

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode I**

By DemoMonkey

(Wherein our hero is intrigued by a new game, and the refining process begins.)

“Hi, it’s Matt. How would you like a free trip to GenCon?”

For me, that’s how it all started.

Matt Robinson (and if you don’t know the name, check the back of your rulebook) called me in January of 2000 and told me that a mutual acquaintance named Kevin Barrett (check that rulebook again!), was working on a new miniatures game and needed a local group to playtest the game and then demonstrate it at GenCon. The trip alone would have been enough to pique my interest, but then Matt told me something that hooked me irretrievably; he told me that the figures would be collectible like a card game and that all the game statistics would be on a rotating dial **RIGHT ON THE FIGURE!**

Now I’ll be honest, the first thought that ran through my head was very cynical; I didn’t think it could be done, because I couldn’t believe a product that complex could be built at a reasonable price. Imagine all the things that could go wrong! This was the first, and probably last, time I doubted the genius of Jordan Weisman’s idea. The possibilities if it could be done though, were tempting enough that I couldn’t resist. A collectible miniatures game without clumsy record keeping or heavy books of reference charts could draw people into miniatures gaming who might otherwise never have given the genre a chance. Doubts and all, I was in.

The first playtest session I attended was in Kevin’s basement, and it was an interesting experience. Kevin, Matt, Derek, Mike, Curtis and Chris were all present, and “Alpha Test” was born. The session was pure brainstorming, and the concepts were flying fast and furious. Once the basic concepts were explained, everybody had a new idea to throw into the mix. Some of them (such as Army Sets and Unique Figures) were eventually incorporated into the game, while others are still to come, but it was clear right from Day 1 there was no shortage of either enthusiasm or creativity!

Sadly, that first playtest session was the beginning of the end for one of Kevin’s favorite portions of the game—“Playing For Keeps”. The original concept behind the capture rules was that if you captured an opponent’s piece and held it captive at the end of the game, you kept it! A “Prisoner Exchange” was then conducted, beginning with the player who won the game, allowing them to return one captive piece to an opponent and getting back one of their own figures in return. When your opponent had no more prisoners to exchange, you could keep all the remaining figures you had captured from them, and vice versa.

All the playtesters had CCG experience, and I think everybody except Kevin knew immediately – that idea doesn’t work! The only way you can play a game like that is if the pieces have only trivial value. If the game was a hit, the collectibility of the pieces would make them valuable (at least to the players) and no one would want to “gamble” with them. If the game was a flop, the rule would be irrelevant because no one would be playing the game at all. Our reasoning was, why include a rule that assumes your game won’t be successful in the first place?

It took another 5 or 6 playtest sessions, but despite some valiant rearguard debating by Kevin, the capture rules were amended to the somewhat more “player friendly” version found in the rulebook. They were retained because they were still fun, and provided an interesting tactical option. If we’d known then how much extra work they’d cost us...

Oddly enough, there weren’t any actual games played at that first session, but we all did get our first look at the rules. They were already up to version 5.0 before playtesting even began (Kevin is such a perfectionist!), 7 pages long, completely without examples and illustrations, and entitled simply “Mini Wars” rules. The games 8 factions, barely described, were the Human “Grunts”, ½ Elf “Hybrids”, Orcs, Trolls, Nightstalkers, Golems, Vampires and Dragonkind; players built a 100 pt. Army of them for a standard game. The movement rules were vague, the terrain rules were flawed, only ½ of the special abilities were even assigned colours, the capture rules were gambling, and with the victory conditions linked to the capture rules nobody was quite sure how the game was supposed to end.

We loved it anyway.

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode II**

(Wherein the name gets changed, the game gets played, and the horror of “Keening” is revealed).

The second playtest session was very different from the first. Brian had joined our group\*, the rules had changed to version 6.0, the game had been renamed “Magii”, and there were actual miniatures on the table! They weren’t Mage Knight figures of course, but they were better than nothing. It would be months before the first MK figures would be molded: in fact it would be weeks before even the first proto-type dial could be constructed. We had no way of knowing if the project would even prove technically feasible, but we were determined that the rules, at least, would be complete.

Without MK figures, we were forced to use whatever fantasy miniatures we could scrounge from our personal collections. (I played a lot of Elemental and Black Powder armies that looked, to the untrained eye, like great hordes of skeletons and zombies.) The miniatures were stuck to metal washers that matched the diameter of the base specifications. The stats for the figures were printed on spreadsheets, in a format very similar to those provided recently to a gaming magazine; damage was marked by either scratching off columns or moving one of those versatile metal washers along the track. It was a long running playtester joke to suggest to Kevin “Hey, why don’t we put all this information right on some sort of circular dial, right on the figure? That would be so much easier!”

He never got tired of that one.

In the interests of posterity, (and to show that ANYBODY can play wrong the first time!), here’s a battle report from that first evening.

