

GREATEST HITS 264

THE ZINE WITH SOUL



This is **Greatest Hits 264** from Pete Birks, Top Flat, 4 Lewisham Hill, Lewisham, London SE13 7EJ. It costs £1 in the UK, more abroad.



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My personal e-mail addresses are peter.birks@informa.com and pbirks@btinternet.com. Circulation is now around 59 and gradually decreasing. **GH 265** will probably be out in February 2004 and the DEADLINE for **GH 266** is late January 2004

It should have been obvious to me, I guess, but it still came as something of a surprise to see the hobby reaction to Keith Loveys' death. I was worried that when I couldn't make it to the funeral that there would only about six people there. You know, one of those depressing funerals that you see on TV sometimes, where the only people who turn up are the detective involved in the case, the gravediggers and the parson. It's always raining as well.

Well, I needn't have worried. As with Richard Sharp's funeral, the service was, apparently full to overflowing. Once again, I should stop overestimating my own importance in the grand scheme of things. My presence or absence was of significance only to myself.

The vast majority of the people who did turn up were bridge players, but a few hobby representatives were there as well. The large attendance apparently somewhat surprised Keith's family, who seem to have been unaware of his significance in the games world.

And the recollections in the zines have also been profligate. The reasoning is not complicated. Keith was still active in the hobby, whereas Richard, despite his production of *Dolchstoss*, was not. Keith was probably playing in as many postal games as anyone, right up to when he died. Nearly every zine that I have received since Keith's death has contained a comment about the games that he was playing in and what would be done with them.

Another odd thing that struck me was that he was often characterized as "reserved", a fact that I hadn't noticed because I had often met him face-to-face (many was the morning when we were the first two out of bed and played some head-to-head game while waiting for the pub to open). It seems that although a lot of people knew him to speak to, few people had had extensive conversations with him.

I have also received as many responses to Keith's death as I did to Richard's. And in case I forget to mention it **again**, I should also point out that Don Turnbull died this summer.

Anyway, there's quite a long letter column of reminiscences.

I fly out to Las Vegas on October 16th, so this will once again be late. Let's hope that this time I don't have to announce a death.

One magazine that I write for at work is called *Enterprise Risk*. I have written a monthly betting column for the past seven months. Anyway, they want to offer me £500 to write a 2,000-word piece on casino risk management. This will at least pay towards part of my holiday! What I need to do now is to get someone else in Informa to pay for the hotel if I promise to report on a particular conference. Oh, and that would also ensure that the days there did not count towards my holiday....

Autumn has landed, a mere six weeks or so after 100-plus temperatures. This week I put the heating back on. But I remain a lover of Autumn, the really nice season.

Redecoration of the house has gone well this year, although with that, online poker and an increased workload, the time and, to be honest, inclination to write *GH* has diminished. Part of the reason for this is that Informa give their editors more freedom to adopt their own writing style (an attitude which Chris Morrison at Evandale would doubtless have relabelled "amateur"). This means that some of the writing at work is now actually enjoyable rather than mere hack stuff.

However, I eventually get around to churning this stuff out, although it can be quite an effort.

Ah yes, the decorating. Well, the front room is virtually done, as is the bathroom. The walls in the kitchen have been repainted and I have actually ventured into the world of plastering, repairing one particularly rain-affected corner (no longer a problem now that the new roof is up). This morning I completed the installation of a couple of shelves above the door in the office, and I am quite pleased with the result.

The car remains outside, costing me about £600 a year for less than 1,000 miles of use. Ridiculous. After my trip to Vegas (yes, I'm now back) the battery was virtually flat, but I seem to be able to get it going for a drive each week — just. Last week I went as far as the South Circular, left, left again, right through Kidbrooke, back onto the Blackwall Tunnel road and left to Blackheath. I hadn't realized how close to the Blackwall Tunnel I was. Perhaps it's a viable alternative route into Central London.

Dolchstoß

Dolchstoß (I shall refrain from using the German scharf s “ß” for the duration of this history, if only to save me from interminably typing ALT+0223) really came about by accident. Richard recounted the tale several times, but that is no reason not to recount it again.

In 1972 Richard was editing at Cassell. (“Publisher’s editors” are not in any way the same as “magazine editors” and these in turn are different from “commissioning editors” and “sub-editors”. “Production editors” are a different field entirely. In fact, the term “editor” is very deceiving.). The good thing about being a publisher’s editor is that, so long as your publishing house is wide-ranging, you can have an endlessly varied job and acquire a mass of knowledge that is useful for dinner parties and quizzes, if not for much else. This is what Richard did.

Anyway, Richard discovered Diplomacy at Christmas 1970 and immediately thought that it had postal potential. In May 1972 the first issue of *Games & Puzzles* — a Graeme Levin project — appeared, which contained an advert to join the British Diplomacy Club. Graeme Levin then advertised for games writers/testers and Richard replied.

Richard’s description of Graeme Levin merits reprinting because, in its way, it encapsulates how good Richard was at writing. Brief, factual, insulting and entertaining (plus no

fear of the Oxford comma, but I digress)

[Graeme] was a South African Jew, which I supposed entitled him to be paranoid, and he was. He was a caricature: if you asked him any question, however innocent, he always said, “Why do you ask?”.

