

A REVIEW BY
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Swords & Sorcery

Quest and Conquest in the Age of Magic

Swords and Sorcery is a fantasy board game by SPI. It is 2 separate games: an Army Game and a Quest Game, each with its own scenarios. The setting is the Valley of Aralve — the Valley of the Great Sword — the most magical place on a planet set in a trinary system of suns. The action centres around the struggle for power within the Valley and can be conventional, magical and personal.

Swords and Sorcery has an attractive 22" x 34" map depicting the Valley of the Great Sword; 400 colourful counters; 56 cards depicting characters, magical artifacts and monsters; 2 sets of Charts and Tables; a sheet containing the Solar Display, Diplomacy Display and Personal Combat Display; 2 dice; nice box; usual new-style, low-utility, deep artist's palette-type counter-storing, non-lidded tipping assemblage; and rules and information booklet.

The map, shown at right, is broken up into Provinces in which dwell various races and nations who have largely settled in terrain which suits them best. The rules booklet, 56 pages long, appears imposing, but isn't all rules. There is an introductory story which sets the scene; historical background and chronology of the Valley and Swords and Sorcery world, and discussion of the races, characters and monsters who will feature in play; all this creates an atmosphere to the game. A careful examination will reveal that the actual rules sections are concise and yet entertainingly written.

Swords and Sorcery is two separate games — an Army and a Quest Game which should be tackled separately; I strongly recommend that the Army Game be undertaken first.

The Army Game

The Army Game is played with a variety of units including armies, monsters and characters. Movement is generally from hex to contiguous hex though teleportation portals facilitate rapid movement across the map. Stacking is restricted to 2 units and any number of characters. Unit race and nationality affect the ability of different units to stack and different races are subject to different terrain costs for movement. Army Units, but not characters and monsters, exert Zones of Control which inhibit movement, but do *not* prohibit retreat. Flying units enjoy special rules pertaining to movement and ZOC's. Combat is not mandatory but is affected by terrain and leaders. Magicians can have a direct magical effect on Army Combat by converting their magical ability into strength

points. Units take losses by retreats, demoralisations and eliminations; leaders, including magic users, can be captured. The retreat rules are especially impressive and effectively cut out "doubling back" towards or equidistant to the hex a unit retreated from.

Magic has a profound effect on play. Magic-using characters are of varying power, the more powerful magicians being able to cast the more powerful spells. Casting spells incurs the expenditure of "Manna Points," each magic-using character having an allocation of Manna Points which he cannot exceed. Spell-casting characters draw their Manna from one of the 3 Suns of the Dis stellar system. Manna, once expended, can be regenerated, the amount dependent upon character activity and the phases of 2 of the Suns. These 2 Suns — the Red and the Blue Suns — may be in equilibrium with each other, or one ascendant over the other which would hence be in descendency. This is easily determined by an examination of their positions relative to that of the third Sun, the Yellow Sun, on the Solar Display. The Yellow Sun is always in equilibrium. Magic using characters are aligned to one of these three suns and their power will fluctuate where they are aligned to the phasic Red or Blue Suns: when their Sun is in ascendance they are more powerful and can use more powerful spells; when their Sun is in descendance, the converse is true. At equilibrium, the power of a Red or Blue Sun magic user will be between the above positions; the power of characters who draw their power from the Yellow Sun does not fluctuate and their Manna regeneration will be more regular.

Spells are arranged by power level and have many different functions. A goodly number are presented and they are not in my mind the "artillery" type of spells. They vary from "River Crossing," through "Conjure Zombie Infantry" to "Monsoon" and successful play will involve their judicious use. The spells are great fun to ponder over and they represent quite a subtle element of play.

Rules are provided covering Random Events, Monsters, Vortices, Teleportation, Alliances, Diplomatic overtures to Neutrals via Emissaries and including (ugh!) Human Sacrifice, Rabble-At-Arms (intrinsic garrisons of Castles, Towns, Capitals and Cities); Character capture and escape and Scenario directions including reinforcements, replacements and Victory Conditions. The Diplomacy rules are particularly impressive and encourage skilful play. The Army rules are not as bulky as they may appear and are quite entertaining.

