

THE MARK NELSON EXPERIENCE (June 1992)

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

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The Mark Nelson Experience is available to everyone on the mailing list (circulation this issue is 30). This zine contains Hobby discussion.¹ It is a neofan free zine.

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

U-Bend Revisited

Last issue carried a feature on **U-Bend** and Harry Bond, yet did not contain either a definite appraisal of the zine or the editor. I did not say that if they were either *Good Thing's* or a *Bad Thing's*. Whilst some fan critics state after the first issue of a new zine if it will be a core zine in eight years time or if it will have folded and been forgotten to the collective fannish conscience, I am not so certain about my own visionary powers. Never mind eight years, I hesitate about predicting eight months into the future.

And on those rare occasions when you see a fanzine of such outstanding quality that you *know* that it is going to be an integral part of the hobby for years to come what happens? Zines such as **Been There, Done That**, **Blunt Instruments** and **Moire** illustrate how quickly the mighty fall.

True, these are all North American Zines. Turn our attention to the UK and we can identify zines that received rave-reviews. **Yet Tiz** is one of the Worst Five Zine's I have had the misfortune to see, yet it received rave reviews from some quarters.

Similarly there have been surprises. Who would have dared to suggest that Iain Bowen would last even a year as a fanzine editor, let alone five. Who predicted that he would raise from such humble origins to become Keeper of The Holy Flame and Grand Master of The Knights of York ?

There are new zines that so bad that you know they won't amount to much; although even **Garbage In, Garbage Out** had its supporters — a useful Hobby Service would be to produce a one-off zine giving names of those infidels that flocked to this heathen flag.²

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

² Not the subbers, just those that gave it good reviews

Last issue's feature prompted comment in other zines.

“Up Around The Bend 10 is a marked improvement on earlier issues because it has returned to primitive technology. Yes duplicators are back! It was like stepping into a time-warp, and not an unpleasant at that.” Pete Birks in **Greatest Hits** 171 (May 1992).

“Mark Nelson just devoted a whole issue of his select zine to a discussion on UBEND and the irrepressible Haz, which underlines UBEND's significance to the present hobby. It was the first new zine out in a fair while and I think encouraged a few other people into production as well. Certainly myself. I'm also certainly glad that I didn't have to face up to the expectations that were expected of UBEND, which are perhaps a millstone around Haz's neck... I also wonder whether the constant pressure and criticism received by Dunx and his zine GIGO may have contributed to his sudden fold and disappearance, but I suppose if you can't hack criticism you shouldn't be editing a zine.” Vick Hall in **A Little Original Sin** 10 (June 1992).

U-Bend is one of the few interesting zines around and **Young Harry** one of the few interesting editors. In a hobby increasingly dominated by computer nerds, train spotters and Turbo Phreaks the existence of a zine that is aware of the older traditions in the Hobby is welcomed; although **U-Bend** is far from being the saviour of the hobby that it was heralded as being. You want more than that? You'll have to get the zine yourself and follow it's journey into the future.

A WORD TO THE WISE

Recently one or two people have commented that they do not like my practice of restricting circulation of this zine to those that I think will enjoy it and those that comment on it. But let's look at the facts.

Who did John Miller mail **Mr Gladgrind** 49 (May 1992) to? Everybody on his mailing list. Who does **Young Harry** mail **U-Bend** to? Everyone on his mailing list. Who does **Ol'e Blue Eyes** mail **C'Est Magnifique** to? Everyone on his mailing list! Can we detect a pattern here? I trust I will have no more nonsense along the lines that everyone in Fandom has a God given right to be mailed any zine because the Ghods aren't having any of it.

Fanzine Reviews and Schools of Fanzine Criticism

The first thing I do upon receiving **Greatest Hits** is to turn to the back of the zine and read the Sweepies. Pete is one of the few editors who runs a reasonable coverage of the hobby and is one of an even more select band who pass comment on the hobby.