#### **ORC RAIDERS vs ORC\ELEMENTAL LEAGUE**

My first MK army was an all Orc Raider force. Sure, I had been warned that they were meant as a supplementary faction and might not have the figure mix required to stand alone, but I was certain my wargaming experience would carry the day. I had a cunning plan: all ranged attacks!

Several Orc Slashers, a weak Shaman, and a Chaos Mage later, I was ready to take the field against the devious Derek. He had chosen a Chaos Mage as well, supported by Troll Brawlers. Only 1 of his figures had a ranged attack! My victory seemed certain.

Terrain was then set up according to the complex and formal system used during the initial sessions; both of us put some of whatever we had on the table. Then one of us would say “How does that look to you?”. The other would reply “Yeah, that looks good.” Then we’d start playing. This system was of course far too intricate for the published version, so we were later forced to develop the “Setting The Scene” rules.

Over the first 3 turns Derek’s troops closed the gap between the armies, while I maneuvered mine into a small wedge shaped area between a blocking terrain domino and a water terrain felt cut-out. I positioned my Slashers in front and the Shaman and Chaos Mage behind them, planning to take full advantage of the Magic Blast ability. Ready for the assault I awaited my prey.

On my Turn 4, Derek's troops were less than 12" away from my Chaos Mage, on the other side of the domino; he thought he was safe for that turn. I fired the Magic Blast at him, and the first rule argument was begun.

"But you can't see me!"

"Don't have to."

Rules printout consulted.

"Isn't that just for hindering terrain?"

"Umm, I don't think so..."

"KEVIN!!! We need a ruling!"

I was, of course, correct. Derek was, of course, unfairly angry that I hadn't given him any warning. And, of course, I missed.

The next turn Derek passed in order to rest his army, and I elected to push my Chaos Mage in order to take another shot at the onrushing hordes. The attack roll was a hit, the damage dice was rolled to great hooting and cheering (we had an audience at that point), and the result was- a 1. At the end of the action, BOTH Chaos mages had taken a click of damage and lost their Magic Blast ability. Sadly, for the remainder of the game it never occurred to either of us that even without the Special Ability the figure still has a 12" ranged attack.

Turn 5, the Trolls advanced and the horrible futility of trying to use Range 4 attacks to force a stand off with Speed 6 creatures became suddenly clear. The Trolls moved to range 6, outside of the Slasher's range but close enough to move into b2b with another move. Realizing I would probably never even get a shot, I moved the Slashers into b2b with the Trolls myself, reasoning "The Trolls all have action tokens on them. Derek probably won't push them to attack me."

It was forcibly impressed on my unfortunate minions that this was very, very bad tactics indeed. 4 turns later, with all my figures eliminated and only 1 eliminated Troll brawler to show for their efforts, I began petitioning for Orc Bowmen. I'm still waiting for them, but we did decide to try giving the Orcs Body Armour (later, Battle Armour) so that at least they could close with ranged attackers. They certainly couldn't force a stand off!

Derek, in the meantime, was setting the table for game 2, which was unmercifully brief.

## ORC RAIDERS vs NECROPOLIS SECT

I took the Orcs again (what can I say, I'm stubborn) and my devious weasel of a cheating trollop opponent (note to self, edit that part out later) took a Necropolis Sect force that included several Screeching Terrors. The Screeching Terrors had an untested ability called "Keening" which proved, to say the least, decisive.

Turns 1 and 2 the armies approached each other.

Turn 3, Derek moved his Screeching Terrors to Range 8, taking unusual care to ensure they were more than 8 “ from each other. I had no idea why he was positioning his figures so carefully, but in response, I moved my entire army to Range 4 to enable the Slashers to ranged attack the next turn.

Turn 4, the Screeching Terrors push in order to use “Keening” on the entire Orc force. At the time the ability worked out to the figures full range, and did full damage to every target hit! 2 good die rolls later my entire army had evaporated. Righteously indignant with Derek for not giving me any warning, I conceded immediately, turned to Kevin (who couldn’t decide whether to be amused or horrified) and said “That’s gotta go!”.

So the next time you face a Shockwave figure across the MK table, give thanks to those brave, doomed Orcs. Without their sacrifice, it would be worse. Much, much, much worse.

By DemoMonkey

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode III**

(Wherein our hero discovers the value of NOT playing, the movement rules get “Simplified”, and the Order of Vladd is re-pointed. Again. And again. And again.)

But first, a note to my loyal readers...

It has never been the intention of this humble chronicler to describe every playtest session in chronological order, for two very good reasons. One, it would take forever to do so, and two (more importantly), it would be boring!

I do hope to recount the highlights of the process however, so the next three episodes will cover the Early, Middle and Late Stages of the playtesting. Episode VI will cover – well, you’ll just have to wait and see, won’t you?

#### **The Early Sessions**

The early playtests were all conducted with the same philosophy – play fast, play aggressive, play again! We needed to test as many different combinations of figures as possible, under as many different situations as possible, against as many different opponents as possible, in order to get the widest statistical sample of results. Early games were conducted with a bloodthirsty disregard for the safety of the troops that would both astonish and horrify the average player now.

