

SORCERER:

A CRITIQUE BY STEPHEN & ANDREW GILHAM



Back in S&T nr 44 Feedback, one of the suggested new titles was 'Sorcerer - a fantasy science fiction game on the tactical level depicting all sorts of weird things'. In S&T 48 it resurfaced as 'Sorcerer - a fantasy/ Science fiction game, primarily involved with sword and sorcery. Various types of magic and magic practitioners are as critical, if not more so, than the actual use of conventional weapons. Many scenarios to cover the many different approaches to this subject'. With jaundiced 20/20 hindsight, we can see that even at this juncture, elements of the present turkey were emerging where we expected the definitive fantasy game.

By Moves 19 (the next month) it had been given the go-ahead, and we found to our delight that Redmond Simonsen, fresh from his great success with Starforce, had been given design-responsibility for the project. S&T 49 promised an unusual game, trading on the success of Starforce. 'Colour' surfaced in Moves 20 - very pretty, but eventually boring. We were promised popular 'Sword and Sorcery' super-heroes (sic) and a 'fast moving slam-banging game with a lot of weird surprises built into the system'. Next issue, passers-by on East

23rd Street would have been surprised by the magic bolts being flung about at SPI's offices - not to mention the demons and vortices lurking in dark corners and alleyways. At this point we still had great hope for the game, which seemed to be living up to its expectations. Even in Moves 22 we were assured that there would be 'scenarios flexible enough to assume the characters of a given literary work are operating in them'.

A month later, the finished game was announced, complete with impressive full page back of S&T advert, including a fairly elaborate shaggy dog story.

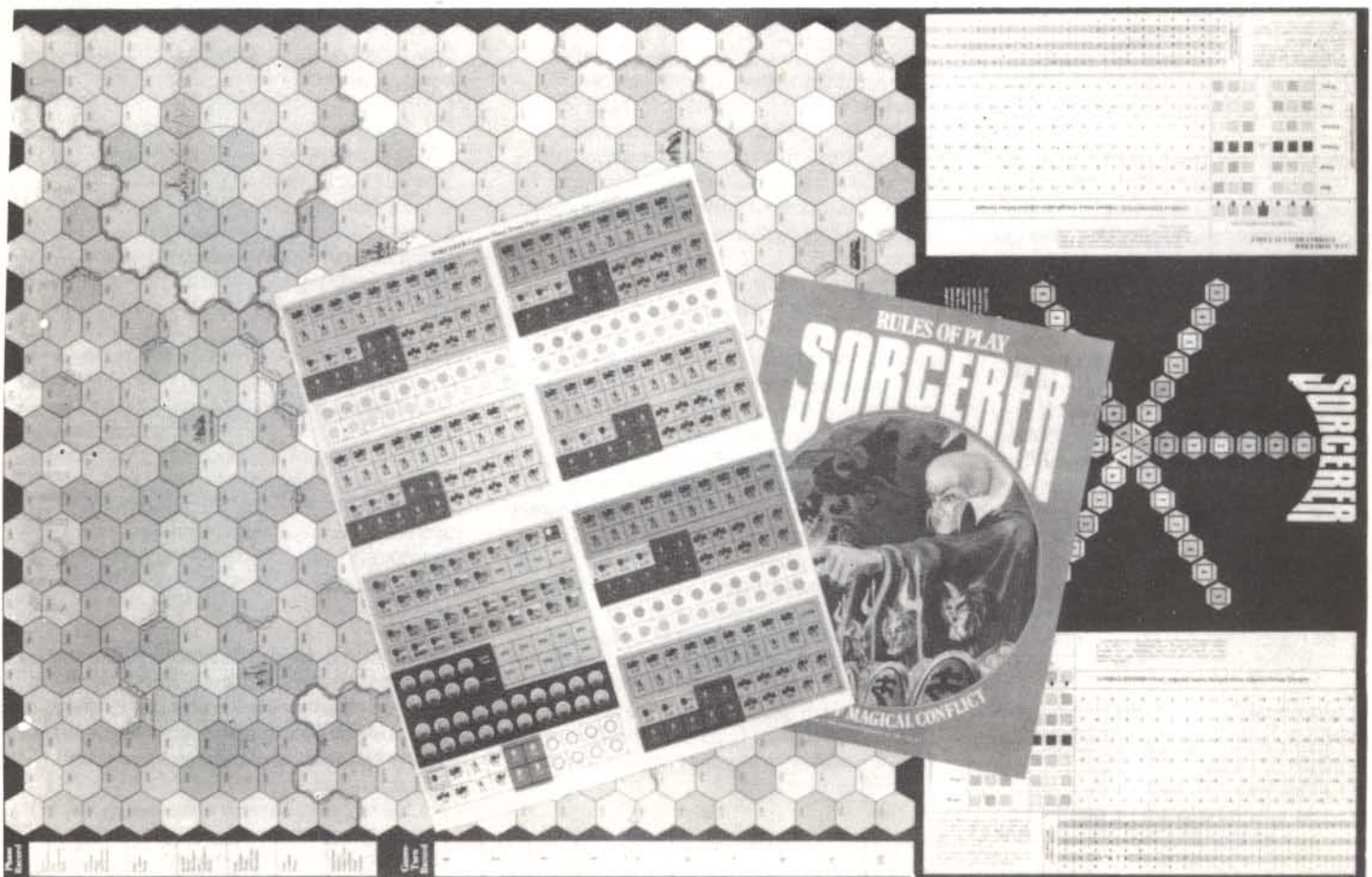
Opening the game, and donning sunglasses (not supplied), we examined the lurid four-colour map. Did we find realms of colour, with borders for the Sorcerers to do battle over? Did we tie our tongues in knots trying to pronounce 'Wollobett-akryvdyritta?' Did we find well known S&S super-heroes? Did we find a lot of weird surprises? Did we find even one werewolf or vampire? Did we find an exciting game? Are we discouraged? No, yes, no, no, no, no, *no yes!!*