Graeme set up the BDC with the assistance of Don Turnbull because he (Graeme) thought that he could make some money out of it. Richard was assigned to his first postal game, BDC 4, which was run in Hartley Patterson’s *War Bulletin*.

That autumn, Graeme asked Richard to run some BDC games, and so *Dolchstoß* was born.

At this time Graeme also came up with the idea for the NGC. “Like all Graeme’s ideas, it was intended to make money and didn’t”, Richard wrote.

My own involvement in Diplomacy came about via these NGC face-to-face meetings, so it was natural that the first game I should play should be in the NGC’s zine — *Dolchstoß*. I still recall eagerly awaiting the Tuesday arrival of the adjudication after the Friday deadline.

My first game was BDC 22 and the first issue I received of *Dolchstoß* was number IX. In those days the concept of having zines numbered

CCXXXVIII was just incomprehensible. It was to be some time before *Dolchstoß* abandoned this numbering system.

It was May 1973, so I would have just been doing my A Levels — in which, if I recall correctly, I did not sparkle.

Dolchstoß was very much a zine in the right place at the right time. The enthusiasm for postal Diplomacy around 1973 and 1974 seemed to know no bounds, and the circulation of the zine was already up to nearly 100. The zine was foolscap and the logo was introduced for the first time in issue 9. It was electro-stencilled in blue and designed by Richard’s younger sister, Barbi, who was studying at Southampton at the time. I reproduce it above.

Participants in the games included Andy Davidson, Mick Bullock, Adrien Baird and Glyn Palmer, plus at least two of the “Didsbury Mob” — Andrew Herd and Dave Pink (of whom more later).

Postal Diplomacy, despite having been around for some time, was still “finding its feet”. There were debates about how to structure joint orders so that no player could be *certain* that he was not being double-crossed. Then there was the drop-out stand-by problem. The fast growth of the NGC meant that a number of the new players only knew other players through postal Diplomacy (I think that it would be a bit premature even to call it “a hobby” at this stage). Elsewhere, say with *War Bulletin* and *Ethil The Frog*, the postal Dip scene was more of an offshoot of science-fiction fandom than a hobby in its own right. Other zines, such as *Grafeti*, were university zines that happened to have a small external readership.



The point was, this new influx had no separate loyalty to the other players. This made dropping out easier and introduced it as a serious problem later in 1973. Without dropouts, there could be no stand-by controversy, and it was this which was developing. Should a game have stand-bys or not? The

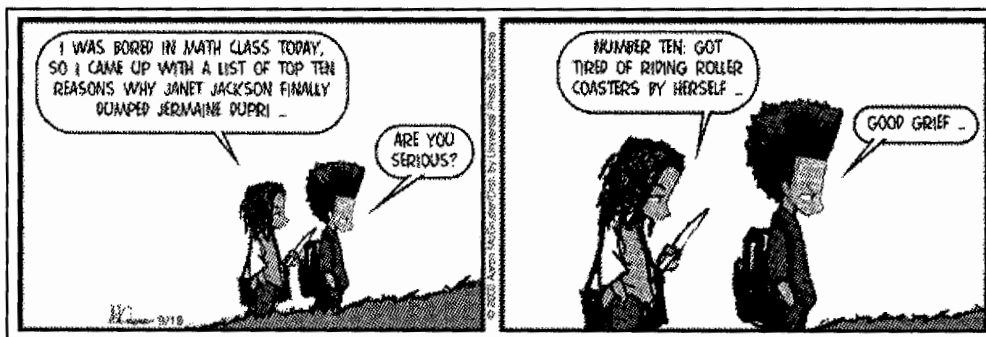
logical conclusion was that, since Diplomacy is a game between seven players rather than seven countries, then games should be standby-free. The counter-argument was that people signed up and paid to play a game, and a drop-out at the wrong time could ruin a particular game — just handing victory to a lucky player.

In issue X Allan Doodles and Norman Nathan made their first appearances. BDC 26 was to be run by Colin Bennett, who took on GMing the new games in his sub-zine *OJ*. (This was not a brilliant prediction of *OJ Simpson*, but a reference to the tune “Backstabbers” by the O-Jays).

The provisional player lists for BDCs 27 to 29 in issue 12 contain some interesting characters. Not only does Bert Spike make an appearance, but so does Yermack Plink, better known now as Nicholas Palmer (aka “Nicky”, aka “Nick”), currently MP for some northern mining establishment. At the time Nicky was living in Denmark. He would later inhabit Switzerland (where he took on another persona as “Dr Nicholas”) and fight for the parliamentary seat of Chelsea before returning to his well-known northern roots.

Mike Sherrad also appeared (now known as “Mike Sherrad is 44”), plus Mark Gleeson, current whereabouts unknown, Steve Wyatt and “D M Allen” of Butlins Holiday Camp, Clacton. There were at least two Dave Allens in the hobby even then, but later details show that this was the more famous, then long-haired, one. Dave would later rise to fame as the captain of the team in University Challenge that got totally slaughtered (Birkbeck), mainly because they made no preparation whatsoever.

It was in issue eleven that Richard first launched his campaign against “regular” Diplomacy. As far as Richard was concerned, the adjective was “standard”. “Regular is what All-Bran makes you”, he declared. This was the beginning of a long-running battle about how the standard game should be described, with Richard Walkerdine firmly in the “regular” camp. So much so, that when he was elected to the NGC as “standard



Diplomacy” chap, he called his mini-zine “All-Bran” (sub-head, “it makes you regular”).

