

THE MARK NELSON EXPERIENCE (March 1992)

Welcome to Volume One, Issue One, of *The Mark Nelson Experience*.

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The Mark Nelson Experience is available to selected *Mouth Of Sauron* readers, you can't trade or subscribe to this zine on its own. This zine contains Hobby discussion.¹ It is a neofan free zine.

This is West Riding Press Publications 205

"No, there isn't enough news and gossip to fill a global hobby magazine." *Mike Siggins Electric Monk 31 (August 1991)*

I entered the wonderful world of fanzines through my interest in role-playing games early in 1984. Although my interest in RPG fandom has waned (and was never great) I've always subbed to at least one RPG zine, more out of habit and a reluctant to sever this link with my fannish roots rather than any great interest in that hobby.

Aslan #12 (January 1992) represents the end of an era. This is the last RPG zine that I see (although I'm trading with Ben Goodale for a laugh) and I'm not renewing my subscription. It feels slightly strange to be continuing in Fandom without seeing any RPG zines.

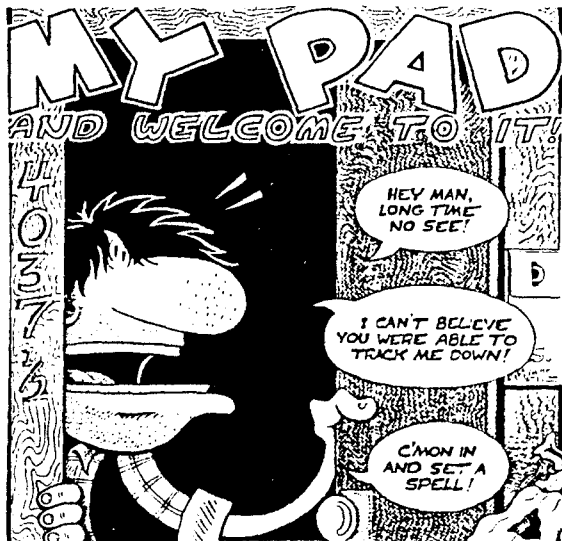
RPGs don't hold the interest that they once did (I haven't done any serious RPG for almost five years) and whilst RPG fanzines today are vastly superior to those of my youth they remain much too attached to playing the game to hold much interest for me.

One of the main developments in RPG zines has been a move away from the compartmentalised style of the early RPG fanzines towards a more free-form approach with writing on role-playing rather than systems. At the same time rpg fandom has progressively lost any sense of it being a fandom. The old style of zine may have been a lower quality product than those of today but the old style editor had a greater awareness of a living breathing fandom surrounding him. Today's zine editors are more inward looking with very few references to a fanzine hobby.

And perhaps it's this lack of a fanzine hobby that's the real reason why I've given up on RPG fandom.

In the middle 1980's the move away from the hardware style zine that had dominated the hobby until then (and which would ultimately produce zines such as *Aslan*) at first saw a flourish of perzines and for a

¹ Actually it contains Markie Nelson writing about the Hobby as he see it rather than various people actually *discussing* the Hobby.



while it seemed as if RPGdom would spurn a separate RPG perzinedom. As a reaction to this some of the hardware zine tried to become more 'chatty'. Does anyone remember the infamous 'chat' issue of *Demon's Drawl* (issue 15 I think) where Jeremy Nuttall failed to understand what exactly it was about perzine chat that made it chat?

But where is this talk of my fannish youth leading me? Geoff Challenger would, no doubt, just say that Markie was talking about some kind of mythical 'Good Old Days' when the grass was greener and the fanzines better. Perhaps he's right. But this has also been a cunning lead in to ...

THE INFAMOUS FANNISH ISSUE OF *Springboard* (or not really ...)

The issue in question, almost certainly destined to go into the annuals of fannish history (so write to Danny and ask if he has any spare copies, this is a collector's issue!), is issue 54 (January 1992). It is amusing to think that in six, or so, years time someone might be talking about the 'Good Old Days' and the infamous fannish issue of *Springboard* as a lead-in to some notable Hobby event. Who knows, if I haven't lost my marbles by then perhaps it will be me!

Now in recent times *Springboard* has been criticised for not being very fannish. Indeed as I have recounted elsewhere Danny has expressed his confusion as to what the damn word actually means! Strange but true. But it seems that someone has tipped our man off...