As well as the hobby news **Greatest Hits** has excellent book reviews. I was surprised to discover in **Greatest Hits** 171 (May 1992) that one of Pete's latest reads was "The Fannish Road". This seemed

rather remarkable and a double take showed, alas, that the title of the book in question was "The Famished Road". This is not the same thing at all.

Still at least "The Fannish Road" has the potential to be reused as a fanzine title, and I may do so at some time in the future for an extended article on fannishness and fandom that young David Hood keeps pestering me to write.

This was even more remarkable in that I saw this after seeing Pete's review of the latest issue of **Arfle Barfle Gloop**: "*In the lettercolumn Chris Sutton takes a sideswipe at the likes of Mark Nelson for criticising other zines for 'unfannishness'.*"

Is fannishness (or unfannishness) a valid basis for fanzine-criticism in the diplomacy hobby? Leaving aside the question of whether we can *even* identify fanzine-critics and schools of criticism, the simple answer is yes.

The problem with most zine reviews is that they are *not* reviews. The typical 'review' will include details such as frequency, cost, method of production, typical size of zine, games run and waiting lists with little or no comment on the zine's style. Certainly no analysis on the role that the zine has in the Hobby. Rather than pointing out defects in a zine a reviewer will simply gloss over them.

The school of fanzine criticism that is to be found throughout almost all of the hobby is positivism; whatever the content, whatever the quality the zine is one of the best in the hobby! Actually, it's not even positivism but blatant toadism. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours is the call of reviewers throughout the land.

This is a far cry from the more opinionated style popular in the 1970's. Even in the 1980's most reviewers would point out which zines were real 'Turkey's. In the 1990's it is considered to be an heinous crime to write critical reviews of even the bad zines.

This has become most noticeable in **Mission From God**, which has seemingly become a reserve for Turbo Phreaks and train spotters, where the editor's have actually *refused* to run critical reviews. How much faith can you put in a supposed *review* zine that ran good reviews of **Garbage In, Garbage Out**? Not much.

There are basic ingredients common to most schools of fanzine criticism: presentation, frequency, standard of GMing and quality of players. But provided that reviewers get their facts right³ there is no objective stance for reviewers. No guide-line handed down in a Novice's Guides to Fanzine Reviews. A good fanzine critic reviews from his own view-point, and the best use their reviews as launching pads for their own ideas.

It is entirely proper for a fanzine reviewer to emphasis fannishness as a desirable quantity in fanzines, even at the expense of ignoring the basic ingredients. This is not to say that fannishness is the only valid measure of worth, the only yardstick by which fanzines can be measured; only that fannishness is a standard⁴

³Which is more than we can expect from Danny, and people blame TV for lowering standards of education...

⁴We will soon be defining a British Standard Unit of Fannishness to help compare different zines.

On the other hand I can imagine sf fen throwing their hands up in horror, and shouting “No, no, no. A thousand times no!” SF fans like to think that concepts such as *fandom* and *fannishness* can only be applied to SF zines by “those that know”.

The view that only *bona fide* SF fans are knowledgeable enough to use certain terminology is put forward in Mr Gladgrind 49 (May 1992), where John Miller writes:-

“... Mark’s description of himself as ‘Crazy Markie’⁵ and his liberal use of words such as ‘neofan’⁶, ‘fannish’ and ‘fandom’ made me fear the worst.”

There is nothing wrong with adapting ideas from one subject into another, in fact it’s common. One of the ways in which the English language evolves is by taking words that are invented and used by small groups and throwing them into mainstream circulation. In the course of so doing their meaning may change, certainly ‘fandom’ and ‘fannish’ have different connotations in SF fandom and diplomacy fandom. (In fact there is a difference what Americans fans construe as diplomacy fandom and what British fans construe as constituting diplomacy fandom.)