To be blunt, the game is boring. In more detail, movement is boring, conjuration is boring, teleportation is boring, magic bolts and vortices are boring, attrition is boring, combat is boring and hex conversion is as bad, if not worse than the rest.

To be fair, however, let us examine the points upon which these conclusions rest.

The sequence of play, is in its essentials 'first player moves, both fight, second player moves, both fight'. In as far as it goes this is all right, but little would have been needed to be done to institute continuous combat as in 'Punic Wars' - give a Sorcerer 20MP, and make the cost-to-fight 5MP, give all other units one extra MP, and make their cost-to-fight 1MP if you really want to try this.

Game equipment. The map resembles a psychadaelic dayglo patchwork quilt. Only the rather splendid magical units - 7-3 trolls, 5-9 demons, 3-15 dragons, and fortresses of various flavours, and the 'snowflake' colour-value chart show the special influence of the Art Director at SPI. The Sorcerers themselves look like Jackie Pallo in silhouette, and the human infantry



are dull (at least though, they aren't cross-in-box symbols).

Movement is almost standard, but... Essentially, independently operating magicals have to pay a movement point penalty to leave their first hex of the phase, a penalty equal to the combat strength augmentation they enjoy in that hex. This practically renders trolls immobile, and reduces a game to the point where only sorcerers and their retainues can move. This counts against a game, even when there are a comparatively large number of leaders - e.g. 'Frederick the Great' - but when there may only be one or two Sorcerers per side, this is a fatal flaw.

The limited area covered by the map - 23 x 23 hexes - with the fringes of the map virtually out of play - combined with the vast (15MP) allowances of Sorcerers reduces any importance of position, without even requiring teleportation. Teleportation consists of moving from a hex of your power colour to a similar, non-Enemy-occupied hex at a cost of 1 MP, or five MP if a human infantry unit comes along for the ride. This is effectively shifting without randomization (Starforce). For a quick-and-dirty fix use the randomization table from Starforce, reading 1 hex for 1 lite, with depletion instead of neutralisation.

Conjuration ; why, oh why does it take sixteen hours (5MP out of 15) to conjure a demon army? Can they not tape-record the spell, then play it back faster? Per-riandrenn's nonsense verse must have been rather serendipitous - one Tra-la-la instead of a Fol-de-rol and anything could have happened! But, to be serious, this is what happens: in a hex of your colour, you expend MP's to combat the strength of the unit to be conjured - and what is more, the hex may contain no other magicals. Apart from the strength differences of the unit types, they do not differ. This is the weakness in the system - one's only decision is to conjure whatever can be afforded.

Magic bolts. These are a means of attacking other units during your movement phase, to soften up enemy stacks to weaken them for their coming combat phase. The trouble with bolts is that they are too weak - a two colour sorcerer can fling bolts only of strength ten, and against stacks typically worth fifteen this verges upon the ineffectual. Possibly they have all been equipped with copper wire so they can ground their weapons, leading the bolts harmlessly to earth? In fact, they are just another reason for not playing fast-and-loose with lone units.

Vortexes: these are just as useless. We have never seen these do anything worthwhile. They are only effective against lone magicals, and one-colour sorcerers tomfool enough to leave their hexes of power. Even if one finds a hex susceptible to vortex damage, often as not (if not more so) the vortexes will scatter in some other direction. Conjuring them is a waste of time, and destroying them all the more so. You could try allowing new vortexes to be aimed on their first turn, giving some reason for conjuring them in the first place.

Hex conversion. For just 15MP's you have the privilege of being able to convert a white (all six colours at once) hex to one of your own favorite colours. This is also an important victory condition for many scenarios (yawn).