DANNY COLLMAN: "This turns out to be the fact that the editor (or some such) spends part of the zine simply chatting about something that interests them: holidays, children, other Hobby people, the International Hobby Scene... whatever"

"And one of the complaints about *Springboard* which some Mainstream Editors have made about *Springboard* is that it is seriously and solemnly, direfully, Diplomacy-oriented."

"I wouldn't give a damn about such complaints were it not for the fact that *Springboard* is supposed to be an introduction to the wider Hobby. At the moment, newcomers have to go elsewhere other than this zine to discover the many other facets of the Hobby."

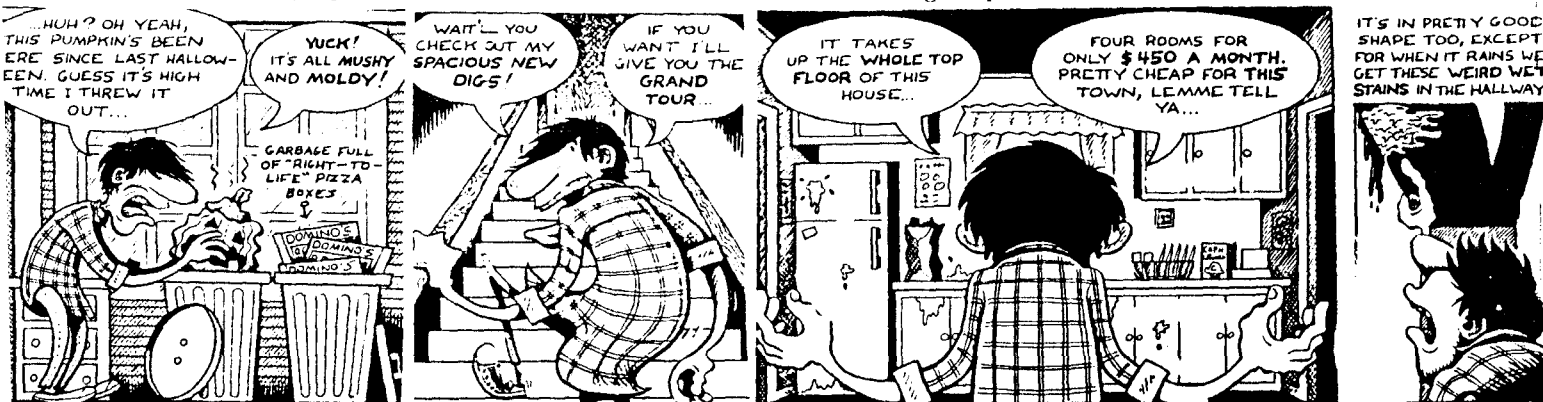
"So I shall try to rectify some aspects of this problem — in my own way."

"... What I'm going to do, is report each issue on something European..."

Unfortunately all this goes to show is that Danny has yet to grasp the fannish way of life. If fannish equated to chat then perzines would be fannish by definition. True there are some fannish perzines, but there are many perzines which are fannish. When Jeremy Nuttall reacted to a growing trend of chattyness in RPG zines he was no trying to make the zine more fannish.

I suspect that one of the problems is that different people understand different things by the word fannish. Iain Bowen², Harry Bond and myself probably take the word one way whilst other people take it another way (although I can't actually recall anyone using the word in a different sense, possible because as a matter

²Who likes to remind people that he introduced the word into circulation amongst dip fans



of principle I wouldn't want to see such deviant zines).

I can't actually recall anyone using the word fannish except for the people who know. As an example of its misuse, it might be claimed that **Electric Monk** is fannish because it contains a long letter column and a degree of inconsequential chat.

Long letter columns do not make a zine fannish. Indeed some fannish zines do not have a letter column at all. And as I have already hinted fannishness does not equate to chattyness.

I am rather fond of the expression "*All that appears fannish is not necessarily fannish.*" Actually what I intended writing there was "*All that is Fannish is not actually Fannish*" which sounds quite impressive even if it doesn't seem to make any sense.

But back to Danny (who in recent times has certainly earned a promotion to the ranks of *Most Valued Trade*).