Historical all the early dip fans (upto circa 1965) were SF fen and almost all of the editors (upto circa 1970) were SF fans even after wargamers started entering the hobby. (Indeed many of the early dip publishers also published SF zines.) Words such as ‘fannish’ and ‘fandom’ readily circulated in the early years of the diplomacy hobby; all that we are seeing today is their re-introduction into the language used by f fans.

Of course to people such as John Miller ‘fandom’ has a certain meaning. Yet it was common in role-playing fandom to refer to that hobby as ‘fandom’. Are role-playing fans to be strung up because of their unauthorised use of the supposed SF term ‘fandom’? No, fandom is a far more useful term to allow it’s use to be restricted to SF fandom.

It is easy to see why some people, such as Chris Sutton, object to the use of fannishness as a basis for a school of fanzine-criticism. This isn’t an argument about the word ‘fannishness’ but about the conflict between “the diplomacy hobby” (where people play games and want to play games) and “The Diplomacy Hobby” (where people have other reasons for remaining in The Hobby). At heart this is nothing more than a repeat of the controversy over the undue influence that the ‘Old Hard Core’ exerted in the late 1970’s — a group of people more interested in drinking, socialising and playing ‘games’ such as bridge, darts and snooker rather than spending their time at cons playing ‘proper’ games.

Eventually the OHC argument died, to be replaced by an argument initiated by David Watts and Alan Parr; who they complained that fanzine editors weren’t interested in writing/running articles on games. How could we expect to attract people into the postal-gaming hobby when we looked down on games, as if they were some second class citizen? Now this argument has been replaced by Fannishness vs Turbo Phreakness.

⁵It’s only a technicality, but it was Iain Bowen who came up with this name.

⁶It’s only a technicality but this is a euphemism for Joe Springboard

To emphasise fannishness is not to say that playing games is a worthless active that has no part to play in the hobby. It is to say that for many people there is more to the hobby than a collection of people playing games. AS Pete Birks writes in **Greatest Hits** 171 (May 1992):

“Unfortunately there are still many who live in the Dark Ages and think that the ‘Diplomacy’ hobby is still what it is all about. While many people retain an interest in Diplomacy I think it is clear that the ‘hobby’ as a whole is somewhat more nebulous than that.”

We shall return to this topic in a short while.

Neofans are fans to!

One area where I suspect that John Miller and myself are in agreement is the use of the word ‘neofan’ to imply a class distinction between those that are considered worthy and those that are beneath us and unworthy of our attention. Unfortunately this is a very common attitude amongst SF fans. Yet you should be proud to wear the ‘neofan’ name badge!

You can’t enter Fandom and immediately learn all that there is to know. You have to spend time finding the Yellow Brick Road that will take you to enlightenment, along the way there will be adventure, puzzles, disappointment and phun!

In issue 14 of the American SF zine **Folly** (March 1992) Arnie Katz writes:-

“Earlier in the day, Laurie had chafed about being labeled a neofan, an honourable and accurate description of her status in fanzine fandom.”

“Everyone is a neofan for a while,” I pointed out, I used the Brooklyn Insurgents of the early 1970s as an example of the progression from neo to BNF. “If you’d taken all the members of the club and ranked them in order of fame and fannish stature in 1971,” I said, “the bottom names on the list would have been Moshe Feder and Stu Shiffman.” I paused to let it sink in. “And they’ve both gone on to do big things in fandom and earned lots of egoboo and respect.”

In which the Turbo Phreaks raise their Banner

The hobby in America has always been more orientated towards game-playing. Whilst the occasional zine may have floated above the tide of strictly diplomacy orientated fanzine it was quickly dragged by down into the undistinguished mass of North American fandom. It has only been in recent years that there has been a discernible movement towards fannishness in most new zines. And now what do we have? We have a backlash from the games-players against the fans, which has seen several zines go under.⁷

⁷This is nothing more than Serconism vs fannishness, how fannish!