Game replay

We found Swords and Sorcery good fun to play and the various play elements possessed a subtle interaction. The diplomacy element is very important in many scenarios, giving your side an edge, a comfortable position or even a fighting chance! Note — in this context — diplomacy refers to overtures made by emissaries to Neutral forces which are not controlled by anyone; the object is to bring them over to your side or at least keep them Neutral! Alliances with other players in multi-player scenarios can be important and negotiation can be "interesting"!

Random Events can have quite an effect if you are caught out by them. Thus don't draw up your troops along the main riverbank, especially if the army is multi-racial, a flood can cause absolute chaos and could effectively wash sections of the army away; don't hang around volcanoes, (good advice for anybody); be prepared for sections of a multi-racial army to become ineffective; don't be shaken if portions of your army do, or don't do, things you may want them to; adopt, adapt and improve!

The main river — the Undine — is an interesting piece of terrain, especially when considering crossing it. Apart from its normal bridges and fords there are a few areas where both banks are clear terrain. So if you are going to attempt a river crossing, or build a bridge, (all possible via modern sorcery), choose such terrain where movement is swift and a defensive terrain advantage is not present for enemy forces on the opposite bank. I'd recommend the area between the Swamps and Castle Gund; you get more men across per turn for your Manna!

In you are fighting the Empire, you'll need no reminder of Imperial strength. Watch out for

Imperial pikes and charging heavy cavalry. Note that the defence strength of heavy cavalry is 2, not 4 when they are undemoralised (case 13.17). Catch them if you can. Should you have weak forces which are worth Victory Points to the opposition, deploy them carefully out of enemy grasp or in favourable terrain. You'll find the Orc and Goblin light spear aren't exactly a collection of muscle men!

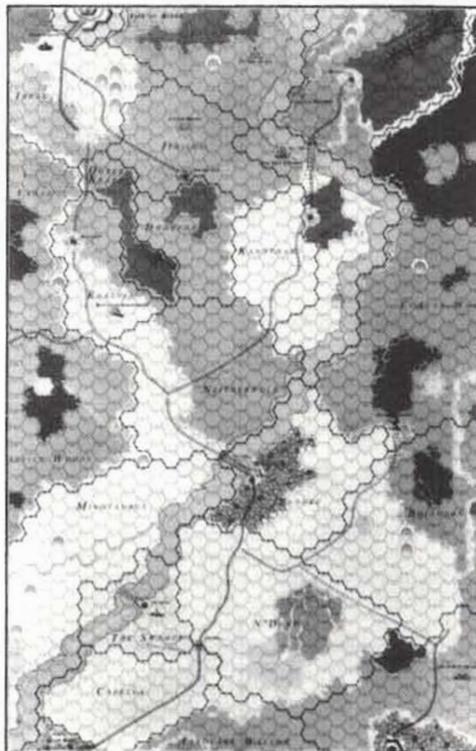
Make the best of the retreat rules and if you can force an overstack, attack it. Try to trap enemy units against a Neutral's border — should it retreat into Neutral territory this constitutes invasion and will probably send the Neutral to your side. The enemy units' alternative is to choose an elimination result instead of a retreat result. Be careful not to violate (!) a Neutral unless you really want to invade. Watch out for, and also be ready to exploit, the effects of an influenced Neutral.

Conjured units — yes, you can magically create combat forces — can be invaluable but be careful not to rely on them too much. A "banish conjured troops" spell can seriously weaken your position prior to an attack. Take losses from amongst conjured units as their existence is ephemeral on the game map, especially if they are about to go POOF and vanish 'cause their Manna has run out. Zombies can be good for low odds attacks; Koboldic Infantry can add strength to your forces; Wyvern airtroops make great taxis.

Manna — 'nuff said in itself. It can be used up quickly yet its implementation can be decisive. Select your spells carefully and do not ignore the "direct magical effect on Army combat" rules. Waste no Manna. Expend Manna should you possess your maximum amount for a character who is liable to regenerate manna that turn, but do it positively if at all possible. Attempt to maximise Manna regeneration.

Characters are very powerful, including those who do not use magic. It will generally take a character to defeat a character. Characters have a large movement allowance and so can be easily used to shift attack forces. Their ability to make preferential shifts on the CRT can make or break an attack. Make "stepping stones" with your units to assist the movement of characters along the "front".