In short, if putting some coverage of European affairs into **Springboard** is an attempt to make the zine more fannish, it is an abject and dismal failure. It is also an abject failure if it is an attempt to make it more representative of the world outside the cloistered walls of **Springboard**. It does, however, make for a slightly more interesting fanzine.

Danny is right (!) in saying that if **Springboard** were not a novice zine then they would be no reason for Danny to take note of any criticisms that **Springboard** is nonfannish. Quite right.

There is no reason for every zine to follow the same path, no reason why everyone should follow the fannish call. But **Springboard** being the point of entry into the Hobby of so many people makes it a special zine. **Springboard** needs to try and represent fairly the whole of the Hobby to its readers. The problem isn't that **Springboard** isn't fannish but that it portrays such a small window onto the Hobby outside it.

Whilst we are on the subject of Danny. In the February 1992 issue of that altogether excellent zine **The Mouth Of Sauron** I retold Danny's not really very accurate review of **Dolchstoß**. Danny has apologised for that review and adds: "*I won't attempt to explain how I cocked that one up (I don't know).*"

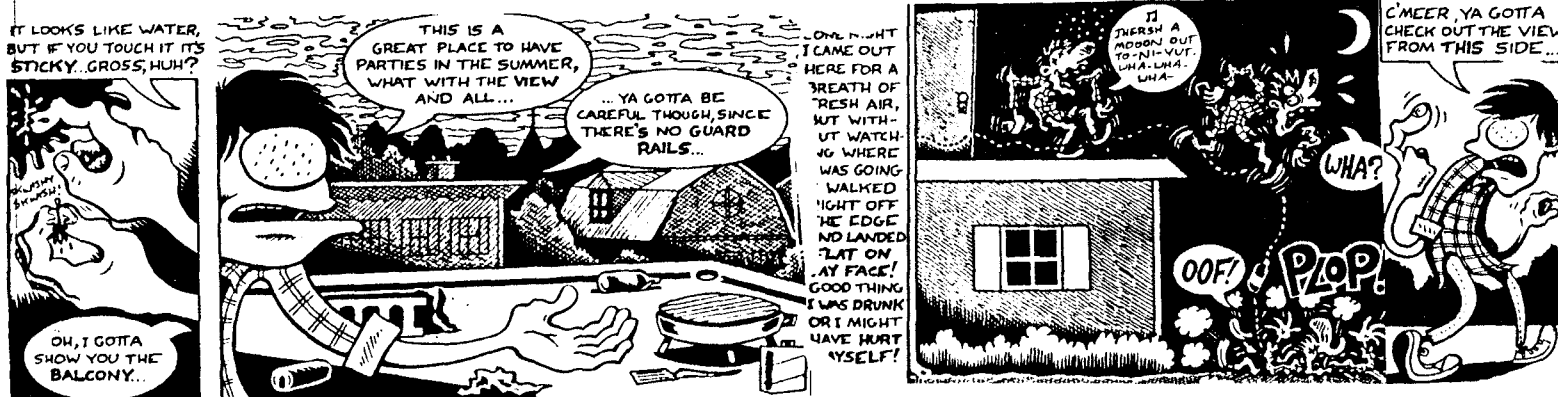
The explanation that was going the rounds at the January Yorkmeet was that Danny doesn't actually read **Dolchstoß** because he knows that if he does he would have to write a nasty review of it and because Danny admires Richard Sharp so much it this is something that he does not want to do.³ (Danny has strange views on what political material he considers acceptable in a fanzine.)

THE HARRY BOND HOBBY BOND

I found myself puzzling over the latest issue of **Gallimaufry**, then I realized that what I was reading as Harry Bond was actually Hobby Bond. This cleared matters up.

The Hobby Bond was an idea pushed forward by Steve Doubleday in **Gallimaufry** 115 (*December*

³We can blame this one on Bowenmir



1991). It was the thrust of a long editorial on the subject of zine folds and the effects of folding upon readers and the hobby.

On the hobby? Aside from orphaning games, folds often result in a number of people leaving the hobby. It isn't unusual for zines to have readers who see only that zine And when that zine folds they leave the Hobby. Indeed there have been zines which have contained a large number of one-zine-only readers, Steve gives us Vienna, Ummagumma, Hannibal and He's Dead Jim! as examples.

