

Frem fra glemselen

Matthijs Holter

“Imagine a band of travellers on the long road from St Albans to London - a dangerous journey in troubled times. Which will YOU be?

- * An alchemist - skilled in the dark arts of magick

- * A rogue - on the run from justice

- * A noble lady - on her way to stir up intrigue at court

- * A spy - disguised as a herbalist, carrying vital messages to the King

- * Or any one of a host of different characters...”

Da jeg leste dette i Puffins bok-katalog en gang på midten av åttitallet, skjønte jeg ikke bæret. Jeg hadde spilt et par millioner Fighting Fantasy-bøker (i hvert fall tre), og tenkte det var på tide å prøve noe nytt. Men hva var alt dette...? Gikk det an å spille slike roller? Hvordan kunne man være så mange forskjellige folk i en og samme spill-bok?

Senere på åttitallet. Jeg hadde endelig spilt rollespill (fotokopi av D&D-boka), og skjønte at Maelstrom måtte være et slikt rollespill. Jeg tok spranget, bestilte Maelstrom, fikk den lille blå paperback-boken i hendene, spilte det en gang eller to, og la det bort. Ikke fordi det var dårlig, eller jeg ikke likte det; mest fordi jeg ikke hadde den fjerneste aning om hvordan jeg skulle lage flere eventyr til spillet. Det ble aldri utgitt noen tillegg.

Men jeg har plukket opp den lille boka mange ganger siden det. Jeg byttet den bort, men savnet den, og kjøpte den på nytt. Det er noe med dette spillet, en følelse av at det kunne vært så bra, så bra, med bare littegrann oppfølging. Og en følelse av undring over at Penguin valgte å utgi et rollespill satt i - av alle ting - Shakespeares England.

Etter lang og hard leting klarte jeg å finne forfatteren Alexander Scott, og fravriste mannen et intervju - nesten 20 år etter at boka ble utgitt.

Under what circumstances was Maelstrom conceived?

Well, I was at school, and doing a lot of role-playing, but it was always difficult to find shops that stocked rpgs. I thought it would be great if you could just go to a bookshop and buy an rpg for the price of a paperback book rather than having to find a specialist store and pay several times as much for one of the AD&D rulebooks. The Fighting Fantasy solo adventures were popular at the time, and some friends of mine had written a book called "What is Dungeons and Dragons?" (explaining D&D to

non-gamers, and also published by Penguin), which made the whole thing seem more possible. So I wrote off to Penguin myself and suggested they publish a game in a paperback book.

What kind of games did you play at the time?

I played a fair bit of AD&D, partly because there was a lot of material around for it, as well as bits and pieces of various other games. But the first game I played, and which I still have great affection for, is Tunnels and Trolls. There may be some problems with the rule system, but the rulebook and the game are whimsical, idiosyncratic and downright fun. It also has excellent solo adventures!

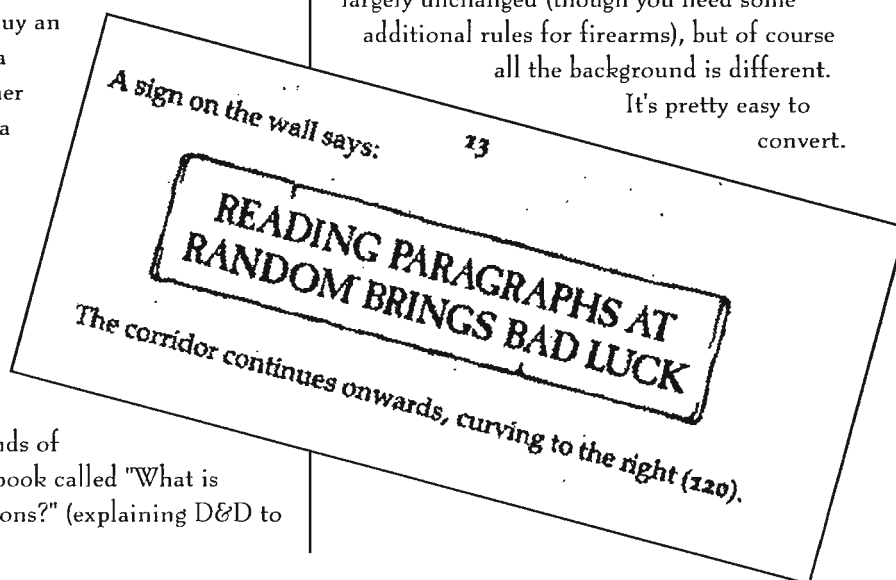
While the game itself is mostly a realistic historical game set in 16th century Britain, there is a chapter devoted to the enigmatic Maelstrom, a living vortex from which mages draw power for their spells. Where did the idea for this come from?