As in 3rd Reich, you can obtain 2 player turns on the trot. Make the most of this facility when it comes your way — remember, your opponent is



The entire playing map from SPI's
SWORDS & SORCERY game

then well placed to get 2 straight turns back at you. Be merciless.

It is unlikely that any 2 plays of a Swords and Sorcery scenario will be the same. Set up time for scenarios is usually short, especially once players gain familiarity with the unit types. Players will find that if they draw up their own "Sequence of Play" on a separate piece of card for both the Army and Quest Games that play will be facilitated and enhanced. It is suggested that players note at what point emissaries are created and at what point reinforcements and replacements arrive on their Sequence of Play for the Army Game; it is also suggested that they note an addition to the Sequence of Play for the Quest Game in the December 1978 errata on their card for the Quest Sequence of Play.

It is unfortunate that no directional compass/scattering diagram was printed on the map (though an ordinary compass was). So it is suggested that for moving random units like vortices, etc., a roll on the die of 1 = north, 2 = north-east, etc...

I've outlined below a few notes on a couple of the Army Game scenarios:

Scenario 2

Setting: Black Dwarrows (Dwarves) pick a fight with the Elves and invade the Elven Province of Vynar. (Fig. 2).

I'd recommend that players begin with this Scenario as it is not involved and the game's concepts are introduced fairly gradually. As no diplomacy is involved (there are no Neutrals), players will not need to consider the diplomatic rules. Randomly moved units should be few and only 3 magic users are involved in the struggle. It is unlikely anyone will teleport. The scenario is for 2 players who can get used to the system and, in particular, the spells without wading in at the deep end.

The struggle is contained within quite a small area of the map and should be quite a tussle. The Black Dwarrows have the support of one Loki Hellsson, known as the Dark Lord, who may not leave the Citadel of Blood and has limited magic. The Black Dwarrows themselves are strong and led by Gerudirr Dragonslayer ... The conventional forces of the Dark lord are led by Ganab the Nasty, one of the most distasteful Goblins you ever saw, and his command is moderately strong. Ganab must have prevailed upon the Dwarrows to launch their

attack at an opportune moment as Dalmilandril, the Elven magic-user, has just seen his Sun pass from ascendancy and will not see ascendancy again in the Scenario whereas Ganab will! Dalmilandril will probably remain in his home hex, the Elven Capital, to maximise Manna regeneration. The Elven forces are quite impressive and very ably led by Linfalas.

In one playing, the Dwarrows swooped down from Outer Krasnia, across the Krasnian plain to attack the Elves on a broad front from the east. Ganab's forces made limited headway from the north. Their objective — to slay Elves and occupy Vynar in strength. The Elves were committed to hold Vynar and stay alive! Ganab's forces were being ably repulsed by Linfalas as the Dwarrows under Gerudirr made progress towards the Elven Capital. Fear and Morale spells flew back and forth, the latter countering the former. The Dark Lord reinforced the aggressors with conjured centaurid cavalry, his "best choice" for the Scenario in our minds. Linfalas was here, there and everywhere, wherever he was needed. Dalmilandril backed him up magically. But Gerudirr was closing in: something had to be done at this point, Ganab penetrated the Elven lines in the north! Seizing an opportunity to give Ganab one across the jaw, Dalmilandril "feared" (reduced in effectiveness) the units stacked with Ganab. Ganab was out of Manna so could not respond and the Dark Lord was out of range. What was more, Ganab was situated at the tip of an exposed salient after an audacious advance-after-combat and Linfalas wasted no time in bringing his best units to bear, eliminating Ganab's stack and capturing him. Gerudirr and his Dwarrows responded by occupying the terrain between Linfalas and the Elven Capital wherein, and only wherein, Ganab could be executed. Not to be deterred, Linfalas struck south and he and Dalmilandril did the same again to Gerudirr and his stack! Both captured failed all attempts to escape and were put to death in the main square of the Elven Capital.

Undeterred, the Dark forces battled on and finally eliminated enough Elven units to secure a tactical victory. Be careful with your weaker units, Elven players; don't leave them to defend unstacked. Also try and counterattack at the highest possible odds and counterattack any Black Dwarf unit not in doubled terrain whilst you attack from doubled terrain (which should be quite possible at the beginning of the Scenario). Nevertheless, I got a couple of G's....