I’ve often wondered about another word that Richard would not use in its American sense — “hopefully”. The “English” (but now almost archaic) meaning of the word can be gleaned from the sentence “He jumped over the wall hopefully”, meaning that he was full of hope. Unfortunately even we have another word which is more often used in this case, that being “optimistically”. The American sense of the word is as a substitute for “It is to be hoped”, which strikes me as a pretty efficient compression of words.

August 1973 brought the first big change in *Dolchstoss*. Graeme Levin had been demonstrating the seeds of financial talent that would later come to full bloom with Games Centre. As Richard wrote on page two of issue 12, “the club has been getting steadily into the red”. At this point the face-to-face meetings were getting more and more sparsely attended, inflation was roaring away, making subs received even a year before worth virtually nothing. So, the *NGC Bulletin* got the chop and *Dolchstoss* became the “official” NGC zine. Credits were rearranged, prices were raised and the idea was to make a profit. It didn’t work, but the idea was there.

The “mini-deadline” was also scrapped. This charming idea, perfectly suited to the Internet, or to the era when post was collected six times a day and delivered three, didn’t work in postal Diplomacy in 1973, where you had to post your build/removal orders in by return of post. Richard then sent out a carbon-paper confirmation of these builds and removals to the players in the

game. Perhaps Keith Thomasson could handle this sort of thing, but I know that I couldn’t.

Having been merged with the *Bulletin*, this meant that we got reports on other games, including the first postal NGC Scrabble game, in which Peter Dean (NGC Scrabble secretary for many years and probably still playing the game today, if he is alive) beat John Piggott (serial zine folder, long-time inhabitant of irradiated Canvey Island and somebody I must get in touch with about stained-glass windows again) by 414 to 366.

It was also in issue 12 that Richard launched his famous review of Mike Sherrad’s “Futur War” (it still has not been established whether this was a deliberate misspelling). “*There are some original features, notably the bodily removal of Silesia east of the Urals*”. “*Mike intends to run this game himself; I can only say I’m glad I’m not playing*”. “*The victory criterion for the USA and USSR is 50 supply centres, including 2 or 3 Japanese ones respectively. So here is a tip for any two minor countries — get together, declare nuclear war today, and fire your A-bombs, all four of them, at Japan...*” “*Alternatively, the nine countries between them can destroy every supply centre within the first seven months of the game — this may be realistic, but what happens next?*”

I also note in the COAs that a “Valery Wellburn” had moved to 56 Alexandra Gardens in Kew. Curiously, this was also the address of well-known Diplomacy player John Balson, whom I used to meet once a year, regular as clockwork, for a drink on Christmas Eve in Richmond.

Issue 13 was a superb example of the classic “disaster issue”,



perhaps one of the first of the genre. It had no electro-stencilled title and two page ones, before zipping eccentrically to page 4 to list "sheet 10" of new NGC members. Sheet 11 was on the next page which was, predictably, numbered three.

Some odd gadflies were listed here, including Conrad von Metzke (member number 273) and myself (member number 277). Dave Allen slipped in at the bottom of the page as number 281. A number of future zine editors were on this page, including Ken Jones (later of *Comet*) Clive Booth, Norman Nathan and John Coombe (*Pendulum*). Curiously, Graeme Levin appears as member number 275. Presumably, as founder, he was like the Queen when it came to passports, and did not require a membership number. Stephen Walsh, then opera critic of the Observer, snuck in at number 257.

Issue 12 had suffered another, smaller disaster, in that the Royal Mail had returned some copies to Richard on the grounds that it could not handle stapled mail. This event hit **GH** around issue 22, at which point I tried to deal with the Post Office, gave up and surreptitiously reposted the lot in bundles of half-a-dozen at various postboxes throughout London. As Richard observed of the *Dolchstoss* debacle, it "*ruins our delicately balanced economy as now we have to buy envelopes for everybody.*"

A "Demonstration Game" featured the likes of Brian Yare, Mick Bullock, Will Haven, Les Pimley and John Piggott, as well as famed non-communicator Andy Davidson. It also featured a commentary each season from Don Turnbull. Of course, for me the most interesting fact was that there were still so few people in the hobby that Richard could just call Russia "Davis" and assume that readers would know whom he meant. (It was probably Martin Davis of the Isle of Wight).

By this time BDC 1 was already up to 1908 and, owing to Richard's considerate comparison of the prices of German Scrabble sets and English ones, I can work out that at the time there were six Deutschmarks to the pound. Good grief, and this was the

early 1970s. Curiously, the cost of Scrabble sets worked out the same in sterling and in marks. One has to assume that German Scrabble sets carried on costing DM21 for many more years, as the pound gradually deteriorated.

It was at issue 17 (February 1974, circulation about 200) that Richard decided that running the NGC might require a committee. Membership of the NGC, thanks to a flyer in the Diplomacy set, was increasing apace (at about one a day). Richard was by now virtually running it on his own. The FTF meetings had folded, but the postal side offered a whole raft of games besides Diplomacy.

Nicky Palmer took on the post of wargames editor, from Denmark. His seminal work *The Comprehensive Guide To Board Wargaming*, to be launched in the London Liberal Club a year or so later, was doubtless already in preparation.