Demo: “I move my formation closer, to here.”

Brian: “Your front figure is in range of my Ranged attack.”

Demo: “So? I have more figures than you do, range boy. FORWARD!!!”

The problem was that moving the figures was taking so long that there wasn’t enough time to do all the combat that was needed to give the figures a good shakedown. We began to debate a couple of changes to the movement rules that would speed play, but couldn’t agree on them immediately. At this point I volunteered to spend more of the playtest sessions watching the other games, and sifting the comments from other playtesters, rather than playing matches myself. As a neutral observer I could better judge whether rules changes needed to be recommended to Kevin, or whether someone had just had an off game.

(Rumours that I stopped playing because I never won a game are completely and maliciously unfounded. I’m sure I must have won a game some time; I just can’t remember the details. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.)

Eventually changes were made to streamline the movement system (patience, all will be revealed in the next Episode explaining the “Philosophy of Mage Knight”). Once movement became less of a chore, the basic elegance of the combat system began to shine. Free to position their figures precisely as they wanted, players could focus on the tactics and pacing of their attacks. Combats were fast, furious, and fun. We all became confident that we had the major issues solved, and looked forward to wrapping up our portion of the playtesting early.

Then came Vladd.

The original version of the Order of Vladd was called, surprisingly enough, “Order of Vladd” , had Flight, Vampirism and Protection from Magic, didn’t have Command (because it didn’t exist yet!) and was 46 points. The first game it was played in was against a force composed entirely of figures costing 20 points each or less. It wasn’t even close. At the end of the battle the opposing army had been utterly destroyed, the almighty Vladd was down precisely two clicks of damage, and we were all suddenly a LOT less confident.

Vladd was the first figure to seriously challenge our pre-conceptions about the point value system. Repeated play of the flying meat grinder confirmed that it was far, far too powerful for it’s point cost. The cost was immediately recalculated, of course, modifying the intricate point evaluation system that Kevin and Matt had designed (I believe this was when the dart board and chickens blood were added to the process) , but we still weren’t satisfied. There was a larger issue at stake, namely “Can large numbers of small figures take out one strong figure of equal points?”. We knew the answer had to be “YES”, we just weren’t sure how.

The first step was to tweak the close combat formation rules to make swarming the beefy figures easier. “in base contact with the same opposing figure” (instead of in contact with each other), “ any warrior in the formation is in contact with the target’s rear arc” (instead of the primary attacker only), restricting free spins to the moment an opposing figure makes contact (instead of anytime an opponent is in b2b), and “Heal ONE click on this warrior” (on Vampirism) put us a lot closer. Vladd was still winning consistently, but at least he had to work for it.

So he was re-pointed again, revising the calculation system to take into account that raising a statistic on a powerful figure 1 or 2 points has a very different effect than giving a weak figure the same bonus. (More darts, more chicken blood, more frenzied long distance consultation of JoJo the Math Savant. “Yeah, definitely needs 1 less slot of Vampirism, yeah, yeah, He’s a very good flyer, yeah, very good flyer. Tuesday is Salisbury Steak day, yeah, yeah, don’t give him any more abilities, yeah.)

Finally we were ready for the big showdown. In one corner, Order of Vladd 4.0 and his hemoglobin depleted Necropolis support troops: in the other, an Atlantean Magus and a wave of Utem weenies. With a sell-out crowd watching , the battle was a hard fought one, and the Necropolis player played with enormous skill and determination; anything less than brilliance would have made the results less conclusive. In the end, there was only one possible outcome. The almighty Order of Vladd was completely –

DEFEATED!!!

Wounded early by a non-magical ranged attack by the Magus, and unrelentingly mugged by assorted Crossbowmen and Guardsmen too numerous to count, the flying meat grinder was at last brought low. Balance had been restored, and all was right with the world. Vladd had been proven beatable.

I just wish I hadn’t been playing him at the time.

By DemoMonkey.

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode IV**

(In which the secrets of the point calculation system are not explained, cross border feedback begins in earnest, rules compression begins, and an actual base is seen by simian eyes. All this, and the “Philosophy of Mage Knight” too!)

#### **The Middle Sessions**

By the time playtesting was half done, there was a lot of feedback from groups and conventions across the US that had to be incorporated into the design process. Going by the theory that “Many heads are better than one”\*, Matt, Jordan, Ray and others had been going to every possible convention and running demo games furiously, and there were many, many comments and suggestions to assimilate.

Our task was rendered considerably more challenging by the fact that frequently the comments and suggestions were contradictory. ConflictTool players thought the movement and combat rules were overly simplistic, while complete novices to miniatures gaming thought they were too complicated in places to be fun. Of course we had no choice but to accommodate the people who really knew what they were talking about.

So we simplified the rules.