In the UK between the early 1970's and late 1980's zines have emphasised their written quality more than their construction as vehicles for playing games by post. I hesitate to use the 'fannishness' in this respect, perhaps neo-fannishness is a more apt description of this movement? In recent times we have seen a 'movement' emphasising the use of more puritan values in fanzines — because **Springboard** is acting as a filter on which kinds of fans enter the hobby?

From 1979 to 1983 **Greatest Hits** dominated the Zine Poll in a manner in which no zine had done before or has done since. With wins in 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983 and a second place in 1982 it set a record which will stand for all-time.

In recent years it's record has not been outstanding, but in the 1992 Poll it finished 4th⁸. What has been the reaction to its return to glory?

*"... a number of people who should know better are whinging that **GH** should not be included in the zine poll because it does not run Diplomacy (including one person who admitted voting for it!)... One curiosity about this zine poll publicity is that I have never claimed existing membership of the hobby, but my appearance in the poll last year — when I had even less to do with the hobby, caused no comment whatsoever, perhaps because I was supporting other zines rather than coming higher. I have my own views on the reasons behind all this..."* Pete Birks in **Greatest Hits** 171 (May 1992).

Is the **Hits** of today a different zine to the zine which so dominated the Zine Poll? Yes. **Hits** is no longer a three weekly zine running a stack of diplomacy games, featuring one of the best letter-columns in the hobby, some of the best writing in the hobby and excellent hobby coverage.

This last year it has been more-or-less monthly. It doesn't run any games. The letter column is not as interesting as in the zine's Golden Age (but remains one of the best in the Hobby), but the writing has improved. As a fanzine? Difficult to say. What the zine has lost in it's letter-column it has gained in its editorial writing, and whether you think the current edition is better or worse than the Golden Age edition depends on whether you put more emphasis on the letter-column or the writing.

Yet the Golden Age **Hits** did not dominate the Zine Poll because of the games it carried, or on the calibre of the GMing in the zine. It dominated the Zine Poll on the strength of its letter column, the quality of the writing and the hobby coverage. On this basis, there is little difference between the zine of yesterday and the zine of today. Does the inclusion of a dip game effect whether we consider this zine to be part of the diplomacy hobby?

For the Turbo Phreak the answer is a resounding YES!. Who are these Turbo Phreaks, you ask? Richard Sharp, come on down!

"As for whether or not someone is part of the hobby, which hobby are we talking about? I'm talking about postal Dip, and the qualifications are pretty simple: you have to be playing it, or

⁸Incidentally, **Greatest Hits** has been in every Poll since 1975 the longest consecutive run of any zine.

running it, or recently involved in one of these. This would appear to exclude John Harrington (one game ten years ago)" Dolchstoß163 (May 1992).

Fan Social Status

Last issue I hinted at a rewrite of the En Garde! rules to be set in Fandom. One problem is trying to decide upon a strata of Fandom. OK at the top there are the BNF's and at the bottom there are the neo-fans and fringe fans. Are editors a higher form of life than non-editor? I didn't give it a moments thought since I didn't give the En Garde! idea any thought until just recently...

It is almost fifty years since US fan Jimmy Kepner devised an amusing scheme for classifying fans, a fannish class-structure which is well worth reviving for a few moments amusement.

"He described an upper upper class composed of the old aristocracy of fans who had been prominent for years, a class impenetrable without a long record of achievement; a lower upper class, containing most of the outstanding fans, an area that could be entered with fair ease and one whose members would not admit subordination to the upper uppers; upper middle class fans, who never finished in the top ten in popularity polls but were familiar to everyone and frequently wrote or did something noticeable; the lower middle class, comprising neofans, prozine letterhacks, and older fans who had never fulfilled early promise; the upper lower class, consisting of today's fringefans category, a sprinkling of juveniles, and the few thoroughly disliked fans; and the lower lower class containing those fans with personality problems or possessed of subnormal mentality." Harry Warner in "All Our Yesterdays" Page 26.

I can see that the Yorkmeet is going to have hours of endless fun classifying fans into their correct social league. Perhaps we should start by going through MFG and classifying all the editors. "subnormal mentality", I wonder who falls into *that* category...

