin Games (aka Middle Earth Games) run the game with precision engineering and a nice personal touch. Any last minute order changes are never a problem. They are also developing the game, at least where their hands are not tied -eg, a program to help process turns - all of which improves the gameplay, and new scenarios: Five Armies (I was involved in the play test), Gunboats ("silent") and the infamous Face-to-Face weekends being very successful. The only downside has been the turn fee rise to £4.50 a turn, which (for me and others) has limited the number of games that we now play in'

Bernd Luehrsen - 'Harlequin is offering a new modification of the 1650 and 2950 scenarios called Gunboat. The basic idea behind this is that no communication at all is allowed in this game. The GMs very much rely on the fairness of players to assure this, but will also keep a close eye on the game to prevent cheating. Players can chose from six fixed pairs of nations per alliance: it is a 12 vs 12 game with prealigned neutrals. Rhudaur and Corsairs are Dark Servants, Haradwaith and Dunlendings are Free People, while the Easterlings are removed from the game. The prealigned neutrals, the (IMO very balanced) nation combos and the lack of information call for completely new strategies, resulting in a very refreshing approach especially to the old 1650 setup, which is considered a little outworn by some players:

- Established automatisms which bound most nations to certain 'opening moves' for the benefit of the whole alliance are suddenly in question,
- Information and synchronisation with allies is mostly limited to what can be seen on their own turnmaps, which is likely to result in a more local gameplay,
- Artifact search will turn out different, because the distribution from those who find them to those who can use them to maximum effect is very limited,
- The former neutral nations which sometimes tended to build up slowly for some turns are right into the action, too.

While undoubtedly in "normal" ME-PBM the communication and diplomacy adds much flavour to the game, this mod is perfect for those who like to play but are limited in their time and can't afford to read and answer 30 emails a day. In fact, preparing the turns without having to consult anybody goes quite fast, so that Harlequin might think about reducing the two-weekly turnaround to a weekly one.

I very much enjoy this scenario, because there is so much to explore and to try in a world which I thought to have perfectly known already.'



Other News from MEPBM Games

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

We're taking Monday 23rd to Friday 27th off this year. No turns will process during that time. So if **NORMALLY** your turn would fall then it will instead process the same day a **WEEK** later, etc. We'll have the correct **DUE** date on your Turnsheet though - if in doubt get it in **EARLY**. Have a good one...

UPDATE TO ACCOUNTS With each turn you should now receive in the main body of the email a list of your last 10 transactions with us. This should enable you to keep a track of any charges made to your account and get back to us should there be a problem. Also we are now able to send out at the end of each day an email informing you when we have added funds to your account and a warning should your account be low.

RULEBOOK 1st draft is nearly done on this. We're looking to upgrade the rulebook. Is there anyone out there that is interested in contributing to this project? We're hoping to help new players into the game with examples of orders, some tactical advice and basic economy, army, character, Pop Centre management. Feel free to get in touch if you feel you are able to help here or just want to know more. We've got permission to use appropriate quotes from "the Lord of the Rings" and "the Hobbit". Around 3 or 4 paragraphs in length, giving a reference (book and chapter). Feel free to send in your favourite quotes and we can add them into the rulebook. Note **NOT** the other books only LotR and tH. We have a fair bit of work done for this now - anyone else want to contribute?

AN APOLOGY The last issue of Bree (#19) opened with an excellent article "Confessions of a Newbie". This should have credited **Brian J. Hancock** as the author. Both MEPBM Games and the News from Bree editor apologise unreservedly for this error.

From out of the West

by John Davis

This morning, I was woken by the groaning of my central heating as it struggled into life, closely followed by the dubious pleasure of having two small dogs jump onto the bed and wriggle under the duvet. Nothing unusual in that, or at least, nothing unusual if you happen to have an antiquated central heating and two small wriggly dogs. Except that this was 3am in the morning, the temperature having dropped sufficiently in the night to stir the central heating into action, and the noise of the central heating coming on - usually a sign that I am getting up - sufficient to penetrate what passes for a small wriggly dog's brain and convince them it was time for me to be woken up.

When I finally did rise, it was to emerge from the house not to be greeted with the usual gentle caress of rain, or even - given that I live in Wales - the fairly frequent driving maul of rain, but with the lash of hail. Then, having cleared the ice from the car windscreen to drive to work, and broken the ice on the outside toilet at work, I staggered in to find, nestling amidst the pile of bills and the occasional soggy turn on the doormat, a handful of cards.

All of which could only mean one thing.
It is Christmas again.

This fact was only confirmed by the note on my desk asking me to write something bah-humbuggish for the Christmas edition of News from Bree. Now, if you've had the misfortune to have found yourself cornered by any previous Christmas editions of our newsletters, you will know that normally this would not be a problem for me. Indeed, many is the time I've railed against the commercialisation of Christmas, bemoaned the twinkly

lights which twinkle oh-so-pretty on a lamppost outside my living room window from early November onwards, gaily reflected in my television screen when

I'm trying to enjoy, say, the sight of Sean Bean's heinous overacting having chased

poor Frodo away, or waxed lengthily about the fact

that for near on a quarter of the year we are entreated to enter into the Christmas spirit, namely spending more than we can afford, eating more than we want, and watching repeats of dated sit-coms on television, all the while enduring a ceaseless bombardment of banal Christmas songs, advertisements filled with false festivity, and, perhaps worst of all, facing near universal condemnation if you think to object.

..... Pause to draw breath.

But for some reason, I don't really feel that way this year. In fact, strange as this may sound, I am actually looking forwards to Christmas. By which, I hasten to add, I mean Christmas eve, Christmas day and perhaps the few days following, not the three months or so which are generally considered as fair game for that ever-expanding concept which is Christmas. And the reason for this, I think, is that I have, with a bit of effort, managed to avoid the fury of the Christmas storm raging across the land.

For the last few months I have watched almost nothing live on television, instead videoing it and watching later, thus enabling me to skip endless snow-dressed adverts and jingly Christmas jingles. With my radio steadfastly tuned to radio 3, a station whose only recognition of Christmas so far has been the brief mention of a carol concert being broadcast on Christmas Eve, I have avoided the audio anguish of Christmas songs. The internet has saved me from the hell of Christmas shopping in town, and Sainsburys - bless their middle-class souls - have so far resisted the urge to pipe Christmas musack through their speakers. And, thanks to an agreement with my wife that we do whatever she wants on Christmas day if we don't put up decorations until Christmas eve, my house is Christmas-tree-free. All right, so I do still have twinkly lights twinkling at me from outside my window, but on the other hand the fact that they've been there all year, and have been turned on for so many 'special occasions' such as rugby matches, football matches, and because whatever fool they have placed in charge of the light switch felt like it, means that they no longer really have any connection to Christmas at all.

All of which means that, with Christmas nearly upon us, what little annual measure of Christmas spirit I still possess in my hardened soul has not yet been entirely drained. So that I find I can endure the occasional carol which manages to get through my anti-Christmas firewall (available free from www.bah-humbug.com) without having to fight down a wave of nausea, and I can give an opinion on which wrapping paper to use without feeling the urge to insert the roll somewhere painful in the next person to mention the 'C' word.

So. Does this mean there will be no bah-humbugging from me this year? Well, yes and no. For I still harbour as much hatred for the whole three-month faux-festive frenzy as ever. But what I do now find is that this is divorced from my feelings about Christmas itself. Which comes as a rather pleasant surprise.

Alternatively, I suppose, it might just be the thought of seeing the Two Towers on Boxing Day which is keeping me going. But at any rate, this year the next round of the Gaffer's own brew is on me. I hear it comes in pints, too.

