

Northern Lights

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Issue 1-97

Mars



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Editorial - Off the Top of My Head

Hello again! Long time, no see! This issue was put together in haste, and it shows. Better sloppy than not published at all!

I have been out of the loop for several issues of AotA now, and it is great to be back. My work schedule hasn't left much room for a life the past year, but I think it is easing up a bit. It has to! Anyway, this should make it possible for me to meet AotA deadlines with a bit more regularity. (Actually, I have missed the AotA #30 deadline already as I write this. I hope that Robert haven't put everything together already.)

This time I am writing my submission in MS Word and emailing it, Email submissions are becoming more common. This means cheaper submissions, and that we can shave a day or two off the submission dates. (If I use the mail, I have to send the submission in at least a week before deadline.) Few things in life are free. File submissions carry a price in the form of compatibility problems, files that won't load, or print, missing fonts, messed up layouts, etc. Enter the Roleplaying Markup Language, a system for making file submissions easy and safe. You can read all you want to know about it in this issue of Northern Lights. (Which won't stop me from blathering on about RML in the next couple of issues too.)

I haven't had time to play GURPS lately, but I did the next best thing, I bought a few new supplements, and of course, In Nomine. There are capsule reviews in this issue.

I have been writing straight through the night to make this issue (it is almost 7 o'clock in the morning) so my batteries are running low. I'll cut this preamble short, and let you get on with the rest of the 'zine.

Henrik

The Roleplaying Markup Language

Some time ago I suggested that we should take steps to simplify AotA submissions over the net. I suggested that we create our own file format standard for AotA submissions, the Roleplaying Markup Language (RML). The project is now under way. With luck, we might even finish it. One thing we lack at the moment are people interested in using RML, so here comes the salesman's pitch.

The RML Development Team

Before we start, you might like to know who is currently on the RML project team:

- David S. Carter
- Bill Collins
- Robert N. Gilson
- Henrik Mårtensson
- Jeffrey O. Pfaffmann
- Arthur Shipkowski
- Lowell B. Stouder

Everyone has done a very fine job so far, but we still have quite a distance to go, so do not expect moving to RML anytime soon, unless you wish to experience the joys of beta testing.

What Is RML, and What Do I Need To Use It?

Technically Roleplaying Markup Language is a markup language designed using SGML. SGML is a meta-language, a set of rules for designing markup languages. The most well known such language is HTML, the markup language used to write hypertext documents for the world wide web. An RML file is a simple ASCII text file where the text is marked using special tags. For instance, the text file could look like this:

```
<p>Oh, for a <em>Muse of fire</em> that would ascend<lf>The brightest heaven of  
invention!</p>  
<p>A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,<lf>and monarchs to behold the swelling scene.</p>  
<quote><title>King Henry V.</title><author>W. Shakespeare</author></quote>
```

What you see in your text editor when you write this, would of course be a bit more readable. Perhaps something like this:

