

HYBORIA

A fantasy game in an ancient setting described by TONY BATH

HYBORIA is a game for people interested in history — in this particular instance, ancient history. It sets out to create, as realistically as possible, a fantasy world in which the players can be not only rulers or military geniuses but also economists, financiers, propagandists and merchants etc. They must be prepared to deal not only with the large things such as a foreign war or a tricky alliance, but the smaller things like road-building, turning a wilderness into a flourishing province, running an intelligence network, setting up a communications system; all within the framework of the ancient period.

Hyboria is not the only game of this kind in existence. There are several others, notably Feudalia and Midgard in the same period, some in later periods as well, but Hyboria is probably the longest running and most complicated of them all.

It differs from other such games — Midgard in particular — in that it, in effect, belongs to me and I run it arbitrarily. I decide when to send out situation reports and the players wait for me — sometimes a little impatiently! Midgard, on the other hand, is run democratically. You pay a subscription to join the game, and are, therefore, entitled to vote on any amendments in the rules, while there are several appointed officers to deal with various aspects of the game. This sounds very nice, but I doubt if it works out as successfully as my system. A dictatorship is usually easier to run than a democracy!

Most of us have at some time or other had day-dreams of being something completely different than we are — an emperor, a king, general, warlord, a big business tycoon. For many of these dreams, board games exist which enable us to enact these roles to some degree; but these games are transient things lasting only a few hours and having no connection with the next game.

The participants in the world of Hyboria, however, are enabled to project themselves far deeper into their roles, and the game goes on and on, each session leading automatically to the next, and affecting what happens in that next session. Because more time is involved, much more personality and reality can be introduced. At the same time more scope is given for individuality and invention, since the rules are always changing and expanding.

The present game of Hyboria is a highly sophisticated organisation which has grown up over the long period of play and experimentation. It came into being originally merely to give a continuous background to a series of war-game campaigns set in the ancient period of history; not wishing to be limited by real history, I turned to the realms of fantasy and set my campaigning in the world of Hyboria created by the American fantasy novelist Robert Howard. This meant that I could, while retaining much historical realism, also use my imagination as much as I wished.

Howard's Conan books contained a rough outline map of the Hyborian continent; this was the skeleton which I gradually padded out, adding many more cities, plotting the course of rivers, filling in mountains, forests, and natural resources such as minerals. The map was related to a map of the real world so that I could base temperatures, winds and general weather on that existing in our world, thus making it more realistic. The current map is some 4' x 4' and is divided into $\frac{1}{2}$ " squares, each $\frac{1}{2}$ " representing 5 miles.

At first the game grew slowly. I involved other people in it for limited periods but only as opponents in limited wars, the whole world



Hyboria is a game in which realism and fantasy meet, limited in its scope only by the imagination of the participants and in particular by the games-master, Tony Bath, who here describes what it is all about. Hyboria is one of several similar games each kept alive by its own small group of enthusiasts. Hyboria — there is only one game in progress — has been running for years and the end is not in sight because theoretically there is no end.

You may think this game has many advantages: you assume the role you want, you play at your leisure without the necessity of the other players being present, and it costs almost nothing. The extent to which you participate is up to you and, within loosely defined limits, you do what you want. As a game, Hyboria could be considered avant-garde, off-beat, the simulation archetype of the future. Not so much a game perhaps — more a way of life.

THE POWER GAME



was not involved, only parts of it. Then, as the character of the world grew in depth and complexity, the game evolved into a new dimension and I opened it to a wider circle.

Under the new system, my part in the game changed completely. I was no longer involved as a king, emperor, general etc., instead I became the controller of the game, a sort of combined umpire and god. As the originator and designer of the game, I made the rules by which it was played; the players who took up the characters of various inhabitants of the Hyborian world, made all the moves and directed the affairs of the countries they were involved in.

So that the whole thing would be more realistic and, at the same time, easier to run, it was necessary at this stage to develop many facets which had little to do with the strictly military aspect of the game. To begin with it was necessary to create royalty, as well as nobility for the various countries, setting up complete families which intermarried, produced children, etc; to create a financial structure to determine annual revenues; look into matters of trade, establishing trading routes and which countries produced which items; decide what religions were established where and how important they were. Thus Hyboria is much more than just a military game. To succeed in it you need to be diplomatist and economist as well.