Not wishing only to refer to future MPs in the Labour Party, the same issue had a comment on the upcoming 1974 National Scrabble Championships, run by Gyles Brandreth. Richard had actually won the event the previous year, in the days before the game was taken over by techno-nerds who know every word in every dictionary but couldn't tell you a meaning of any of them.

Anyway, Richard's beef this time was that they used the Shorter Oxford rather than Chambers (also known as Chambers' in the 1970s and as Chambers's in the 1930s — I wish that they would make up their mind). Anyway, he could not resist slating future Conservative MP Gyles Brandreth (although I am sure that if you had informed him at the time that he was writing about two future MPs he would have laughed

in your face and had you breathalysed) for "bubbling" that the SOED had 168,000 words, although it would bar such new-fangled words as taxi, Mach and aitch. You could get away with the word 'bus only because it was defined as the past tense of bud. (Richard was later to refer to Brandreth as "odious".)

The youth of the hobby at the time was quite frightening. Already a grand old man of the Diplomacy world at 31, Richard said that *Dolchstoss* went to "at least three people who are older than me". Not bad out of a circulation of around 200.

Issue 19 had the rules for Anagrab, which was played with Scrabble tiles but wasn't at all like Scrabble. We played this quite a few times in the 1970s, but it must be 25 years or more since I played it last.

Also very active at the time was the FTF world. In those days it tended to be a housecon for the day, attended by a maximum of 20 people. But Willson broke this mould (although it could be argued that it was merely a continuation of Pimlicon, which Les stopped running because of illness). About 50 people turned up to sleep on floors, stairs, sideboards, etc, and to play games just about anywhere, even in the pub. I played a lot of darts and pinball, I remember that. And this was the con where I got the idea for publishing and the name *Greatest Hits*. It was supplied by Greg Ward on the night coach to Preston. Pete Swanson and graham Jeffrey were also there. Hell, Preston seemed *a long way away* in those days. Now you fly to New York for the weekend without a moment's thought. Amazin'.

What the NGC did not have yet was a poker school, although this



would not be long coming and perhaps merits saving for next time. The first "hobby" game probably took place at Richard Scott's Desscon, in early 1974. Piggott excelled himself by losing the then-enormous sum of £10 to Richard, who, I fear to say, was only really any good at poker games when he could see all his cards before the betting started (e.g. Pass The Shit, Anaconda, Silly Buggers). The results of the NGC elections were published, with Tony Ball being elected treasurer, and Richard Walkerdine, Steve Doubleday, Mick Bullock and Les Pimley being elected to "the committee".

Peter Dean, Nicky Palmer and Jacques Parry held responsibility for Scrabble, wargames and chess respectively. And page 11 had no less than six gamestarts.

1974 was a funny time. For a start, I voted in two general elections, which must be unusual for someone aged 18 and a bit (Feb 1974) and 19 years one month (October 1974). A few years previously I would not have been eligible to vote at all. Then inflation was increasing, and there were power cuts, and generally everything was an incredible mess. But at the same time we had the most hilarious music scene, consisting of Yes, ELO, and Slade (of whom The Darkness are beginning to remind me). Punk would emerge just two and a bit years later, but seems like a different generation.

The most controversial part of issue 20, although I doubt that Richard realized it at the time, was when he proposed to his 235 readers that, if they were thinking of voting in the Calhamer Awards, they should vote for British nominees and that the voting should be "unanimous". The rest, as they say, was history, with Richard's "suggestions" sweeping the board and the Americans going apoleptic.

Next time, the big poker games, the Eurocons and the "I was very ill that summer" tale.



Ocean's Eleven really was remarkable tosh, but was rescued by strong performances. The plot was that George Clooney got together 10 assistants to rob the vault of three Las Vegas casinos, the owner of which (played by Andy Garcia) happened to have got off with George Clooney's wife.

Enter Brad Pitt (always eating) in a poker game that once again had me tearing my hair out. When I was in Vegas in October, there were a remarkable number of novices. The World Poker Tour on the Travel Channel has brought them in to play Hold 'em in their thousands. Unfortunately, they have also watched too many movies like *Oceans Eleven* where you get the line "I'll see your 500 (pause) and raise you 500". In poker, this is a string bet and the raise would be disallowed.

Also in the mix are Carl Reiner (superb), Don Cheadle (worst cockney accent since Dick van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*), James Caan's son Scott, Matt Damon as a pickpocket, the brilliant Bernie Mac as the black blackjack dealer, Elliot Gould (owner of the finest wardrobe...) Casey Affleck and others.

So, as long as you realize that the plot is nonsensical (no, they do not have to keep \$1 in the vaults for every dollar that they have in chips in the casino ...) and just appreciate the performances, then it's fine. Although

the Julia Roberts character never really gelled for me.

But I missed Matt Damon picking Andy Garcia's pocket, and even when I spotted it, I couldn't figure out what it was he was picking (the combination codes, apparently). And how did George Clooney know that he was going to know the "bruiser" brought in to hit him? And how come the bruisees waiting outside didn't hear their conversation? Well, the flaws in the plot go on and on, but, if you don't mind the implausibility, it remains pleasant enough eye-candy.

28 Days Later, from the director of *Trainspotting* Danny Boyle, was another slightly disappointing movie, although Naomie Harris (previously seen in *White Teeth*) is sensational. The plot is based on a virus breaking free from a testing establishment that infects people with rage. Jim (Cillian Murphy) wakes up in hospital (echoes of *Day of The Triffids* here) 28 days later to discover an abandoned London.