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```
<p>Oh, for a <em>Muse of fire</em> that would ascend<lf>
The brightest heaven of invention!</p>
<p>A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,<lf>
and monarchs to behold the swelling scene.</p>
<quote><title>King Henry V.</title><author>W. Shakespeare</author></quote>
```

The application that formats the text to make it ready for publishing would be able to do a bit more sophisticated interpretations of the tags, for instance like this:

Oh, for a *Muse of fire* that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention!
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
and monarchs to behold the swelling scene.
King Henry V. *W. Shakespeare*

So far, RML is no different in principle from other markup systems, like RTF, HTML, MIF, and others. What makes RML special, is that it contains a lot of specialized codes that are useful when writing AotA submissions. For instance, there are codes for marking up skill lists, advantages, game rules, character attributes, etc. Most markup codes in RML are *content based*, that is you mark text up depending on the *content* of the text, not the appearance.

To write an RML document you need two things; an RML Document Type Definition (DTD), and an SGML editor. The RML Document Type Definition is a file that contains information about what tags are allowed in RML, and in what context each tag may be used. An SGML editor is an editor capable of reading a DTD and configure itself according to the rules in the DTD.

The RML development project is working on providing both of these, plus some nifty little extras, like programs that can search RML files and retrieve information from them.

If RML Does Not Suit You, Don't Use It

RML will, we think, be suitable for most file submissions, on disk or over the Internet, but it does not handle everything. RML separates writing the submission from creating the layout. An RML file contains no informations about fonts used, how many text columns to be used, etc. All of that information will be in a style sheet used by the application that prints the submission. Usually, this program will be run by the CM. If you like to have more than miniscule control over the layout, RML will not suit you at all. If so, just don't use it!

The Current Problems in Disgusting Detail

Let us have a look at the current problems with file submissions, and how RML would solve them. The current system causes problems in three areas:

- Submitting material
- Indexing submissions
- Archiving submissions

Things That Can Go Wrong with Your Submission, and How RML Deals With the Problems

Currently, AotA file submissions are accepted in six different PC formats, and four Macintosh formats. There is a list in the Submission Guidelines section of the Membership Roster page of every issue of AotA. Even if you use one of the supported formats, things can go awry:

- The fonts you used may not be supported. This can mess up your layout. Special characters may disappear or get mixed up. Fixing this means a lot of extra work for the CM.

There is no font information in an RML file. What fonts to use is determined by the layout application (run by the CM). Special characters are handled through special codes called *character entities*. When you enter a special character like ‘®’ in your SGML editor or word processor, that character is translated to an entity that can be understood by the layout software the CM uses.

- You may have the right software, but the wrong version. For instance, there are at least three slightly different versions of the MS Word 6.0 file format. All are slightly incompatible. That is just on the PC. There are a couple more formats used by the Mac version. If your version of the software and the CM’s version do not match exactly, chances are there will be problems. A single person, the poor CM, will have to deal with *all* such problems.

If enough people moves to RML, the number of different formats used for submissions will naturally decrease. Like other file formats, RML may change as it develops, but *we* are in control, and can make sure that files are always backwards compatible. (We will add new features, but not remove or change old ones.)

- Pictures may get lost. Even if the text survives being imported into the software the CM uses, illustrations may not. (I have seen large, costly documentation projects get twice as large and costly, and severely delayed to boot, because illustrations in an MS Word file were lost when porting from a Mac to a PC version.)

As part of the RML standard, we will define the image file formats that may be used. We will select only those formats which can be handled by nearly all SGML layout applications.

- You are too dependent on the hardware and software resources of the CM. Let us say that Robert one day decides to pass the torch. Having a bit of an off day, you unanimously decide

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that I should be the new CM. (Don't laugh, it's just an example.) What would happen? Since I do not have ready access to a Mac, I would not be able to support submissions using Mac software. PageMaker? Sorry, I don't have it. I do use FrameMaker and Ventura, but does anyone else? Probably not.

With RML, as long as we all use SGML software, it doesn't matter what particular programs we use. As long as we have the DTD, the programs will be able to handle RML.

RML can help us with other things beside making submissions easier to handle. Let's have a look at the AotA index:

Indexing Submissions

What is your opinion of the AotA index maintained by David? *Loud cheers, ecstatic stomping on the ground, 'Hooray, hooray!'; hats and keyboards thrown into the air.*

I thought so. I like it too. It is a lot of work though, going through issues of AotA and indexing them manually. Today, indexing manual submissions is a pain. Indexing electronic submissions is not practically possible at all. Not all of the software used for the submissions support indexing. To build an electronic index today, David would have to first convert all submissions to a common format. (*Trouble, trouble!*) Then he would have to insert index markers into the text. After that, the index could be generated, but the page numbers would not match, since after all the conversion and reformatting, the layout of David's version of the files would be nothing like the thing that is actually published. Thus, the last step would be fixing page numbers manually.