A good example of that simplification is how the movement rules evolved. In order to minimize confusion and allow combat to get started fast & furious, rules and conventions that impede movement were trimmed away or never adopted in the first place. Measurement at any time was implemented because, contrary to popular wisdom, we found it actually speeded play, by reducing argument time if nothing else. The “Free Spin” was implemented because the leap-frogging tactic of always moving a figure past the enemy in order to contact their rear arc was slowing games down, as well as looking completely ridiculous. Finally, the controversial “Line of Movement” rules, allowing players to move their figures along a line of movement even if the figures base would not fit in the space (as long as there was room at the end of the move for the base) were instituted.

The line of movement rules are interesting because it was one of the first major breaks with realism in favour of playability. At first figures were moved along the tabletop normally and had to stop when their bases came into contact with an opposing warrior. The problem was, it was difficult to measure a line of movement for a figure if you were trying NOT to come in contact with a given opposing warrior. How far away from the edge of the opposing warriors base did you have to keep the flexi-ruler in order to ensure that your figure would not contact it?\*\*. It wasn’t an impossible problem of course, but it was certainly an inconvenience. I even went as far as to design cardboard “Zone of Contact” arcs to be placed on the opposing figures. Funnily enough, almost as soon as the game was released an enthusiastic player designed a far more elaborate version and posted it on several sites, not realizing that it was no longer required. Great minds really do think alike.

It was during one particularly complicated melee that Gus (bless his heart) suggested, “Why don’t we just say that the measuring line can’t cross a figure base, just like a ranged attack? It’s kind of artificial, but at least it’s clear and people won’t spend all night arguing over it.” After a brief moment of stunned silence, we all agreed enthusiastically, and that slogan became both the mantra of our playtest team and a good summation of the philosophy of



MageKnight : “It’s clear, and people won’t spend all night arguing over it.” Really, what more could you want from a game?

It was also around this time that streamlining of the Victory conditions began. The original ones, including “playing for keeps” and “surrendering the field”, had never been fully playtested both because they were too long and involved and because the early games were too action oriented. In order to test the figures as fully as possible we had been playing highly aggressive games, with little concern for the final point scores. That had to change in order to more accurately reflect how players out to win would actually play the game.

The “no bookkeeping” principle that drove the games design dictated that the scoring system be based entirely on the point values of the figures and not abstract battlefield considerations, such as capturing territory. There would be room enough for those sort of ideas in special scenario events; for the core rules, we needed something that was “clear, and people won’t spend all night arguing over it.” Point values for figures eliminated and double points for figures captured was easy; to that we added points for friendly figures left in play at the end of the game, reasoning that a Warlord who defeated their opponent with minimal losses deserved a bigger victory than a Warlord whose own army was destroyed in the process. The “surrendering the field rules”, which were originally designed with ongoing games in mind, were simplified to the current “Withdrawing” rules, which still allowed a player the option of leaving the game with a portion of their normal points. And finally, all the arguments over chess-like stalemate rules were resolved by stating that the game could end by mutual agreement, a remarkably elegant solution that our hardcore gamer brains took weeks to come up with. Feedback on the changes was good, and the group was again confident that the rules were nearly finished.

Then Kevin told us we’d have to lose a third of them.

12 pages, all inclusive, that’s all we were allotted for space. The rules could be that long and no longer. To this day, I don’t actually know why, but we all had enough faith in Kevin and Jordan to accept that if they said we could only do a 12-page rulebook, then there must be a compelling reason. With a ruthless persecution of what Kevin called “Excess Verbage”, and with no regard to the outstanding brilliance of some contributors work (my poor volley fire rules, oh the pain, the pain) the rules were re-written again and again to find the maximum ratio of clarity to brevity. If a rules function was clear in the portion of the rulebook it appeared in, it wasn’t repeated in every portion of the rules it affected, so we had to be CERTAIN that we had written the best possible rule in the first place. It was difficult work, and at times very frustrating for the whole team.

Then, one session, we heard a noise. It was a very small noise, and it was coming from Kevin. He was ticking.

No, not ticking; he was clicking! He had a base, an actual prototype Mage Knight figure base pat. pend., and it worked! It actually worked! (We all clicked it unmercifully to check.) The game really was going to be made, and our team’s hard work really was going to be appreciated. We were ecstatic.

Then of course, we went back to sticking zombies onto washers with putty and pretending they were amazons.

By DemoMonkey.

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode V**

(In which art is admired, terminology bantered, promo's designed and the madness of last minute changes begun. Plus we have a beer!)

#### **The Late Sessions**

As the start time for production approached, pressure on "Alpha Test"\* began to build. All the "why don't we "and" what if they..." ideas had to be hammered into "it works like..." and "they can..." rules, or scrapped for good. As examples, at this stage "Surrendering the field" and Elevated Terrain were scrapped, while Polearm and Command got hammered.

"Surrendering the field" as I've touched on before, was a way of allowing a player to decide whether to continue the battle at the point their army was reduced to ½ strength. It was an excellent idea conceptually, but it took too many lines of text to explain how the process of counting VP's differed from the standard rules. It was also much better suited to league play, where a continuous running score was kept, and we weren't prepared to write organized league rules before the game was even released!