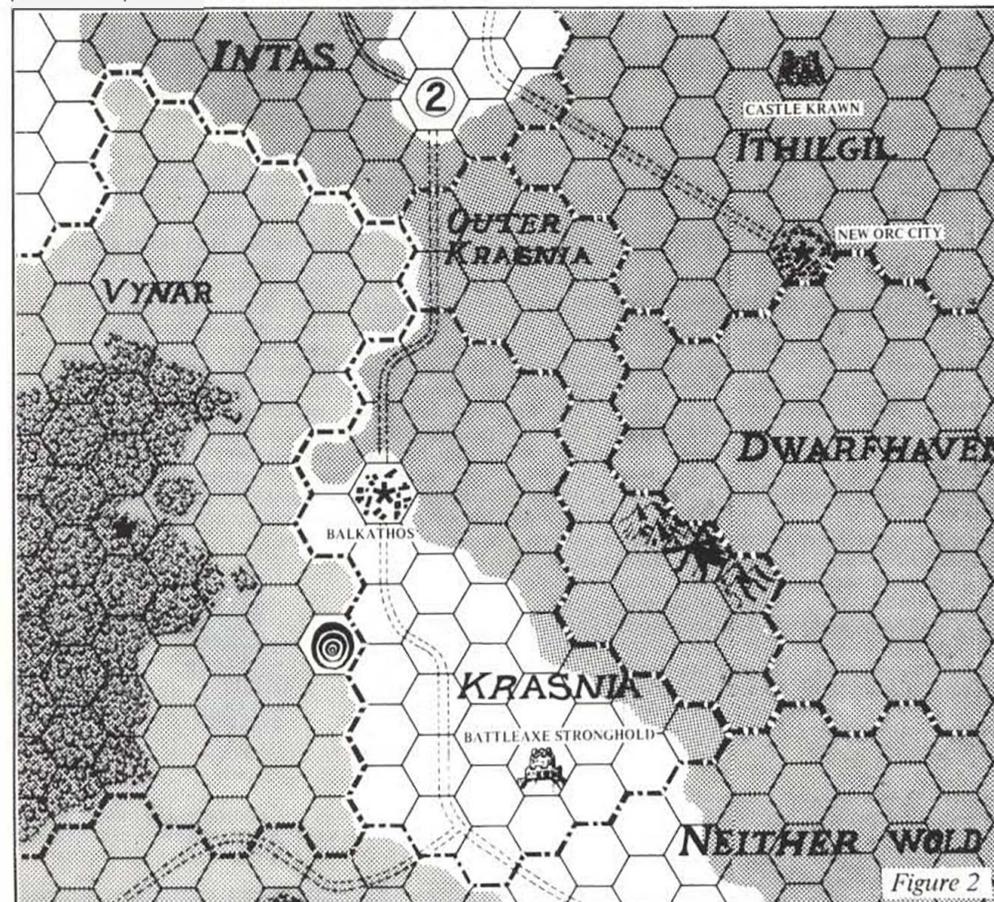


Figure 2

A few rules problems are present within the Scenario and are included within the list of Questions I have sent to SPI (see end of this article). Basically, the Victory Conditions are open to misinterpretation; it is not clear whether Krasnia (the Province) is playable, though if it isn't the game degenerates into a rather uninspiring slugfest; and we extrapolated (!) that the limits of the "Conjure Zombie Infantry" spell extend to all "Conjure" spells. We also encountered problems concerning the deployment of replacements.

Scenario One

Setting: Empire attempt to annex Endore.

This Scenario is a free-ranging fluid tussle: the forces of the Empire race to catch the Endorian forces before they can flee. Endorian leader Jeremiah Ben Ruben will probably attempt to win over and galvanise the support of various Neutral but sympathetic powers in the Valley in a grand diplomatic effort. Endorians will probably hold out as long as possible in their Capital, Castle Gund (well-known anagram and dislexic typing error). (Fig. 3). The forces of the Empire are strong and ably led by Emperor Coron the Unconquerable and a natty little number called Eodred the Sorceress who can do amazing things with vortices.