If we do it right, RML could go a long way to ease the task of indexing. The RML markup system makes it easy to identify such things as scenarios, characters, equipment, advantages, spells, psionic powers, essays, fiction, reviews, mailing comments, etc.

RML has the potential to allow us to have an index that is updated much more often, with less work. To be fair, there are several problems in this area that are not solved yet, but they can be, and with imagination, persistence, and a bit of luck, they will be.

Archiving Submissions

An electronic archive of AotA submissions would be a good thing, particularly if we could make it available on the WWW. Today, there are a few problems:

- Most of the file formats used today would make the archive hard to search for information. The multitude of formats compounds the problem.

RML documents *are* databases that can easily be searched for information.

- Automatically extracting and compiling information about a topic, for instance new spells, is practically impossible.

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The development project will create a number of tools for retrieving information and compiling it into new documents.

- Some of the file formats may be hard to convert to HTML for distribution over the WWW.

Converting RML to HTML is pretty easy using tools that we already have available in AotA. We can make our own transformation engines if we want, but there are several programs available, both commercially and in the public domain, that can do it for us.

RML, the Continuing Story

The RML project will take quite some time, for several reasons. One reason is that we are expanding RML to make it useable not only for AotA submissions, but for writing any kind of GURPS material. In the next few issues of Northern Lights I will chart the development of RML, and the plans we make for implementing it.

Musty Tomes

I do not think that anyone has missed that Steve Jackson Games has released several new GURPS supplements and a new roleplaying game lately. When the latest batch of SJG products arrived at a local store, I bought the lot. Let us have a closer look in a few capsule reviews.

GURPS Vehicles, 2nd Edition

When the first edition of David Pulver's GURPS Vehicles was released, I must confess I was not too thrilled with it. The design system had some flaws, and there were important omissions, like rules for designing spacecraft. The second time around, David has made an admirable job of rectifying the flaws in the first edition.

GURPS Vehicles, 2nd ed. contain an improved design system that is much easier to use than the old one. The system covers every kind of vehicle from canoes to battlestars. Anything mechanical that moves, including robots and parachronic conveyors, can be designed using these rules.

The one thing I miss is a vehicle design sheet. The format used to describe vehicles is very compact, and lacks important information, like weapon stats, that are needed when vehicles are used for combat. Of course, designing a single sheet that covers every conceivable kind of vehicle would probably not be possible, but a few sample sheets for the most common types of vehicle would have helped. This is a minor niggle however. Overall, I like this supplement a lot.

GURPS Autoduel, 2nd Edition

It was a long time since I played GURPS Autoduel, and the system has changed a lot since then. This is reflected by the changes in GURPS Autoduel, 2nd ed. The setting is familiar to Autoduel players of old, but the timeline has advanced 10 years.

Most of the book is devoted to the campaign world. There is a short chapter on designing cars. Other vehicles must be designed using GURPS Vehicles, 2nd edition instead. I was surprised to find that there is no vehicle record sheet. Sample vehicle records use the same ultra compact format that GURPS Vehicles use, and omit important information used in game play. For instance, the Talon powerboat on page 107, has a Vulcan machine gun, but if you want to know the accuracy, rate of fire, damage, and other data on the Vulcan, you have to flip to page 105 and look it up in a weapon table. It would not have been too hard to include a vehicle record sheet along the same lines as the sheet included in the first edition.

To buy or not to buy? Ten years ago I bought GURPS Autoduel to play it. This time I bought it out of curiosity. Will I use it now? Probably not. Would I have liked the 2nd edition rules ten years ago? Yes, I think so. Except for the missing vehicle record sheet, I think Autoduel looks fairly

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good. It focuses a lot more on characters and the campaign world, and less on vehicle design, than the old book. In my opinion, this is a good thing. It may not be the most exiting GURPS supplement to date, but I think it has its place in the system.

GURPS Warehouse 23

Finally, GURPS Warehouse 23, by John Ross, is out. This supplement is a treasure trove for anyone interested in running an illuminated or weird science campaign. In this warehouse all the things that the American government has hidden over the years are stored away. Here you can find occult artifacts, like the ark of the covenant and the Spear of Longinus. Mind-bending computer games, Martian war machines (from the 1938 invasion), a deevolution ray machine, aliens, explosive flour, and flying saucers crowd in the warehouse. Each object, or creature, has a complete description. There are helpful suggestions for hooking objects, including the warehouse itself, into a campaign.

This is one of the ‘must have’ supplements, at least for GURPS Illuminati players.

In Nomine

As you all know by now, *In Nomine* has finally been released. This is the first new roleplaying system released by SJG in many years. Based on a French game, it has been thoroughly revised and rewritten by Derek Percy. (A bit of conjecture, I am afraid, since I do not have the original rules to compare with.)