Elevated Terrain was abandoned (wait for it) because it was just too complicated. Based on the collected gaming experience of the designers and playtesters we concluded that elevated terrain caused more arguments in miniatures games than any 3 other rules combined. Unsurprisingly, we considered that something to avoid, so just disallowing it entirely was hugely freeing.

2 weeks before the deadline on the rulebook we were instructed to put in elevated terrain rules. AAAAAAGGH!!! Panic! Confusion! Frantic late night gaming! And of course, e-mails, e-mails, e-mails!

In the end, a compromise was reached. The simplest possible rules for elevated terrain would go in the rulebook, and the Advanced rules would be posted on the website for those players interested in more complexity. Simplicity and ease of play for new players had to be preserved, even if that meant leaving the hard-core players drooling and howling for more. An entire series of Advanced Terrain rules were planned for the faithful and fanatic, and will hopefully someday see e-publication.

Command was a relative latecomer to the process; we had an extra Grey slot in the damage field and needed to assign a special ability to it. The actual idea came from outside the core group to create "Commanders" (hence the name) that would give a player's army an extra action each. The ability lasted precisely one week in that form, as EVERY SINGLE PLAYTESTER abandoned building armies based on factions and switched over to "How many figures with Command can I squeeze into 200 pts ?". I'm not sure that even one complete game was played before the unanimous decision was made that it didn't matter what the ability cost, it was broken, broken, broken.

To fix the problem, classic 3 Little Bears style playtesting was applied, a technique anyone who has ever done any playtesting will recognize, even if they've never heard the term before. First the ability was scaled back to give one extra action on a roll of 5-6 ("this ability is too hot"), then scaled back again to one action on a 6 ("but this ability is too cold"), then enhanced with the ability to rally demoralized troops ("This ability is just right."). When the

ability was useful enough that players wanted to use it but not so powerful as to doom a player who didn't, we were ready to move on.

Polearm's original effect was a 2" ranged attack that was not blocked by intervening figures. This worked, but since it required an action to use its usefulness was very limited. By changing it to a reflexive ability that didn't require an action, two things were accomplished. One, the ability became much more useful, and Two, we unwittingly gave ourselves timing questions.

Every effort had been made during playtesting to make timing issues not just simple, but actually irrelevant. Having seen several games that we played and loved turned into nightmare jungles of timing questions in which only the rules lawyers prospered\*\*, we were determined to eliminate every possible point of dispute. Ideally the answer to the question "What order do X, Y, and Z happen in?" would always be "Doesn't make any difference.", and the rules were written accordingly. Unfortunately, Polearms reflexive nature made that goal impossible. The timing issues revolving around it's use are pretty simple compared to those of most CCG's, and have all been posted, discussed and explained, but it never fails to make us grind our teeth in self annoyance when they come up. It should come as no surprise that no one will take credit for suggesting the change to the ability in the first place. I only know it wasn't me; I wasn't even there that session, regardless of what everyone says. I was out of the country, yeah, that's the ticket, out of the country. And I couldn't have made the suggestion even if I had been there, because I don't speak any English, yeah, that's it, no English. So it wasn't me.

Once trivial issues like what the special abilities actually did were resolved, it was time to deal with the important issues: what they were called. "Keening", which to this day retains the dubious honour of being Kevin's worst suggestion, was replaced with the far more impressive "Shockwave". "Protection from Magic" became "Magic Immunity" to help convey the idea that it blocked helpful magical effects as well as harmful ones. "Weapon Specialist" was altered to "Weapon Master" because, well, because frankly "Weapon Specialist" was dull. Finally, and after much bitter debate, "Super Kangaroo Power Ultra" was changed to "Flight". One job down, 237 to go.

While the great minds of Alpha Test were debating these weighty matters, final feedback from the "head office" showed us how close to a finished product we were getting. Artists mockups of the figs were uploaded to us so that we could ooh and ahh over them. Some of them went into production virtually unchanged, while others...let's just say, Brown wasn't always flattering. Some of the sculpts had to be put into production almost immediately if we were to have anything ready in time for GenCon, so we provided stats for an upgraded version of some of the commons to be made as promotional figures. These would provide us with demo figures and handouts, as the full set would definitely not be ready before the convention. It never even occurred to us how insanely high the demand for the promo's would be. We were just happy that we wouldn't have to use mock-ups!

We had no idea what we were in for.

By DemoMonkey (Oh yeah, almost forgot. There was some liquid celebrating involved when the rules were finally put to bed. I don't remember a lot of the details, but I do remember Chocolate Boost shooters, several incredibly bad renditions of "Barrett's Privateers", and an inflatable sheep. I think Chris still has it.)

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode VI**

(In which the travel gods conspire against our hero, rental cars are sorely tested, and the public sees AND plays Mage Knight for the very first time. Plus the rules get changed – again!)