Why do zines fold? One reason that Steve gives is the pressure of full-time education, be they 'A' levels, college or finals; the effect Steve claims is nearly always fatal for the zine.

Steve points out "There have been very few cases of schoolboy editors making it into their middle twenties as editors. Pete Briks springs to mind, and now James Nelson. But the history of the hobby is littered with whole groups of schoolboys."

In passing I should point out that as a matter of record James is only 19. Not yet turn 20, not yet in his middle 20's. I'd be very suprised if he does make it into his middle 20's as an editor. Possible he will become the only editor to be quoted as an example of a schooboy editor who edited into his middle 20's and one who didn't! A rare distinction.

I agree that few schoolboy editors make it into their mid twenties as editors. But the reason for this has little to do with their education.

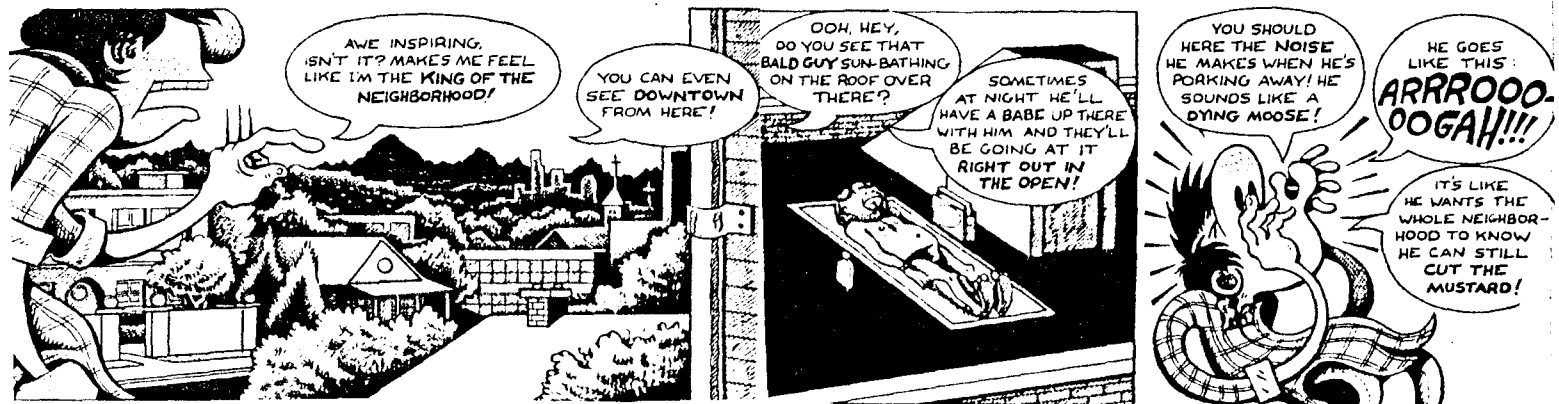
What do we mean by a school-boy editor? These days most new editors seem to have finished their education. Amazingly when I entered the hobby (in 1984) there were a sizable number of editors in full-time education (mostly at University) and yet in 1992 I can only think of 2 editors who are in full-time education and I am one of them! So to some extent talk of school-boy editors seems to be redundant.

But for the sake of the argument let's say that a schoolboy editor produces his first issue at the age of 16. This isn't too unreasonable, there have been very few diplomacy editors below that age (I can think of only three, none in recent years). Steve says that because of his full-time education he is unlikely to be editing when he is 25.

I agree, he is unlikely to be editing when he is 25. After all that represents a period of nine years. How many people can you name that have edited for a nine year period without any breaks? Very few. A small percentage of the total number of editors, and even the example of Pete Birks isn't quite good enough as he had a gap in his tenure as an editor. The hobby may be littered with the corpses of schoolboy editors, but it is equally littered with the corpses of editors who were not schoolboys.

I've dealt with this point in more detail than Steve gives it because it interests me, but me now move now onto the idea that leads to the concept of a Hobby Bond.