The fight should be close and Ben Ruben should not give up: a late offensive into Endore can bring victory and the Swamp Creatures can always threaten the capital of the Empire, Urf Dural, thus diverting their forces from Endore. Ben Ruben's legendary tongue can gather quite an array!

A problem common to many of the Scenarios first showed up in this one: does one keep a running tally of enemy units eliminated for Victory Point purposes or count up the dead pile at the end of the game? The rules are unclear on this situation.

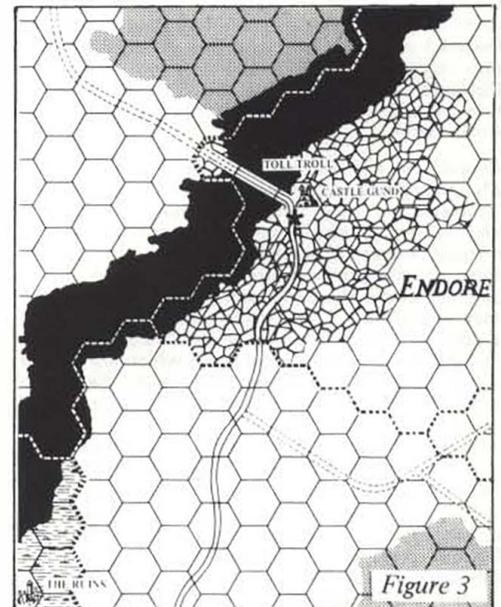


Figure 3

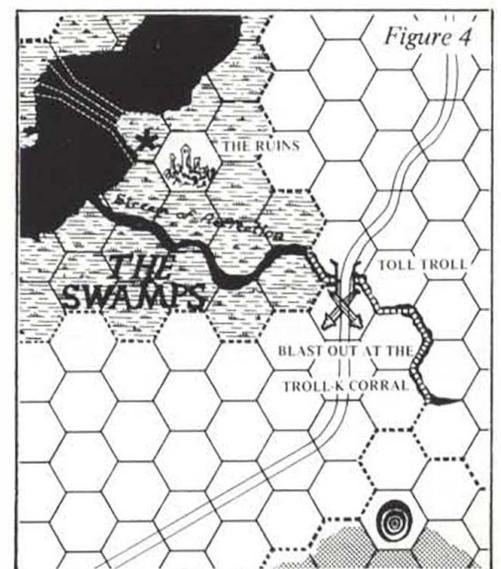


Figure 4

Scenario Hints:

- (i) Win over the Orcs quickly so as to gain Neitherworld as a base for operations for the Endorian side.
- (ii) When setting up, make sure that the Imperial forces are deployed in the *Empire*, as per case 21.21 on p. 23!

Conclusions.

The Army Game of Swords and Sorcery is flexible and mobile; fronts can change quickly and there is ample opportunity for skilful and opportunistic play. The game is fun and by no means difficult or complex. However, the rules have a number of omissions and unclear areas which are an annoyance to say the least. A comprehensive errata is required to set things right which holds true for the Quest Game also. Despite the rules problems, the Army Game is playable and very enjoyable. The same applies to the Quest Game, which we now turn to.

The Quest Game

The Quest Game utilises most of the rules of the Army Game with additional special rules for use in the Quest Game only. Whilst the Army game has separate player turns within its sequence of play, the Quest game employs largely simultaneous Game-turns. The Quest Game is for 3 or more players, to a maximum of 24, with 5 players recommended as the optimum number. Some Quests may be played by 2 players or even solitaire with a great deal of enjoyment evinced, though 3 players or more are really required to enjoy the Quest Game at its best.

At least one player takes the role of a villain character, who controls attendant forces in most scenarios, and two players become "Questers," each controlling 3 characters and no units. Questing Characters are either drawn at random from the pack of Character cards or two Characters (per Quester) are diced up using the character generation tables, the third being drawn from the Character pack. Many of the Characters drawn from the Character pack are leaders used in the Army Game.