In some respects Howard's Conan books were a help in that they gave a fair amount of detail of the continent which I could use. Unfortunately, however, due to a sudden popularity of Conan books in America, several stories have been produced, since I set up the game, by people editing Howard's early works. Certain 'sea-lawyers' among the players sometimes seek to gain advantages for themselves by quoting from these

later works — whether they get away with it depends on the state of my liver at the time.

The game in this fashion has now been running for some 4–5 years very successfully. The operation is basically simple; each player is assigned a character in Hyboria. This is in most cases that of a King, a leading noble, a successful general, although occasionally minor parts are given out. These latter are either because someone would like to participate without devoting too much time to it, or more often to see whether the newcomer is likely to prove an asset or a liability. I provide each player with a copy of the detailed map of the continent, the same size as mine, and gridded like it into $\frac{1}{2}$ " squares for easy reference; a set of fixed rules which specify such things as move distances, financial structure, Hyborian calendar, time scales for ship-building, road making etc; and a dossier regarding the character he is to play. This latter would tell him about himself (handsome, cruel, ambitious, brave) his immediate family, the other notable people in his country, its immediate history, personal wealth, revenue of the country, military resources etc., and the current date. He is now ready to take part in the game.

A move in the game takes up to a week in Hyboria time. Each move every player receives from me a situation report, setting out the results of the orders he issued the previous week, giving messages delivered by the other characters, intelligence reports etc.

On receipt of this, the player then issues his instructions for the following week.

When everyone has sent me their instructions I then plot movements on my master map which lives on the wall of my study and is covered with numbered coloured marker pins which indicate such things as armies, individual characters, spies, trade missions, mines and so on. I work out the result of military movements; if a battle takes place I usually get members of my local group, non-participants in the game, to

fight it, telling them just as much as they need to know. I make the necessary decisions regarding the responses of what we call 'cardboard characters' — Hyborian people who are not represented by players — to the happenings of the week, working from their known characteristics (all maintained on a large card index system) plus graduated dice rolls. I decide whether suggestions and requests made by players should be allowed or not; for instance, one player wishes to introduce a new advanced method of communication — if he can make a logical case for it, and has done the groundwork, such as setting up a university grant for improvement of communications, then I'll possibly allow it. I then have to work out how much it will cost, so that he can see if he can afford it.

How deeply each player gets into the game depends on himself and how much time he can devote to it. Some players concentrate on just military and diplomatic aspects and leave it to me to handle finances and domestic affairs. Others like to go into the finer details and handle everything for themselves. One player produced a set of properly codified laws for his country, another set up a College of Heralds to produce armorial bearings; others give thought to trade development and agriculture.

With each situation report the players receive the current copy of the game newspaper, the Shadizer Herald. This newspaper has two purposes; firstly to leak news to players which they would not otherwise be entitled to — Herald reporters are everywhere — and secondly to provide a touch of humour. Much of the information printed in it is false or distorted and it carries a large amount of pure propaganda. Certain players have shown a skill in this department which could have made them the envy of Dr. Goebbels!

Players are of course required to act within the limits of their Hyborian characters. If they are given the character of an upright honest man they are not allowed to play dirty tricks or behave treacherously; should they attempt to do so they would be heavily penalized. Chance can always take a hand in their affairs, and from time to time I introduce a new element, just to complicate things, such as an embezzling treasurer, or an earthquake or a civil revolt I try to be as unbiased as possible in this — or, as one player puts it, hostile to everyone!

The characters played are not invulnerable.

They can die from sickness, accident, murder or in battle. Usually in such cases the player is then offered a new role elsewhere in the continent. The current players are drawn from all over England and include two in the U.S.A.

Since Hyboria is a fantasy world, it is often tempting to introduce a certain amount of magic into its operation. I have limited this to a great degree because I don't want to have the game spoiled by all-powerful wizards and because it could get rather complicated. But I allow a little bit here and there, usually to serve a special purpose. For instance, when a player wished to withdraw temporarily from the game, I caused his character to be put into a trance by a witch; this was worked in logically, the existence of the witch and her animosity to him being already a fact, and it enabled me to put his character on the shelf without having to kill him off. Similarly when two English players recently visited the American players, I published an item in the Herald about them being magically transported across the sea of Vilayet — which separates their Hyborian countries — and even worked in a threat by the Archbishop of Tarantia to put them under the ban of the Church for trafficking with wizards.