In *In Nomine* the players take the parts of angels and demons battling it out over whether God or Lucifer shall rule life, the universe, and everything. The book is of the modern style over substance variety. The layout is fairly good, but the text is in many cases too wordy. Relevant information is buried in masses of text, making it a little bit hard to use the book as a reference. There are colour illustrations throughout, all by Dan Smith except the cover illustration.

The game system is somewhat reminiscent of GURPS. It is skill based, characters are built with character points, (sort of) and most die rolls are made with 3d6. The system is simpler and less open-ended than GURPS. Character stats have a closed scale, ending at 12. Personally, I prefer open ended systems, like GURPS, but since *In Nomine* is tailored to a specific setting, with less variety in player character power levels than GURPS, this may not matter very much.

I mentioned style over substance. Like many other newer roleplaying games, In Nomine Focuses more on building a setting for the game than on game mechanics. The game system is introduced by two short stories. (Both previously published in Pyramid, I believe.) There is a lot of terminology that is specific to *In Nomine*, and the reader is immersed in it right from the start. On the other hand, the rules tell you that a character with Strength 8 is very strong, but there is no way to find out how much such a character could lift, or how high she could jump. Also,

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changing a stat a step or two makes only a little difference in game effects, even though it represents a rather large difference in real world abilities. I am not comfortable with this approach. While I understand, and sympathize, with the desire to create a vivid setting for the game, I do not think this has to be done on the expense of clear rules. How strong must a demon be to turn over a car, how fast to catch a thrown blade in the air? The game system gives little guidance in answering questions like these.

Despite some flaws, I found *In Nomine* interesting. It reminded me of *Immortal* in some ways, but is probably easier to handle and has a more playable game system. I dislike the unnecessary wordiness, but this is a trait that *In Nomine* shares with many other newer games. It may be that I am getting old. My gaming habits formed during the eighties, and *In Nomine* is definitely a game for the nineties. *In Nomine* will not replace GURPS as my favourite game, but I think I will enjoy an *In Nomine* game session now and then.



Comments

It is a long time since I have written any mailing comments. I'll get straight too it:

AotA #29

Thad Blanchette

Hello, and welcome to AotA! I liked your 'zine, and found the articles both full of insight and well written.

Mikel Featherston

Have you had a chance to take a closer look at TEX yet? Tex is one of the formatting engines we will take a closer look at in the RML project. (There is an SGML to TEX conversion program available in the public domain.) If you are interested in the project, a position as TEX expert is open. (You would of course be welcome in any other capacity too.)

Spike Y. Jones

I liked your Local Heroes article. I think your ideas can bring new life into many a jaded Supers campaign where character points tend to sky-rocket.

David Carter

The Darkheart scenario was nice. I liked Entropy. The RAC Challenge was also fun, though tracking the plots and subplots could make a mainframe break down.

Arthur Shipkowski

The Smallville idea was interesting. Alan Dean Foster has written at least two books where humans are not the largest, but the strongest, fastest, baddest creatures in the galaxy. The human race's entrance ticket to the galactic community is its talent for war, as most aliens are so peaceful they cannot defend themselves against attack from a rival civilisation. Your idea is better though, and probably could be more believable than his.

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Bill Collins

If you think books are expensive, you should try living in Sweden for a while. It is not unusual for an American paperback to cost almost twice as much here as it does in the U.S. The rule is about a 50% markup, but even that is pretty bad.

Brett Slocum

I have seen Yojimbo, got interested in Hidden Fortress when I saw your review, and think that I will pass on Lightning Swords of Death.

I saw Long Kiss Goodnight about a month ago, and felt let down by the ridiculous ending. I think it ruined what would otherwise have been a pretty good action movie. I think that the hunt for the ultimately dramatic ending has gone a bit too far the past few years. It seems that all action films *must* have large explosions near the end. It's just getting a little bit too much for me. (I don't have anything against large explosions if they fit the story, but in many cases it is so obvious that they are just tacked on as a crowd pleaser.)

David Pulver

Congratulations on a job very well done with Vehicles 2nd Edition. I've been trying to get hold of a copy of GURPS Robots, but it seems sold out.

The Flesh Library and zombie prostitutes? You are twisted! I'm going to borrow them both for a scenario! Imitation is after all the sincerest form of flattery.

Dan Smith

A 'zine best described as 'undescribable', better grokked than read. In other words, I liked it.

Andrew Dawson

Hi Andrew,

I agree with you about the luck Advantage. In my gaming group we rarely use the Luck as it is written. Over the years we have tried a number of variants. One thing is clear, whatever we tried, it worked better than the original rule. The only times I have enforced the original rule, is in campaigns where I did not want luck to have a major influence on the life of a character.

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Michael David Jr.

I liked Carita Grimani. The world needs more interesting vampires.

Lisa Steele

A good 'zine, as usual.

Scott Maykrantz

I haven't had a look at your web pages yet, I must confess, but I will. Some useful stuff in the Advanced Robotics article. Now, if I only had GURPS Robots... On the other hand I can probably make do with the robotics rules in Vehicles.

Robert Gilson

Victorian Supers are a new twist for a roleplaying game, I think. It looks interesting, and I'd like to see more of Enigma in AotA.

THE END