#### **The Wrath of GenCon**

As the big weekend approached, we began to prepare for battle. Most of us had never been to GenCon before; in fact, two of our members were complete Con virgins. Milwaukee would NOT be gentle with them.

“DemoMonkeys, under your seats you will find a convention survival kit containing: Four 6-sided dice, Two pens (blue), Eight note cards (unlined), Two double sided tape measures (marked in both centimeters and inches), One emergency ration granola bar, Eight sticks of mandatory breath freshening gum (flavoured), One compass, Two 18” lengths of string, Ten waterproof matches, 2 oz of sticky putty (non-explosive), One Canadian to American dictionary, One copy of the current Mage Knight rules, Three dozen latex prophylactics (unflavoured), One vial cyano-acrylate adhesive, One highly inaccurate map of Milwaukee, One “Vendors” pass, and 400 dollars in gold Kruggerands.”

Most of Alpha Test was flying out early Wednesday evening so that they could get settled into the hotel in Milwaukee and get a good night’s sleep before the madness began. Derek and I however, couldn’t arrange to catch the early plane, so the plan was for us take a later flight, check in, and meet everyone at the Con the next morning. Like all plans, it failed to survive contact with the enemy.

Arriving the recommended 90 minutes before flight time, I went to the luggage check in and received the first of that day’s rude surprises. I was told bluntly that my flight had been cancelled. Another flight to Milwaukee via Chicago was available however, leaving only an hour and 25 minutes later than the original. Yay.

After locating a similarly disgruntled Derek and buying 3\$ airport coffee, we settled into an extended game of “Geek Trivia”\* while we waited. And waited. And waited. The flight was delayed twice more before the boarding room staff began tentatively offering “travel vouchers” to anyone willing to take a flight at 11 AM the next day, an option we simply couldn’t accept. We decided to stick it out and gamble on our plane actually making an appearance.

Around 11:30 PM (elapsed time in Pearson Airport: 5 hours 30 minutes and climbing), while handing out a nutritious dinner of oatmeal cookies and pretzels to the 8 desperate souls remaining, the crew announced that the plane was actually on the tarmac and would be flying out to Chicago that night. Sadly, there were no connecting flights to Milwaukee until the following afternoon. Derek and I responded in the only rational manner to this impossible obstacle; we pulled out our credit and phone cards and began trying to rent a car in Chicago.

Surprisingly, nothing went wrong on the actual flight. We were rather expecting engine fires and clouds of poisonous high-altitude bats by that time, but we arrived at O’Hare airport without further difficulty. After a short but surrealistic trip through the award winning “Neon

Evil Funhouse” passenger tunnel\*\* and an extended bus ride with Earl, a truly directionally challenged driver, we managed to reach the rental car booth.

Now you might expect that at 2 AM, with no other customers within two miles, a car could be rented from any of the three people on duty in less than 30 minutes. Don’t feel bad, that’s a common mistake. In fact the process takes much closer to an hour, not counting break times, blood tests and the polygraphing.

Eventually, we had a car. It was an unknown distance to Milwaukee, we had a full tank of gas, half a bag of pretzels, it was dark, and we were Canadian. We hit the road ready to burn rubber and tear up the pavement. To our credit, it was at least three full minutes before we were lost.

The actual trip is kind of a blur of disconnected images after that. An all night KISS marathon on the radio. Accidentally setting the cruise control to 85. The worlds worst espresso at an all night gas station. Random lane changes. MPH to KPH conversions with sleep deprived brains. Passing an astonishing profusion of roadside pornography and fireworks stores. And, of course, monkeys monkeys monkeys! (Total elapsed time: 11 hours 45 minutes.)

Planned wake up time for Alpha Test was 7 AM, so that we could get to the booth and finish setting up by 9. We checked into the hotel at 5:45, so we had the luxury of a full refreshing hour of sleep before we had to go and teach new players to play Mage knight for nine straight hours. We were exhausted, punchy and completely disoriented. Fortunately, for a gaming convention, that’s normal.

At 9 AM the Vendors room opened to the public. By 9:15, there were enough curious people to start a demo game. By 9:45 there were enough people clustered around to start a demo game on every available table, and IT STAYED THAT WAY FOR FOUR DAYS!! Even with only the 16 promo figures available to make armies, people were still crazy about the game. The only downside was that we didn’t have any product to sell. Everyone who played asked “Where can I buy some?”, and every time we had to tell them “Sorry, it won’t be released until October” they looked at us like we’d punched them in the stomach. To make up for it, we made sure that everyone who played got to reach into “The Drum of Greed” and pull out a boxed random promo figure. Every player who had finished a demo could then sign up for a full game, and the winners of those games could keep their entire army. Play two games, win one, take away five Limited Edition promo figures. Not a bad deal, really.