Once again, there seems to be a fundamental flaw in the plot. Why do the people infected with rage not attack each other? And how is it known that eventually they will starve to death?

Notwithstanding that, I think that the lack of budget really showed in this movie – perhaps it was too grand a project for a Film Four effort. Christopher Eccleston plays a pleasantly nutty army man, and the ending seems a bit of a cop-out. It turns out that there was an "alternative" less happy and more ambiguous ending, which was dropped because it was seen as too negative.

It being several months since the last *GH*, I have obviously seen scores of films, none of which particularly



stick in my mind. I was running through some old videos the other week and came across *Other People's Money*, starring Danny DeVito and Gregory Peck. As I watched this, I realized that I had never seen it before, which is quite amazing really, especially since I had taped it in 1997. On my video index I actually have a "Not Seen" categorization, but this one must have slipped through the net.

Having installed a digibox at great personal risk, I have been exploiting BBC4's habit of showing some obscure foreign film on a Saturday night. This threw up the original version of *Insomnia* (Norway) and a very obscure Spanish version of a J G Ballard book (*Low Flying Aircraft*, I think). This was on the same night as "Home", a brilliant performance by Anthony Sher of one man's descent into madness.

Elsewhere, my viewing of TV has shrunk to "very little" with the lack of *Six Feet Under*, *The Shield*, *Boomtown* or *The Sopranos* on TV. I bought the video box set of *Brideshead Revisited*, which I have been savouring like an exceptionally fine port, and am currently up to episode seven ("And now the time has come to speak of Julia"). It's unfair to say that they don't make TV programmes like this any more, but they really don't. Tenderly paced over 12 hours, it spent an entire hour in Venice (episode 2, hour 3) when, to be honest, not much happened, but you still couldn't take your eyes from the screen. Nothing these days bothers to the same extent with character, as opposed to action.

BOOKS

As a treat to myself I bought Lynne Truss's book on punctuation, "Eats, Shoots and Leaves" and a book called "The Alphabet" by David Sacks. I haven't managed the second yet, but the first is a pleasant little read for less than a tenner.

I was therefore somewhat surprised to see that it had become the best-seller on Amazon.co.uk. I looked into the W.H. Smith's on the way home from work one night a couple of

weeks before Christmas and saw that it was into its sixth printing or thereabouts (it's not so easy to tell these days, what with the new coding system). I am therefore quite gratified to have picked up a genuine first print-run copy.

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I've also gone on a James Ellroy kick, completing *White Jazz* (the last in the LA Quartet), *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* (the first two in the, for want of a better term, Vietnam/Florida/Las Vegas trilogy). For anyone new to Ellroy, I think that reading the books in the right order is a better idea. The third in the Vegas trilogy, covering 1968 to 1975, I should think, should be out in a year or so.

Since which I've tried to get myself away from crime and back into real literature, with a start on *Atonement* from Ian McEwan.

CDs

The Corals' second album, *Magic & Medicine*, was disappointing. Radiohead's *Hail To The Thief* is brilliant. Muse's *Absolution* gives clear indication that the group is heading down the Emerson Lake and Palmer route and are none the worse for that. The Doves' *The Last Broadcast* is better than you might think, and Damien Rice's debut is also a "grower". Perhaps the best purchase over the past few months has been the Chris Farlowe compilation *Handbags & Gladrags* for £3.99. About 23 magic tracks there from one of the best blues voices of the sixties. The worst buy was The Farm's "Greatest Hits". Er, they only had one. Everything else is shite.

Hmm, a column to fill. Well, seen in the past couple of days is *Donnie Darko*, a "cult in the making", or so I have been told. It's the directorial debut of Richard Kelly and there are some clear influences at work — namely Stephen Spielberg and David Lynch (also Jonathan Demme). The film's major problem is that, without watching the director's commentary on the DVD, it is almost completely incomprehensible. Part of the reason that it is incomprehensible is that the bits that make it comprehensible ended up on the cutting-room floor.

So, for those of you who saw it at the movies and came away arguing about what it meant, here is what the deleted scenes make clear:

- 1) Donnie is not a paranoid schizophrenic
- 2) "Frank" (the six-foot bunny rabbit) is Donnie's sister's new boyfriend
- 3) What Donnie sees is real, not imagined
- 4) Donnie creates the wormhole
- 5) 70% of the film is what the director calls a "tangential universe"
- 6) In the "real" universe Donnie sacrifices himself to save the life of his new girlfriend and that of Frank.
- 7) The drugs Donnie is taking are placebos
- 8) The fat guy in the red is from the FAA and is checking out the flight crash
- 9) The fat woman in the audience is a talent-spotter who signs up the younger sister to fly to LA.

However, forget the incomprehensibility — for \$4.5m, it's a sterling first effort and is brilliantly performed. Is Kelly the new David Lynch and is *Donnie Darko* his *Eraserhead*? Only time will tell, but there are definitely some great pseudo-Lynchian moments and colours.



This is the beginning of my “theory of online poker” — how important are various factors in winning at the online game?