Say the average zine has 40 paying readers, an average issue costs 50 pence and the average reader has 6 issues worth of credit. That comes to 120 pounds. Zines have folded because the editor couldn't afford to continue running the zine, often as a result of losing a job (The Road Goes Ever On is the classic



example). And an editor who can't afford to run a zine is unlikely to be an editor that can afford to return subscriptions. Indeed there have been a number of editors who folded and failed to return subscriptions, and sometimes there was little excuse for this because they weren't folding due to lack of money. Probably the three most infamous cases of folding without returning subscriptions are those of John Dods, John Piggott and Richard Sharp.

Steve's idea is simple. Every editor would donate two pounds for every subscriber he has to a central Hobby figure (Steve suggests RJW).

"Members of the hobby would thus show that they were responsible people and, more importantly, there would be a sum of money independant of the editor's household or nooky accounts... The Bondholder would then allocate a proportionate sum per subber to other zines."

"Where the subber is also a player, this would have the added advantage of tiding over the interregnum, the nasty gap where people have to sit down and write a cheque to a new zine. Interest on the account would then go towards the administration of this or a similiar scheme. Needless to say, Bonds would only be usable with other Bond members."

"But there is also another important element to this. That is the poor old editor/publisher, fagged out after 3-10 years of publishing, possibly in financial troubles, doesn't suddenly have the horrible shock of just how much money he's going to have to pay out. This, I think, will reduce the number of irresponsible folds."

I can't envisage much support for a Hobby Bond, I suspect that it would only be supported by those editors that were willing to return subscriptions anyway. And if editors who don't intend returning subscriptions aren't going to support it, it seems to have little point. Would it have any effect on irresponsible folds? I don't think so, in fact one might argue that it would encourage them. *"Sod this, the Hobby Bond can repay some of what I owe."*

And just imagine what would happen if the hobby did support it. Say 40-odd zines with 40-subbers each. The Hobby Bond Custodian would be looking after over three grand. That's a lot of money. How do you decide who would be the HBC, can you trust him not to leave the hobby and how do you distribute the interest gained on that amount? There is no way that 'administration costs' will equal income (interest)!

Steve's discussion of a Hobby Bond, however, is leading up to his final point. "Novice Protection."

The fold of **Springboard** might be a financial nightmare. The zine has 130 subbers, the amount of money that Danny would have to find when the zine folds might be quite considerable. (Given the very responsible manner in which Danny runs **Springbord** this would not be a problem. Danny doesn't spend his subbers money in advance, whereas most editors have to spend their subbers money in advance to pay for the next issue of the zine).

However Steve does point out that the fold of **Springboard** would be a nightmare for the OGRE (25 or so games). Steve points out that there are only 22 'reliable' dippyazines reviewed in the last issue of MFG, that's one game per zine assuming that everybody wants to take on orphan games. Quite simply the number of games being run in **Springboard** needs to be reduced now to prevent a disaster in the future.



The simplest solution, which Steve suggests, is that Danny should farm games out to other zines on a regular basis; Steve suggests after six seasons. Steve also points out that there is no real reason why games should actually start in **Springboard**. If you're going to farm games out then why not do it from the word go and have **Springboard** organizing gamestarts, but pushing those games into other zines. "Shades of the Novice Gamestart Service!" says Steve. Indeed, it makes more sense to farm gamestarts out the to farm out games which are already established in **Springboard**. Farming games out after they have already started would add extra complications, for starters the new gamesmaster would have to continue running them to Danny's houserules.

Farming gamestarts out would also force Springboardians to test their toes in the big wide world outside of **Springboard**. There has always been a lingering doubt in most editors minds that whilst **Springboard** was receiving a large number of novices, there was only a very slow trickle out of **Springboard** and into the Hobby. (There's been no figures published for several years which would allow an evaluation of this statement.)

I tend towards the view that ex-Springboard players are moving out into the hobby but because of the reviews that appear there (almost always written by Danny) they are moving into a small number of zines. This small number of zines is a common concern amongst editors, concerned that potential readers are being taken away from their zine before they even have a chance to read it! Nick Kinzett believes that under the current set-up "*competent editors will recruit from SB and elsewhere as a matter of course whilst he incompetent don't deserve to.*" (*Electric Monk 32, October 1991*)

But for a different opinion we turn to Tom Tweedy in the same issue: "*Just how are editors supposed to recruit from Springboard? Get the zine and pick up the new players and then send them a copy of their own zine or rely on Danny's generosity to give their zine a good write-up? What if Danny doesn't like the zine they edit?*"

Of course, Danny's attitudes towards zine and his zine reviews is where we started this issue...