Characters are moved via simultaneous plot; Characters may *pursue* one another should they be "enemies" if they have made *contact* with one another via a search procedure (which may be magical via spells or mechanical via the expenditure of character movement points). Army units, who are under the command of the Villain player, may also search. The pursuit, mentioned above, is a sort of "taxi, follow that cab!" situation. The Quest Game has additional spells which are neither difficult to get used to nor incorporate. Several of the Army Game spells, most notably the "conjure" spells, are not useable in the Quest Game. Combat between Characters takes place on a separate hex grid from the map using a system of hit points, fighting abilities, combat tactical modifiers and magical spells and abilities. To my mind such a system is a 100% improvement over the *The War Of The Ring* personal combat system. Combat can take place between Characters and Army Units on the game-mapsheet; Characters may attempt to *evade* Army units who will attempt to *capture* them. Captives are largely at the mercy of their captors.

A number of special terrain types are featured, such as a hex containing "The Tombs of the Damned" — barrow — strewn hills (which) are the last safe refuge for the Spectres of Ararlie. Magical items called Talismans of Orb can have a profound influence on play, as they can in the Army Game to a much more limited extent. The more powerful characters can be reincarnated, even within the course of a single Quest game!

A full summary is presented of Character abilities and one optional rule — wandering monsters — is provided, though I feel wanderers occur too frequently and lengthen the game overmuch. Perhaps a lower probability of occurrence of wanderers and attendant shorter game extensions could be tried.

12 Quests are provided, each lasting 15 turns. Be sure to get the December 1978 errata for the set-up of the Suns. Victory points are awarded for successful completion of a Quest and Victory Points are lost should a Questing character be slain. Villain Characters gain Victory Points for slaying Questing Characters.

The Quests are great fun and have a great "atmosphere" despite some rules problems. Here's how a few of them worked out:

Quest L : Beauty and the Beasts

This Quest is tremendous fun. The Emperor "has barged all those truly desirous of his daughter's hand" to bring back from the Valley of the Great Sword the head of one of each of the following : Tyrannosaurus Rex; Killer Penguin, Dragon, and Demon and Spectre. Upon return with this grisly haul to Urf Durfal, Imperial Capital, 20 Victory Points are awarded "and the Princess' hand if she is willing."

For this Quest, the "wandering monster" rule was used with a lower probability of wandering monster occurrence and shorter game extension. 3 different "parties" set off in Quest and it was not long before a sense of co-operation developed. The Emperor had chosen a difficult Quest deliberately to avoid the political problems involved in committing his daughter's hand. Spectres proved difficult and Dragons a nightmare. The remainder provided a pretty good fight as did one or two of the wanderers, especially the werewolf. Towards the end of the Scenarios, one player had achieved 4 heads, another 3 heads the other 2 heads and between them had a full "set". There only being enough time to return to Urf Durfal, a duel was arranged between all three sides in the hex 1744, situated next to the Toll Troll in Capella, just east of the Swamps. Prior to the duel, Gygax Dragonlord, one of the Questers, flew on ahead and despatched the aforementioned Troll. The 3 factions met as agreed and when the smoke cleared only Gygax remained who, in a fury, snatched up the heads and flew to Urf Durfal to cast them before the snivelling little Emperor. He refused Princess Elena's hand, largely on the grounds, one supposes, that Dragonlord might have eaten it. Black affronted, Gygax issued the Emperor with a challenge to single combat. The Emperor had no choice but to accept but proved no match for the Dragonlord who then beat a hasty retreat to his native Kelgarth, resolving that Emperors are more tricky than tough.

Quest B — The Return of the Dark Lord.

Loki Hellson, the Dark Lord, has returned from the dead in this Quest and is ensconced in a castle to the east of Rhiannon, gathering strength. The Quest is to slay him; the longer the Dark Lord stays in his castle, the more Victory Points he receives and he receives a further 5 V.P.s if he is still alive at the end of the game. As only 10 V.P.s are awarded for slaying Loki, Questing Characters must move quickly.