PRE-GAME STRATEGY:

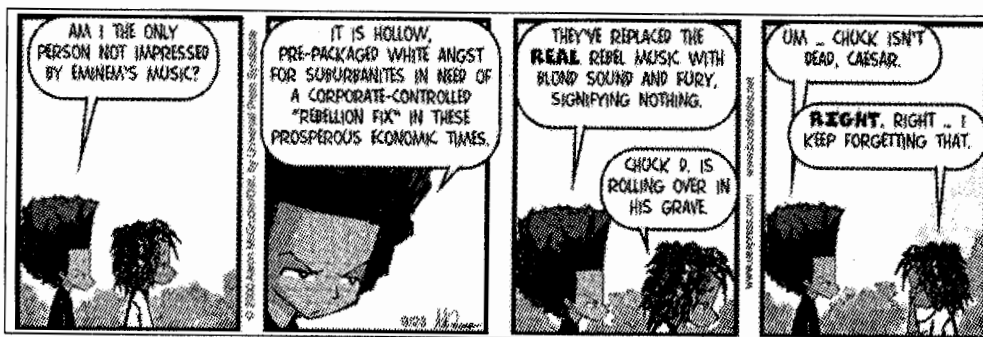
One thing that I see recommended by a lot of online players is to “find a soft game”, but I would rank “choice of game” lower online than I would in bricks & mortar, particularly at the more popular limits. My reasoning is that when playing online there are always a number of people in search of “the most promising game”. This means that a loose game quickly tightens up and a tight game will tend to get looser (because the people sitting down will be less “picky” players). In other words, the regression to the mean is faster in an online game. So, pre-game strategy, 5%. This should include “do not play when tired, do not play when drunk, do not play when angry”.

EXIT STRATEGY:

Exit strategy is more important. If you have been in a loose game but the two fish who have made it a good game go broke, or leave while they are still up, you should leave as well, even if you are “stuck” (significantly down). You are now probably facing seven other rocks and you will not get “your” money back in this particular game. Choosing to leave a “good” game just because you have gone a long way up, but then lost a bit of it back, is also a common mistake (and one that I often make myself!). Stay for as long as the game remains good and you remain alert. Exit strategy — 10%.

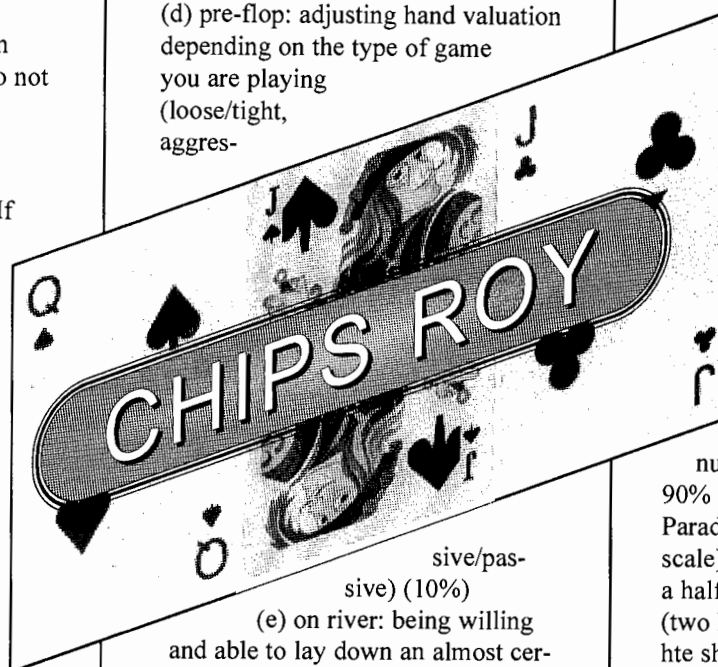
Strategy during game:

Weighting here is much harder. Basically you need to look at the way the most common decisions are made, since these are the most important. Harder decisions that come up infrequently are less important because they are less common. (I am referring here to limit play. In NL and PL, the less frequent decisions go up in weighting because of an added function, the size of the likely loss or gain.)



Those frequent decisions at Limit that crop up all the time include:

- (a) pre-flop: adjusting hand valuation depending on position (15%)
- (b) throughout hand: adjusting hand valuation depending on other people's play during the hand (15%)
- (c) pre-flop: adjusting hand valuation depending on the number of players in a pot (10%)
- (d) pre-flop: adjusting hand valuation depending on the type of game you are playing (loose/tight, aggres-



- sive/passive) (10%)
- (e) on river: being willing and able to lay down an almost certain loser at the end despite pot odds of more than 10-to-1. (5%)
- (f) throughout hand: not going on tilt, ever, but, if you are going on tilt, spotting it and stopping playing (5%)
- (g) throughout hand: seeing how upcards affect the potential of your hand and opponents' likely hands, seeing how upcards affect your chances of winning (25%).

Well, those are my early thoughts. One day I shall get it all together into a coherent book.

Another profitable year comes to an end, even though the whole thing seems to be getting rather stale. I still rather enjoy playing online, but after

50,000 hands in a year, you get to the stage where nearly everything is done by rote.

To stop myself getting stale, I've been playing quite a few tournaments over the past few months and have made a minor profit. These have ranged from single-table “sit-&-goes” (where you just wait for the requisite number of people to turn up) right up to 650-player tournaments.