Attrition; or 'Old demons never die, they only fade away ! This unfortunately sums it up, lone magicals left to their own devices will fade away back to their own continua. This makes them that much more ineffective especially as attrition is fiercest on the most favourable colours for combat.

Combat: like the test matches, combat usually ends in an ineffectual draw. Combat is by differential, using effectively a different table for each pair of colour relationships.

Results are in the form of loss points; for each loss point, a unit must be 'depleted', i.e. flipped, to reveal a weaker unit. The form of the combat results table makes it very difficult to successfully attack units on hexes of their own colour, and if you can work up some sort of parity of forces, losses for both sides will be about even, and usually only about one loss point each. Since depletion can be 'repaired' by sorcerers in their next movement phase, by the time the next combat phase comes around the defending units are back to full strength and can repulse the attackers. Fortresses especially are virtually immune to attack. (One interesting anomaly is that a sorcerer in a fortress enables it to use its normally bracketed combat strength in attack. One wonders how this is achieved).³

Some units, however, are relatively easy to destroy, to wit, lone magical units. In fact, the whole system seems engineered to prevent magical units from exercising any independent action. This is quite correct within the rationale given for the game, but effectively reduces your unit count to two or three (the number of sorcerers you start with): a recipe for a dull game.

Optional rules, or 'stopcloning around': these probably represent a last minute attempt to add interest to the game. They usually are not worth the trouble. Cloning allows multicolour sorcerers to split down into two or three one-colour sorcerers. It is hard to think of situations where this is worthwhile, even though it does enable you to convert more white hexes to colour. In theory, it enables more units to be conjured, but this is the least of your worries. Many games, in their later stages, see 'expendable' magical units fading away through attrition.

The stacking and combat rules forbid more than two units to attack a given hex, so surplus units are quite useless.

So much for cloning; cloak of invisibility, hiding and assassination are just paperwork; magic flux means one colour disappears for a turn, and if your colour goes too often, you might as well resign; Shir, the black sorcerer, son of Gorm, is a bit of local colour (joke). He exists merely to stir and unfortunately requires an extra player. He is the offspring of a two-colour sorcerer and a demon (or demoness, is it?). He is a 12-15 intelligent vortex who can conjure undead human infantry.

The module on creation of new spells is very attractive at first glance, but, as the cookery book said, first catch your spells. The suggested spells are a bit ludicrous (give me a workable time travel rule), and in inventing one's own spells, the difficulty is in finding one which is worthwhile but will not win the game on its own, thus making the game slightly silly. It's too much like the atom bomb in 'Global War', only more risky to build (sorcerers can get killed developing spells, and this is one of those games where the sorcerer represents *you*).

Still, the game might survive all this if only the scenarios were fun. They're not. 'Education of Periandrenn' teaches you that optimum play requires no imagination, and is very dull (worse than the 'rescue mission' in 'Starforce'). Most of the Two-player scenarios are overbalanced, and turn on victory points - and you get lots of points for converting hexes. So, you ignore the other player, and spend your time converting hexes. The, uh, 'historical notes' are the most interesting part of any scenario. They sure do have loose morals, those sorcerers. They are about on the level of certain of the Roman Emperors.⁴

Arnold Handrick's additional scenarios in Moves 25 are a better bunch altogether, though the sorcerers have some unusual pastimes. In 'Starforce', the twist was that the commanders were female. In 'Sorcerer' the twist is slightly different.

All in all, 'Sorcerer' is pretty bad. It suffers from Redmond Simonsen's 'points for this, points for that' idea, which was great in 'Starforce', so-so in 'Dixie' and just out of context in 'Sorcerer'. The system is original, even unique, and that too is a problem. It is virtually impossible to represent your favourite fictional heroes within the colour framework, so you are stuck with the rather nameless, faceless crowd of alphabetically coded sorcerers (Nbar., Btha, Benm, and Yyri - solicitors and commissioners for oaths). The odd system means that any obscure rules point must be hunted down and checked, there being no 'common-sense' solution. The mathematical nature of the combat routine is not what is wanted here, and makes the game too predictable. The Player's Notes are either obvious or irrelevant. Maybe someone knows how to play this game for fun and is not telling. From where we sit, it is a lemon.

Footnotes:

- 1: 'Operation Chaos' by Paul Anderson. Lancer Books 1971. A mention of a device to turn or implode a shell within microseconds.
- 2: 'Swords Against Death' by Fritz Leiber. Mayflower, c.1968. This tactic was successfully employed by Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.
- 3: 'Earthman Come Home' by James Blish. Faber. We favour the piledriver technique used by the Interstellar Master Traders, formerly Gravitogorsk, Mars, in their outrageous Vega Five.
- 4: 'The Twelve Caesars' by Suetonius. Penguin. The section on Tiberias is representative.