MENTIONED IN DISPATCHES: Power Gamers
by Martin Oliver

Welcome to the first of an on-going series of articles which take a peek at one of the most lively and active sources of material for Warhammer - the WFRP E-mail list. Useful as it might be to provide a summary of all that goes on there, it just won't be possible; typically, each day will see another five or six pages worth of discussion arrive, and I'll only have a few hundred words in which to cover it all! So, by way of an introduction, I'm going to skim a few of the topics which have come up recently, just to give you some idea of what to expect. In future, I'll just stick to covering one or two topics in a bit of depth instead.

But before I start blathering on, just what is the Warhammer list? Electronic Mail is one of the marvels that computers can offer, and it gives the option of collating and re-posting a day's mail to groups of interested people. This means, that mail can be sent out to everyone who's interested in whatever area the list covers, and that topics can be discussed by the hundreds of people who use the list. If you've got an Email account, you're already eligible to join the list. All you need do is send a message to "listproc@buddha.intecom.com" containing the words: subscribe wfrp-digest.

And now, back to the content. One of the 'hidden' themes that crops up behind many of the discussion topics is how GMs cope with power gamers. How do you stop characters from "maxing out"? Is Dodge Blow too powerful? Some of the solutions to these problems are pretty neat, it must be said - such as stepped costs for profile advances (so +2 costs 200 EPs, +40 costs 400, etc), or requiring Dodge
Blow to be bought repeatedly, with each level giving a 10% chance of dodging, up to a maximum of the I score.
While these patch up particular problems, they do seem to miss the real point. Power gaming is a style of play, a frame of mind, and that's what the GM needs to tackle. I don't think any rules system is "power-gamer proof" - that's just the nature of the beast. Whilst many of these rules fixes do their jobs admirably, they can become confusing. Taking even a fraction of the list's suggestions on board would mean spending large amounts of time updating players, modifying material, and checking consistency, and I can't quite shake the suspicion that this focus on the rules is precisely the kind of atmosphere that fosters power-gamers.
On the other hand, many of the suggestions are just too good to ignore. What to take and what to leave has to be personal preference, and it's as important for GMs to realise that they can reject list suggestions as it is for them to realise that the rulebook isn't graven in stone. One of my recent adoptions has been Lloyd Carroll's energy critical table, which made a welcome relief from having to improvise things like fireball criticals, and which contains some really nice touches (15: "Victim explodes in a brilliant pyrotechnic display - Ooohhh! Aaahhh!").
Another set of power-gaming problems revolves around careers. Should players really be allowed into the killing-machine careers such as Giant Slayers? Should Elven characters be allowed to become assassins? How can the extensive set of skills and advances in

these careers be justified? All sorts of solutions were put forward, including re-writing the careers to make them less powerful. Other options included taking PCs out of play for a year or so to represent things like an assassin's training, or forcing characters to role-play the callous and amoral murders that the job would require. If well handled, this should be enough to put off all but the worst power-gamers! Elven assassins should be ostracised from their communities, their name and description circulated and remembered by the perfect Elven memories, meaning that the characters would have to be treated as a Dark Elf from that point onwards.

Another area which got thrashed out was how Templar orders would work. These groups, which often seem to be at least semi-autonomous, need to be funded and governed. How do they manage it? The upshot of the discussion was that some sort of "Grand Templar" would have to head the order, and that several other wings would be needed in addition to the fighting force itself - a training wing, possibly a covert force, some religious support, an administrative bureau, servants aplenty, maybe even a small college of wizards. Templars might also find themselves hired out in order to raise funds, or sent off to acquire or protect their considerable

landholdings which provide supplies for the order. Various ideas for scenarios sprang up, to do with gathering information, defending financial interests, and so on. It seems as if having the PC's take refuge with Templars can open up all sorts of opportunities for mayhem.

Questions also crop up about the real world. How do GMs cope when characters get separated? My experience seems typical: I usually end up having split groups, each with a room, trying to juggle them all so that no-one loses interest. Another option is just to leave the "absent" players in the same room, and try and ignore the inevitable comments about what people ought to be doing. Also suggested was a

ban on talking, only allowing note-passing amongst the players. This should stop the others present from commenting, but keep them involved while they watch the expressions of their companions. It's nice in theory, but lots of note writing can be time consuming, and is a bit unfair if you've got dyslexic players. The last of the solutions was to keep the other players involved by having them take on NPCs.

Fun, I'll grant you, but not always practical, especially when an NPC is more than they appear to be. In the end, it seems, there is no easy answer to this split-party problem - but seeing how other Ms coped was a useful way of improving my own methods.

I hope this has given you some sort of idea of what the list is up to. There's an hundred and one other topics that spring to mind as being worth covering, most of which would make for a complete column in themselves. Still, I suppose that's why this is an on-going series of articles, after all...