I definitely wanted to have magic, and knew that the game would lose a lot without it. I didn't feel that a list of spells would really fit with the historical setting, and I didn't want players to have to spend lots of time looking things up either. I also wanted magic to be a "maybe it's real maybe it's not" type of thing, so in the end I decided it should be based around twisting the world to make unlikely things happen. The Maelstrom came out of that, really.

There are hints throughout the book that the Maelstrom system might be used for different adventure settings - Incas and science fiction are mentioned. Did you ever try this out yourself?

Once or twice. Combat and magic go over largely unchanged (though you need some additional rules for firearms), but of course all the background is different.

It's pretty easy to convert.



What was it like working with Puffin/Penguin?

Enormous fun. I was 16 when I started writing the book, and going to meetings with my editor at Penguin was terribly exciting. I'm not sure they really knew what they were getting!

How much influence did they have over how the game turned out? I. e., did you have to change much of the original idea, or is the book pretty much what you wanted it to be?

We went through quite a few different ideas at the beginning. Penguin liked the idea of publishing a game, but they weren't keen on a pure fantasy or science fiction setting. I suggested a variety of different settings, and sixteenth century England was the one they liked. After that, they gave me a pretty free hand.

Did you belong to a circle of game designers, along with FF authors Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone?

Not at all. There were a bunch of people I played games with at school (mostly AD&D), including James Wallis, who has done loads of good writing and designing himself!

How was the game received? Did it do well commercially?

Well, it certainly sold pretty well, despite having virtually no publicity. There was a large initial print run, and it was reprinted after about a year, as well as going into a Japanese edition.

Why were there never any supplements for Maelstrom?

Despite the fact that Maelstrom had sold well, Penguin ended up concentrating on the Fighting Fantasy books and published a (rather uninspiring, I thought) rpg based on them.

Is there a lost Maelstrom supplement lying somewhere in a box in your attic, or in a forgotten folder on your hard drive?



Erm, there's piles of material buried in a cardboard box somewhere in the loft.

What aspects of the game are you the most satisfied with, in retrospect?

I'm happiest with the magic system. I felt at the time that having a magic system with no spellbook was an elegant solution, and would offer a lot of opportunity for creative gameplay, as players would have to come up with with creative ways to use magic. I also liked the long list of herbs at the end of the book.

Oh yes, and I loved the front cover.

And what are you the least satisfied with?

The combat system. I intended combat to be really nasty, with wounds taking a long time to heal (as they would in real life), but I don't think I got the mechanics right.

Do you know whether people still play Maelstrom?

I've no idea. I doubt that anyone plays it with the original set of rules, but it would be nice to think that bits and pieces have been recycled into other games.

What do you do these days?

These days I'm a mathematician, at University College London.

Do you still play role-playing games? Which ones?

Not very often -- it's hard to find enough time.

Do you think role-playing games have changed much in the nearly 20 years since Maelstrom came out?

Is it really that long?

If you were to give advice to would-be game designers, what would it be?

I think that designing new rules and games is one of the most enjoyable parts of role-playing. To quote the Desperate Bicycles, "It was Easy It was Cheap, Go and Do It."

Apparently Penguin are thinking about reviving the Sorcery! gamebook series. Do you ever think about reviving Maelstrom?

I thought about it once or twice, but it never came to anything. I think the book would need some revision...