What makes a successful player of a game like Hyboria? Is it painstaking devotion to detail, military skill, historical knowledge, or just low cunning? All these play their part, but possibly the greatest advantage is the ability to sink into the given character and make it come to life. Most of the players have succeeded in projecting their personalities into the characters they are playing. Each has approached the game in a



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tried

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slightly different fashion and developed skills in different areas. One of the nice things about being the controller is to discover the unexpected capabilities of one's friends. Before inviting Richard Nelson, for instance, to join the game, I knew him as a person of considerable scholarship, whose knowledge of naval history was superb; I soon discovered that he was also

Gentlemen, the Press...

THE fantasy world of Hyboria has not only its own calendar and currency but also its own newspaper the *Shadizar Herald*. The *Herald*, like newspapers everywhere, keeps its readers informed (or misinformed) of current events and reflects the social, political and economic scene. Battles, royal affairs, crime, student unrest, executions; history (of a sort) in the making. 'Hykranian ambassador assassinated in Alkmeenon' screams a headline; 'Naval action on the Styx'; 'Varnar troops in Eastern Hyboria!'; 'Crown Prince Zabuthir released'; there's never a dull moment. The distinguished team of *Herald* reporters includes, as military correspondent, (you might have guessed it) Major Li Dhe Lhart!

Nor does the *Herald* neglect the minor needs of its citizen readers. From travel ('Micron's caravan leaves at the end of Falcon for Turan and Hykrania. No charge to single women') to sports news ('National Archery Championships rained off') and the arts (including some sophisticated poetry by Auna Mathilda). The small ads. cater for all appetites and, as in some better-known papers, make interesting reading. 'Have you found your astrologically attuned partner yet? Contact Magadate' and 'The Yagkashka Pleasure Palace — special rates to the over-50's'. The hard-sell 'Drinka jara wina day' contrasts with the discretely factual advertisement of the Agradur Surgical Carriage Company: 'Mark II Prince of the Orient Command Litter. 8-bearer model. Standard fittings include Morocco leather sherbert and rosewater holder' And if this strikes you as altogether a little too fantastical, then the editorial in issue 10 may have a sober and familiar ring: 'It is with great regret ... the Board of Management ... increase the price ...' But who cares? Life wouldn't be the same without the *Herald*.



a first-rate poet and writer of considerable wit as the pages of the *Herald* have proved.

The newcomer to the game (and new players are allowed in at intervals when vacancies occur, often because a character, formerly not of enough importance to warrant a player, for some reason becomes of increased stature) finds himself at first a little bewildered by the complexity of things and at something of a disadvantage vis-a-vis the more experienced player. However, with a little assistance he soon begins to settle down and enjoy himself. All the players are members of the Society of Ancients, an organisation founded some eight years ago to develop interest in ancient history, with emphasis on military history; and as such they get together at various Society meetings during the year. The opportunity is usually taken for a little Hyborian skull-duggery and propagandising.

Two years ago two American members, holidaying in England, attended a Society week end in Southampton during which a day was devoted to a special session of Hyboria in which all present were allowed to join. The American visitors were very much impressed, and made quite a hit in their role as mercenary generals. Both of them have now become regular players and have contributed a great deal to the game. Despite the distance involved they are as regular and reliable with their orders as the English players. One of them took over the wreckage of a once powerful empire which had just collapsed after military defeat, and is at present busily parleying it back into a position of strength; the other is adventuring among the less civilized states of the south, attempting to carve out a kingdom for himself.

One extra amusement I, myself, have gained from the game is the writing of a proper history of the Continent, starting from the time I first set up the game. During each continent year I keep a meticulous diary of events, and when a battle is fought I write a comprehensive account of it, writing it up as a real battle, not a wargame, and clip the account into the diary. Then, after a war is over, I write up a full account of it, on the basis of the diary and the battle accounts, as a chapter in the growing history of Hyboria. Last year, encouraged by the interest expressed by even non-players. I published Volume 1, of the 'History of Hyboria' and quickly sold out every copy. Volume 11 is due to appear early next year, and will bring events up to some two continental years ago. This has been a most rewarding project for a frustrated military historian!