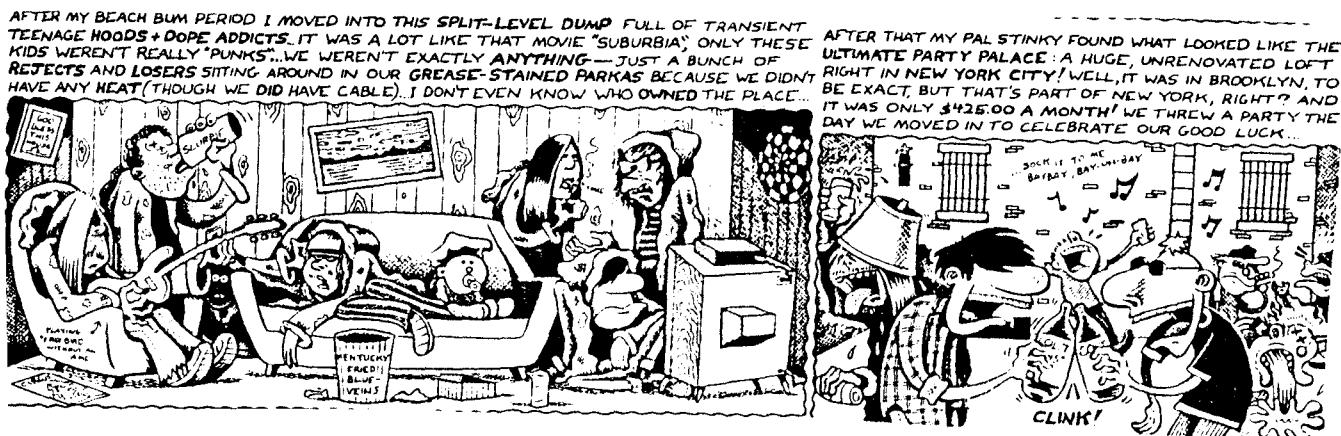
The suggestion that **Springboard** should farm games out has been made before, but unfortunately Danny effectively vetoed the idea. His argument was that (1) He would only farm out games to established/reliable diplomacy zines (2) That some zines were unsuitable (for example they contain jokes, and humour has so little point in such a serious hobby) and (3) all the players in the game would have to agree to this measure.

Not suprisingly I am only aware of one game being moved to another zine (**A Step Further Out**).

However it is interesting to note that when an ex-Springboard player started up a zine these rules went out of the window. Danny saw no objection to a new, unproven zine receiving a **Springboard** game.

What on Danny's views on the subject?, He reviewed Steve's article in **Springboard 54**, but didn't express an opinion on it; meekly asking for comments from his readers.

This is a pity, with **Springboard** reaching a critical mass it's time to reduce the load and prevent what would become a nightmare fold. Perhaps it's time to return to the values of the CGS?



In the days before **Springboard** there was the CGS (Central Gamestart Service). Newcomers would write to the CGS and when 7 people had signed up for a game the organizer would send this gamestart to the zine of his choice and the game would run as if it has been started by that zine. Was this an efficient way of dealing with novice requests? I don't know, it would be interesting to calculate the percentage number of dropouts from CGS games and the percentage dropout from **Springboard** games. This would let us know if Danny is doing a better job then the CGS when he comes to keeping players in the Hobby. My inclination is that there is very little difference between the two methods, both CGS and **Springboard** games have high drop-out rates (I believe that the current average for **Springboard** is over 4 dropouts per game, excluding standby players).

The CGS withered and died whilst under the control of Nick Kinzett, (and from its ashes arose **Springboard**, or somethign like that) because the number of people entering the Hobby and wanting to be placed in a zine dropped to almost zero. Towards the end of the CGS Nick was having to mix novices and experiences players together to get game starts at anything like a reasonable pace, under Tom Tweedy the influx of novices was so great that games were filling at the rate of one a month --all farmed out to the mainstream zines of the day. The reason why **Springboard** has been starting new games at such a strident path is because there are now flyers back in the box again and all requests from that flyer are dirrcted towards Danny Collman and **Springboard**.