No one was prepared for just how busy we were going to be. Our carefully organized break schedule didn’t survive the first day. How could we leave an empty table when there were people lined up asking “When does another game start? Can we play?”. Finding time for food was a triumph; seeing the rest of the con was a luxury. At a rough estimate each of us ran 25 demo games and at least two tournaments. The standard con rule of thumb certainly seemed to be in effect: “Games, Food, Sleep – pick two.”

Actually playing the game with the general public was simultaneously exhilarating and humbling. Teaching new people to play, and seeing their enthusiasm was exhilarating. Teaching people how to play WRONG, and seeing their confusion, was humbling. Sometime between the last playtest session and the con the rule preventing healing a figure in base contact with an opposing figure, and the rule allowing flyers to break away on any roll but a 1, had been added to the Special Ability card and some of us (me) hadn’t noticed. It’s a bit embarrassing telling people you helped create a new game and then have them point to an

updated card and say “But you’re wrong, look, it says so right here...”. Fortunately, everybody was having fun anyway.

After the doors finally closed to the public at the end of each day, it was time for all the other vendors to come over and beg for a game. There wasn’t a single evening that any of us got out of the hall before Security came around to request it, and after the first day we were always approached by the other vendors before the hall opened as well. The game was equally popular with both retailers and the gaming public, and multiple distributors had already said they would take as much of the game as we could make. Extra tables had to be set up in the open gaming area to accommodate the demand, and the “Capture Princess Flag” tournaments on the final day were all double booked. When it was finally timed to drag our tired but happy selves back to our Northern homes, there was no doubt left in our minds at all – we were a hit.

GenCon veterans say that it is the ultimate gaming experience. I can’t disagree with them. That’s why any time people ask me what the convention was like, I always tell them the same thing:

“I have no idea.”

But I’m going to actually get out of the booth this year for sure.

By DemoMonkey Next Week: Episode VII – The Exciting Conclusion! (In which the game hits the stores, the website goes on line, the rules come under a microscope, our hero begins the ongoing process of teaching the masses, and everything goes completely according to plan, 100 % Error Free.) Acknowledgements I’d like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at WizKids for the stellar treatment they gave us lowly playtesters during the trip, especially Jordan and Ray. We were well treated and made to feel that our contributions were valued and appreciated. Thank you. (They’re also a lot of fun!) · \* Four games to two, my favour. I am the Alpha Geek! · \*\*I still wake up in my bed screaming “Run Derek, run! The clowns are coming, and they’ve got banjos!”.

## **The Complete Confessions Of A Rebellion Playtester**

### **Episode VII**

(In which the game hits the stores, the website goes on line, the rules come under a microscope, our hero begins the ongoing process of teaching the masses, and everything goes completely according to plan, 100 % Error Free.)

The Exciting Conclusion! Delayed by insane work schedules, MK madness and a literal computer meltdown, but now here at last!!

After the incredibly positive response the game received at GenCon, everyone involved was excited about seeing what would happen once players got their hands on the product. GenCon was the first time any of us had seen the box art or design, so we knew what they looked like and hoped to soon be seeing them in large numbers in our local games stores. The only problem was that only a very small portion of the first shipment was allotted to Canada, so we were in the odd position of helping develop and promote a game that we wouldn't be able to get any of. We'd still be playing with old RPG figures stuck to washers while all the people we introduced to the game were playing with the actual figures. It was maddening!

Fortunately, playtesters are nothing if not resourceful. Through our extensive underground intelligence network we learned where and when shipments would be coming into the country, and were able to stake out the local game stores. The storeowners were pleasantly surprised to see the new product arrive and have customers scrambling to buy it before the shipping boxes were even opened. Nearly 25% of the first shipment of MK that came into the city was, in fact, bought by the games own playtesters. We were supply AND demand.

At last we had real Mage Knight figures. At last we could build armies without resorting to jury rigs, conversions and proxies. At last we could do away with micro-print spreadsheet copies of the figures stats. At last we could click the dials like normal players. It was a moment of sweet, sweet triumph.

Then, of course, we had to put them away and start playtesting for Lancers. But I'm sure no-ones really interested in hearing about that.\*

Around this time the official website came on line, and the strange entity we call the "MK community" began to coalesce. From a bare homepage and a very lonely empty forum, a groundswell of curiosity, support, enthusiasm and boundless nitpicking began to grow. It grew slowly at first, but within 2 months there was more traffic on the site than WizKids had expected for the following year. With equal parts amusement and amazement we all started paying attention; our new players now had somewhere to make their opinions known, and they weren't at all shy about doing so.

After the inevitable first wave of Trolls, Rezzers and Spam-andoes passed (or at least, subsided) it was interesting watching the hierarchy form. The people who had actually read the rules and had at least some idea what they were talking about were easily identifiable. Sadly, so were the people who hadn't read the rules and didn't know what they were talking about. Gradually however, the core people who could be relied on to answer questions clearly and intelligently began to outweigh the people who were unable or unwilling to actually read the rulebook. It was the fastest example of a self-moderating community that I had ever seen, and it expanded at a rate that no one could possibly have predicted.