The Letter Column

Andrew York (P.O Box 2307, Universal City, TX 78148-1307, USA) [email 73210.3053@com.compuserve] 3rd May 1992

I'm not too sure what **SPRINGBOARD** is. I'm guessing that it is a zine that runs novice games. It's not too bad an idea; however, I find it is better to put a mix of players together – as I do in **RW**. I've had quite a few people start out in **RW**, and I agree that it is better to answer their questions in personal letters than in the 'zine itself.

I've recently had one novice who's been a bit trying. He wants the 'zine and the games run on his own terms. I'm on a tightrope as I don't want to drive him from the hobby with heavyhandedness; however, I don't want to cater to his every whim. A difficult situation.

My participation in the Dip Hobby has been quite recent. I've been gaming since '68, and pbming board games since the early '70s (and using professional pbm companies, i.e. Flying Buffalo, since the mid '70s). I started passive watching of Dip games in Earl Whiskeyman's **GAMERS' ZINE** and started playing in the late '80s. **RW** was originally just a flyer for a Mensa game that I was asked to GM. It grew, and grew until it's current format. I hope to keep it about this size; however, I would like more subbers (esp. overseas).

Influence on **RW** has been minimal from other 'zines. As I mentioned, it started as a flyer; but, I wanted more. The international subzines wasn't an idea that came from elsewhere, it's just what I wanted. The Poll Question was just designed as a quick filler - I'd hold the submissions until there was room to publish them. Other features just occurred. The only thing I 'borrowed' was the quick turn-around time. I hated waiting, and waiting, and wondering, when the next issue of a particular zine was going to arrive. Also, I never knew when it was 'too late' to get in orders. The two GM's that influenced me there was Earl (mentioned above) and Fred Davis with his **BUSHWACKER** and **DIPLOMAG**.

Per Westling (*c/o Lindh, Drabantgatan 11, S-58346, Linkoping, SWEDEN*) [email c85perwe@und.ida.liu.se]
20th May 1992

I won't be going to Xavier's Con in the Summer as I haven't heard anything from him since last year and have stopped sending **L4E** to him.

I did trade with **U-Bend**/Harry for some issues (4-6 or so) but as it was too much games and way to little material so I cut that trade. I fall into that category of cutters you describe in **MNE 3** but it is a bit different to cut widely worldwide (expense if no other reason). My trading policy locally is a bit different partly because **L4E** is the international gateway for most hobbyists/pubbers in Scandinavia.

Andrew York (*P.O Box 2307, Universal City, TX 78148-1307, USA*) [email 73210.3053@com.compuserve]
31st May 1992

I've sent a number of sample issues overseas and not had any reply! People I've not heard from in: Adrian Appleyard (Aussie - **Popular Cutlery**), Norman Berdichevsky (Israel), Xavier Blanchot (France - **Trahison!**), John Cain (Aussie - **Victorianna**), Tom Carlson (Japan), Thomas Frank (Germany - **Diplomat**), Halvard Hagesaether (Norway), Vic Hall (England - **A Little Original Sin**), Joergen Rasmussen Hoerskaetten (Denmark), Roy Li (Hong Kong), James Nelson (though I heard from him through you, **Variants & Uncles**), Jonathan Smith (UK), Peter Sullivan (UK - **C'est Magnifique**), six Canadians and one Brazilian.

The overseas ones I've heard from are on my mailing list, as well as one British, one New Zealander, one Swedish and two Canadians who declined to sub.

CrAzY MaRkiE If you want to attract overseas subbers you need to plug away over a number of years steadily raising your profile, thesedays it won't suffice to see 'Hi, I'm friendly; waana sub to my zine?' This is because there are a number of zines with good reputations which attract most of the people interested in internationalism. It is, as ever, easier to setup international trades.⁹

⁹Not in the UK as many editors aren't interested, and don't even believe in the concept of an International Hobby!