The interesting thing about these massive tournaments is that you nearly always get into the money at about the same time. The levels at PokerStars go up every 15 minutes (10 minutes on the new Paradise Poker tourney tables), and about 10% of players get prize money. The number of players is reduced by 90% by level 10 (level 11 or 12 on Paradise, because of the shorter timescale), so it takes you about two and a half hours to get into the money (two hours on Paradise, because of the shorter timescale).

Unfortunately, the lowest level of prize money is about 180% of the entrance fee. All the “big” prize money is saved for the last nine players at the final table.

This makes for an interesting choice of strategy. Do you “play safe” and just try to get into the money as often as possible, or do you “go for gold”? Although it may seem difficult to outsurvive 90% of the field constantly, if you approach the tournament with the attitude “if I am alive after two-and-a-half hours, I am in the money”, things don't look so difficult. I try to turn my initial \$1,500 into \$3,000 at the end of the first



hour and to \$10,000 at the end of the second hour. I would adopt this tactic whether I was planning on "survival" or "death or glory".

It is at the end of the second hour (by which time the blinds in a limit game will be \$600 and \$1200) that you have to decide whether to aim for the final table or whether to make sure that you are in the money. Because the prize money is so pathetic at the lower levels, the game does not tighten up as much as you would expect as "the bubble" approaches. This is because a large number of players are only interested in the final table and are therefore continuing to play very aggressively. This means that a conservative strategy with your \$10,000 (play nothing less than Aces, Kings or Queens, or when you flop a set to your small pocket pair...) will easily get you to the money stages.

However, once you are there, you will simply be looking to survive "one more table" and to move up the prize money rankings.

I have adopted this strategy with rather more success than the "go for gold" strategy and have, through some nice cards at the right time, actually made it to the final table a couple of times. But I suspect that this is just my natural style of play.

I "blew out" through inexperience in a freeroll of 150 runners, where the top two obtained 10,000 frequent player points (or entry to a big tournament for a \$10,000 game in Aruba next year). In cash terms this was only about \$100, but there were three of us left and, despite me managing to obtain most chips going into the "last three" situation, my inexperience and impatience cost me my place. We were playing for about 40 minutes before I got fed up with being reraised once too often and called with just top pair on the flop of J-6-4 rainbow. My opponent had J-4. Clearly in this situation you have to wait for a decent flop. Unfortunately, I never got one, but I could have passed in this situation and waited for one to come. If the same situation crops up in the future, I will now.

But this "last three" situation was very unusual, in that third place got nothing. Most tournaments have

much flatter prize structures. I don't think I shall be entering tournaments like this again in much of a hurry.

By way of an afterthought, the "final" tourney, with four prizes worth \$10,000 and no other prizes at all, got down to the last five, and continued for another 200 hands before the final player was knocked out. This would be about six hours' play in a live tournament and was a good three hours' play online. The mental stress involved in that kind of game is not my idea of fun!

Compared with this, cash games are almost soporific. I play \$2-\$4 while watching television, sorting out my CDs, reading the newspaper, whatever. As such, I really must move up a level or two come the new year, in order to regain some kind of excitement!

When Genius Failed

When Genius Failed purports to be the history of Long-Term Credit Management, the hedge fund that is thought to have brought the US banking system to the verge of implosion. But it could equally be called *Liar's Poker, Part Two*, because the history of LTCM is inextricably intertwined with the life of John Meriwether, formerly the partner at Salomon who established the bond arbitrage group that was at the heart of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Then in 1991 Meriwether resigned after a scandal involving one of his traders. Lowenstein recounts this sad tale and also delves into Meriwether's background.

Hurt, Meriwether regrouped, got academics on board (including

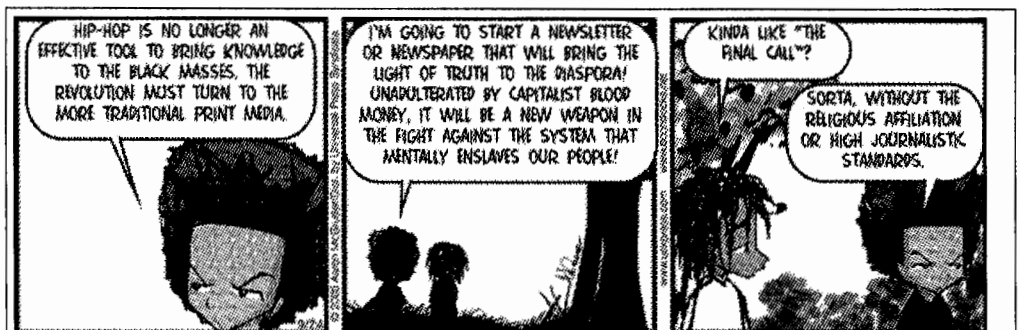
one half of the pair that created the Black-Scholes derivatives value calculator) and many of his former Salomon team, and created Long Term Capital Management.

Hedge Funds were something of a misnomer. As with Portfolio Management, the concept went back a long way. As long as you could pick decent companies in a sector, it didn't matter whether the market as a whole went up or down — by "hedging" your position, all that mattered was whether your investment outperformed its rivals.

But by 1993 this concept had faded. Hedge funds were seen as private clubs for wealthy individuals who wanted to make more money. The LTCM "rocket science" system was really anything but. It found oddities or divergences in the pricing mechanisms of bonds and acted on them. When, a few months later, the oddity smoothed out, LTCM made millions. The oddities were only small, but LTCM was always betting BIG amounts of money, far more than its capitalization.