The old style CGS could easily be ressurected to deal with the flux of novices. Indeed Tom Tweedy, Kinzett's predecessor as CGS organizer, feels quite strongly that **Springboard's** time is past and that we should return to the structure of the old CGS setup.

"Why... should get Spingboard get ALL the new Diplomcy players? What about the other zines getting new blood? I didn't take on CGS games in Dib and hog all the newcomers. So what gives Danny the right to change the Diplomcy box flyers so he gets everyone? NONE! No, it's wrong, and I'll keep saying so." (Electric Monk 31, August 1991)

"...what zine editor would dare say anything against SB today? All their clients come via SB, and come with set opinions! ...Springboard adds nothing that a good mainstream zine like Arfle, Electric Monk, or UBend and The Novice Package couldn't offer." Electric Monk 31 (October 1991)

In the end the most compelling reason to change the current **Springboard** setup might not be worries about how Novices move out of the zine, but the issue that Steve Doubleday brought up; namely the potential fold of the zine. Just because Danny has succeeded so far in managing the zine is no guarantee that he will continue to do so. How much longer can we expect the zine to continue at it's current capacity without something breaking?

Although most people have considered the flow of novices from **Springboard** into the rest of the Hobby, it is noticable just how few of those that have made the progression from novice to Joe Fan have shown an interest in taking an active role in the Hobby and in the time that **Springboard** has been running only one ex-Springboardian has made the transition from novice to zine-editor. This suggests that the manner in which Danny covers the Hobby is putting people off entering the Hobby mainstream. (Who know, perhaps we should actually be thanking Danny for deterring people from producing zines?)

IMAGINE OUR SURPRISE WHEN A WRECKING BALL CRASHED THROUGH OUR WALL TWO MONTHS LATER... SHOULD A KNOWN IT WAS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE...



...SO THEN WE DRAGGED OUR SORRY ASSES BACK TO JERSEY— THIS TIME TO A SIX-ROOM BASEMENT APARTMENT IN THE RUN-DOWN SIDE OF HOBOKEN... SOME FRIENDS OF FRIENDS WERE ALREADY LIVING THERE AND WANTED MORE ROOMIES TO SPLIT THE RENT...



HOBOKEN WAS BETTER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE. IT SEEMED LIKE SOMETHING WAS ALWAYS GOING ON SOMEWHERE IN THAT TOWN... A "HAPPENING SCENE" IS WHAT IT WAS... MET A LOT OF INTERESTING PEOPLE, INCLUDING LOTS OF CRAZY, HORNY CHICKS ALWAYS VYING FOR ATTENTION... YES SIR, GOOD OLD HOBOKEN.



In **Electric Monk 31** (August 1991) Andy Key reviewed the handful of zines that started up around ManorCon had finished with: "In the last few months, more than half a dozen new zines have emerged, most of them looking ready to stay around quite a while. My only worry is the number of old names cropping up on the waiting lists. Sure, it's nice that the newcomers are being supported by old hands, but new zines should be a way of bringing new blood into the Hobby, and there isn't much evidence of that yet. The Springboard effect again?..."

Of course, one of the reasons for Andy Key making this statement is that Andy Key is longer the mild mannered janitor of old. Ever since he took over MFG he has been trying to stirr things up, writing no-controversial controversial reviews but this new look Action Man Key has not impressed many. Simple because no matter how well intended his actions they have been abject failures and bleedin obvious. But I've commented elsewhere on the first post-Bowen issue of MFG.

The next issue of The Mark Nelson Experience will be distributed at the April Yorkmeet.

ASLAN: Andrew Rilestone, 'Minis Tirith', 10 Marlborough Grove, Fishergate, YORK. YO1 4AY £1.25 an issue

ELECTRIC MONK: Andy Key, 144 Perrinsfield, Venymore, Lechlade, GLOS. GL7 3SE 46p + postage per issue.

GALLIMAUFRY: Steve Doubleday, Norton House, 46 Whielden Street, Amersham,BUCKS. HP7 0HU 60 pence an issue

Late news, Richard Jackson has agreed to hand the UKVB over to James Nelson, although he would prefer it if James goes to Bristol for a "talk" first. (Himm, wonder what *that* might be about?)