Only 3 intrepid adventurers could be found to take up the gauntlet: Unamit Ahazredit, that well-known Corfu Cultist, Shanghai, a fighting-man Elf; and Snorri Gundarchuksson, a jolly Endorian fighting man whose home hex is *right next to the Dark Lord's Castle* and from which the intrepid band set out. What a lucky (?) break! Straight into the action before the Dark Lord can tot up Victory Points on our approach! However, the Dark Lord did a Planar Return to the Gateway of Evil (i.e. a spell took him to his home hex faster than Andy Pandy jumped into the hamper with Loopy Loo) and the chase was on. Unfortunately, Unamit was overtaken with religious fervour on Game Turn 2, and as everyone more or less had to wait 'till he had quite finished (as they were frightened of the Dark Lord on their own) the pursuit did not get underway until Game Turn 3. As if to atone, Unamit flew the party over the main river (the Undine) and far away to where the Dark Lord was hanging out. Meanwhile, the Dark Lord had popped into the Citadel of Blood and had summoned a host of vortices as a welcoming committee in the environs. Our brave party waited until the vortices had begun to thin out, judiciously suppressing the more threatening of them and taking up a "siege" position in front of the bridge to the Citadel. They were not to be disappointed in their vigil: Loki Hellsson sallied forth and a tremendous struggle ensued.

Both Loki and Unamit cast spell screens for their respective sides. Unamit cast spells at the Dark Lord, but his spell screen protected him admirably. Hellsson waited until the fighters ventured forward and then fairly singed Snorri who promptly retreated to the comparative safety of the spell

screen. Unamit was coming to the end of his Manna as Shanghai closed on the Dark Lord. In a fierce battle, the Dark Lord bested the Elf who called to his comrades to flee for their lives (Silly idiot). They didn't need to be told twice but were sad to see that although Shanghai fought a brilliant rearguard action, the deft and cruel Dark Lord struck him down.

The dust on the road south was fairly being kicked up as our heroes fled for it. Grinning slyly, the Dark Lord moved to the Gateway of Evil, regenerated Manna and then summoned the *Continental Siege Machine*.

Complete with his very own tank, the Dark Lord came thundering after the intrepid pair. Unamit considered setting up the Rex Rotary and then thought better of painting the front of the monstrous Panzer pretty colours. Instead, they took to their heels.

Castle Gund, Capital of Endore, Snorri's beloved Endore, came into view. They ran onto the bridge across the Undine and slew the Troll (who demanded a toll) in the shadow of the Castle. Overwhelmed, Snorri fell to his knees and, yea, wept as he beheld the land and castle he loved so well. Even Ahazredit was touched at Snorri's depth of feeling, but not nearly so touched as he was by the sight of the perilous Panzer with mirthsome image ensconced atop bearing down on them. Shoving the Rex Rotary up his cassock, he cast an invisibility spell on himself and the eulogistic Snorri and as the machine approached hid Gundarchuksson and himself under the bridge. The tank roared by and Snorri whimpered as he saw the tank go in one side of Castle Gund and come out the other, leaving a rather peculiarly shaped hole clean through it. The Dark Lord grins!

The result was a Dark Lord victory, but not a true victory as he had been too long away from his Castle and had slain only one of his mentors. Note — as only 2 players were involved in this Quest, one took the Dark Lord and the other the Questing side. Only one rolled up Questing Character was used by agreement at the start of the Scenario.

Quests will be different at each playing and should be a real challenge. Turns can pass by quickly and mechanics such as plotting movement are no effort. Spells are particularly important, especially the search and counter search spells. The Personal Combat routine is very enjoyable but the Character vs. Army Combat rules require attention as they are loose and confusing. As in the Army Game, there are a number of omissions and unclear areas which cry out for Errata. Nevertheless, the Quests are very good — enjoy them!

And Swords and Sorcery? It is a very enjoyable game which is not nearly as complex and foreboding as its thick rules booklet might intimate. We have found a fair number of questions which we regard more mechanical than esoteric and agree with the game's designers that the interpretation of esoteric elements within the game is a matter for the individual; such is the essence of fantasy gaming. These mechanical questions underline the necessity of a comprehensive errata for the game; be sure to get the December 1978 Errata at least. Whatever, Swords and Sorcery represents an important and considerable step forward in the development of fantasy board wargaming and we are glad to have it in our games collection. We hope SPI make further and advancing efforts in this field; our commendation to the game is qualified by the real requirement for errata, but it is a commendation all the same.



Demon Yrgild



Spectre



Dragon

(I have a copy of the questions the author sent to S.P.I. If you want a copy please send a s.a.e. to me at P.O. Box 1 at Gorebridge. EDITOR)