As already stated, Hyboria is set in the ancient period of history but it could equally well be run in almost any other period. In fact, suggestions for adapting it to other periods can be found in my recent book 'How to set up a Wargames Campaign'.

What do the players think about Hyboria? I asked some of them to comment.

Richard Nelson said:

"The chief attraction of Hyboria as a wargame campaign is to me, paradoxically, the presence of so many other factors apart from the wargame. The Hyborian continent and its component lands have detailed histories and success in the game can be achieved by mastery of these background facts. You can always produce something to throw your opponents plans into disarray.

Equally, the current history of the Hyborian campaign is being written, and such features of the game as the *Shadizar Herald* enable the alert players to write it. Some of the players accuse the *Herald* of bias but it merely reproduces what it has been sent, and an alert propagandist can do an opponent considerable harm by adroit manipulation of the press. Provided that material is consistently and entertainingly written you can even influence the Controller to change history to your terms. The unfortunate Prince Vakar is a case in point, and all men of goodwill rejoice to see a certain nobleman of Vendhya undergoing a similar metamorphosis...

In reality, the continuing success of the Hyborian campaign can be ascribed to the thorough basis of background detail which is available, and which provides the proper degree of intellectual stimulus to maintain player and controller interest.



Philip Barker, a Director of the Wargame Research Group responded:

'When first invited to take the part of Conan, who according to the original books was a sort of cross between Tarzan, Ned Kelly and Richard the Lion Heart, I had my doubts. I'm not really like that. His behaviour patterns also seemed unlikely to help a head of state, as his word was his bond, he had a different girl in every chapter, he scorned compromise and insisted on finishing wars by removing his opponent's head with a full blooded swing at the crucial moment of the final battle. His favourite tactic was a headlong charge straight at the enemy, though he usually looked first to see what he was charging. Left to myself, I should have been considerably more, shall we say 'flexible'.

However, I determined to do it by the book, and found to my surprise that Conan is incredibly effective. The great thing about being the only honest character among a swarm of villains is that they get horribly confused when you tell them the truth, while on the battlefield, nothing upsets an enemy's careful manoeuvres quite so much as finding my merry (and heavily armoured) men already in their midst, laying about them with abandon and long sharp swords. Occasionally I give way and do something slightly cunning and a little underhanded, though nothing the Watergate prosecutor would really take exception to. I console myself with the thought that a successful usurper like Conan, might well begin to show slight resemblances to Henry VII in middle age.

How has this affected my life? I think it may have made me a little more direct in my approach, more likely to decide on my goal and head straight for it.'

What of the American players? I asked Charlie Tarbox of California:

'Among the many aspects of the Hyborian adventure there are two which principally have intrigued and delighted me in the past. The first of these is its immense scope and thoroughness. Never before Hyboria have players been able to command such complete national units with such complete realism. I recall the minute planning of pirate raids on certain towns held by the enemy and the grand sweep of continental strategy. The continental newspaper is a constant source of delight and allows vent to the humorist, poet, journalist. (The players often care more for their images in print than for the cementing of firm alliances!)

The second facet of Hyboria which offers such allure to me is its cost. Other than time and postage there in none. Nowhere else could I hope to compete against the leading figures in wargaming and their keen tactical minds without regularly flying to England from America. Monthly my instructions go out to do battle but I can remain snugly at home plotting.'

And finally a newcomer to the game, John Norris of London:

'As a relatively new player in Hyboria, I have been particularly concerned with two aspects of the game system, 'The umpire as God' and 'the player in character'. In Hyboria, everything is controlled by Tony, who makes rules so that he can take consistent decisions and we players can plan on the basis of past history. This very flexible system can open up entirely new facets of the campaign with very little difficulty. It does have its drawbacks, since no one can be absolutely impartial. As Warlord of the Varnar Confederation, I have to remember that God is an Aquilonian!

Most of the game interactions are by letter or telephone, and all binding agreements have to go through Tony. Thus he can assign you a character totally unlike your own; that I am an unscrupulous intriguer is a gross canard, which those who know me will deny! This lack of face-to-face contact means that such characters can be acted out in an entirely genuine way. If you try to act out of character, Tony can frustrate you by distorting your communications back into character. It is hard work trying to be an honest Pict!