Unfortunately, not everything could be resolved by players helping players. Sometimes a question or issue arose that no one knew the answer to, and the rulebook or SA card did not cover adequately. To the best of my recall, the first major question that could not be definitively answered by those two sources was “Does Battle Armour stack on top of Defend?”\*\*. Either of the two possible answers could reasonably be supported by the wording on the SA card, but, obviously, only one was correct (and it’s “Yes” incidentally). We did what had to be done; we issued a ruling on it.

This established the dangerous, but inevitable, precedent of “Official Rulings” appearing on the forums. Establishing rules “cred” took a little while, but eventually word got around that Valefor, DemoMonkey, and Kevin B. would answer any rules questions, Lucas W. and Jim L. would answer tournament organization, WarLord, and venue questions, and Supreme would answer site and administrator questions. From that point on, every word posted by anyone associated with WizKids had to be considered VERY carefully, because a lot of people would accept whatever was said as official game errata. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it can be a bit intimidating to know that whenever you post to a forum half of the people there will either accept your words unquestioningly or will do everything in their power to find flaws and faults in them. It makes one extremely cautious; to this day I won’t even answer questions I KNOW the answer to without at least checking the rulebook.

“ How many K’s in “Mage Knight”? Hang on, let me check my copy of the rulebook.”

“Hmmm, looks like only one. I know, I’ll say there is currently one visible K, that should cover me in case it’s a trick question.”

The community at large was also responsible for finding the major flaw with the original rules – the original victory conditions.

Within 2 months the number of man hours spent playing MK by the community exceeded the number of man hours that had gone into playtesting, simply because the game was so successful that there were thousands (and 10’s of thousands...) of players. It was statistically inevitable that someone would come up with something we had missed, and that something lay in the Victory point system. Simply put, it was far too easy to cause enormous point swings in the closing turns of the game by taking actions that were perfectly legal but very internally “unrealistic”, things that just didn’t have the right feel to them.

The first problem was that players were going “capture crazy “ in the closing turns of the game, making nothing but capture attempts as time ran out. The reason for this is the rules at the time caused a triple point swing on a successful capture. If you captured a 50 point figure you not only deprived the opponent of 50 survivor points you gained 2x50 points as well. If you and your opponent had no score or losses up to that point, that single action would change the final score from a 200 to 200 tie to a 300 to 150 slaughter!! With a potential gain like that, good tactics and game play became irrelevant as players gambled their whole games on the last couple of die rolls.

The initial fix, “ no capture attempts in the last 20 minutes”, was too arbitrary and required extra time keeping, something we always try to avoid. The final fix, “2xpoints for captured figures in your starting area, no points awarded for captured figures outside of your starting area” resolved the problem much more satisfactorily. Players could still gamble in the closing turns of the game (which is, admittedly, exciting), but with only a single point swing to be gained it doesn’t render the rest of the game irrelevant.



The second problem, Necromancy and Victory Points, was a little trickier. A lot of people still think that endless waves of Zombies and Skeletons are the problem; let me put that belief to rest once and for all, “correct” use of necromancy is NOT overpowered or broken. What was overpowered and broken was the use of Necromancy (wait for it...) to cause enormous point swings in the closing turns of the game by taking actions that were perfectly legal but very internally “unrealistic”. Sound familiar?

With a single action a player could bring his largest figure back into play in the last turn or two of the game, with no intention of committing it to combat, and boost their score by gaining survivor points for it. Bringing a 50 point figure back into play and gaining a 50 point swing without any chance of failure\*\*\*, for one measly action, was just too tempting. More and more players, even those who used no other Necropolis pieces, were putting Grave Robbers in their armies just for that purpose.

The fix was intended to attack the problem at the actual abuse, rather than the ability itself. That’s why the Necromancy ability was not, and never has been, actually changed. The victory point system was changed instead, so that only figures “that have survived the entire game” count for survivor points. The net result was a far more representative percentage of people playing Necropolis armies, and far fewer Grave Robbers in play in armies they had no reason to be in.

Of course, once we explained these and other changes everyone understood what we were trying to accomplish and accepted them wholeheartedly.

Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha...hahaha...haha...ha. Sorry, I knew I couldn’t get through that with a straight face.

Actually, reaction was ...”mixed”. That’s the strength of an online community though, hot and cold running feedback, on tap 24\7. Without it, WizKids could miss problems that players and Warlords encounter, and would have no opportunity to improve things. With that feedback, the game can only grow stronger. From the early complaints about Necromancy through the Magic Levitation controversy and into the debates of the future (my bet? Standard Terrain Templates!) there is going to be no shortage of opinions from players convinced that they can help make Mage Knight a better game. And that, my loyal readers, is a good thing.

So thanks everyone.

The Monkey will always be listening.

By DemoMonkey

\* Do I smell...sequel?

\*\* The first question we had to invent an answer entirely for? Deep spawn drowning captives. Didn’t see that one coming!

\*\*\* Let’s just assume it has at least 7 clicks, shall we?