One example was that of 30-year bonds in the US. "New" issues were always priced around 10 basis points (0.1%) higher than issues six months old, because the new issues were more liquid (and liquidity in a stock has a "value"). However, six months down the line, the new issue was six months old and the six months' old issue was a year old. The basis point differential disappeared because both bonds were now equally liquid. By consistently trading large amounts on this small differential, LTCM made a lot of money.

So, where did it go wrong? On reading this book, the one word that springs immediately to mind is ...

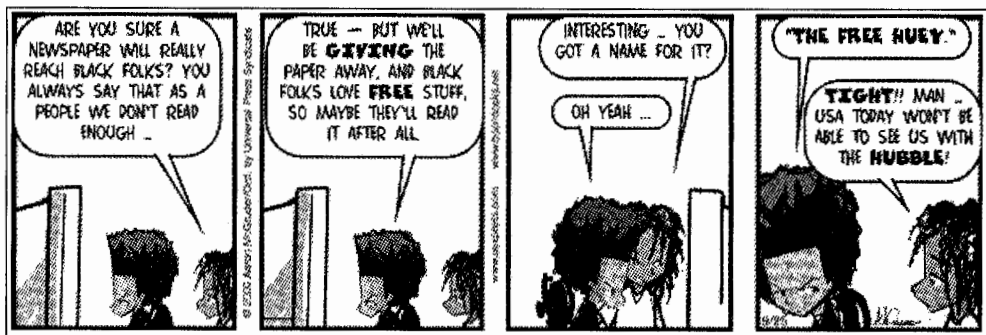


“hubris”. Only a year or so before the disaster, LTCM returned capital to investors because it wanted to take more of the profits for itself. In other words, it increased its own gearing. It chose to do this in spite of the fact that if there is one rule in the markets, it is that they do not stand still. LTCM’s old little tricks were no longer working, because other people had spotted them. So it moved into new areas. Some of these were nothing more than outrageous punts in fields about which the rocket scientists knew nothing.

The final blow was not sudden. After a few years of profits, LTCM started to make losses. In the early days its haughty attitude to the Wall Street establishment (even the offices were away from New York, in the more refined and hushed Greenwich, Connecticut) had been tolerated. But when the losses started, other players were not slow to spot it.

The “trigger” has been seen as the Russian default on its bonds. Sovereign states were not meant to default on their debt. However, LTCM had always been playing Russian roulette with a loaded revolver. Its basic premise was that anomalies always regressed to where they should be. For three years, this is what happened. But during 1999 they didn’t. The anomalies continued to increase in size. LTCM’s maths might have been perfect, but their gearing was so great that, as one pundit put it: “not only did they have to be right by the end of the trade, they had to be right every day of the trade”.

As various spreads continued to widen where the mathematicians reckoned they should be narrowing, LTCM hit three factors that its equations did not allow for. The first was that a market that was acting irrationally could often act in an increasingly irrational manner for quite a long time, before common sense prevails. LTCM’s gearing meant that it could not cope with this. The second was that prices do not move in a smooth fashion when there is an irrational panic. In 1999 this was a “flight from risk”. The equations



assumed (a) liquidity and (b) the existence of a counterparty willing to trade. In 1999 there were positions that LTCM could not get out of at any price. The third factor was the most important. The equations saw LTCM as an outsider trading in the market. It failed to key in the fact that LTCM was itself a part of that market. When other players spotted that LTCM was vulnerable, they moved in for the kill. The widening of spreads of blue-chip over junk, AAA over Baa3, put LTCM in a weaker and weaker position. And a lot of people in Wall Street hated their guts.

When the company was about to go under, an unprecedented meeting was arranged of all the major banks. New York stock exchange boss Grasso basically forced them all to rescue the fund. Meriwether and the rest were humbled and many of them were financially wiped out. Few tears were shed.

As Lowenstein points out, this rescue was quite possibly a mistake. He claims (and I agree with him) that LTCM should have been allowed to fail, that the system would not have collapsed as a result, although it would have suffered a severe shock. By manoeuvring a “soft landing” for

Dear Pete, how are you?

Geoff Challenger

My fondest recollection of the Lamb is organising it so that Gary Coughlan (Europa Express?) and another hobby friend of his could meet up with us whilst they ‘did’ Europe in 3 days or something similar.

It was more the fact that the Lamb had celebrity status and would therefore attract the provincials in. I think both Clive Booth and Richard ‘Mick’ Hucknall popped in.

I used to bring Julie occasionally and our mate Jane. This was always useful to some since it often meant people got lifts out as far as Waterloo or SE London. We got 6 or 7 people in the Polo once with Jane in the front on Woody’s knee, although only as far as Waterloo.

I also remember that one of the Lamb nights coincided with riots in Brixton and being made to divert around the trouble without knowing what it was all about.

Drinking was always a problem for me. This being the era when alcohol was only beer, lager, cider or spirits, I ended up drinking occasional Cokes. I have to say I’m far better suited to today’s alcopop generation’s drinks and would have no problem in falling down at that age now, if you see what I mean. However then it meant that I was usually sober most nights and that leaves you feeling a little excluded sometimes. Not that I wasn’t having a good time...

I also dragged my old friend Will Haven along to VRC once or twice. That was quite strange because it must have been a phase when Birks, probably the only other hobby person old enough to know him, was absent and there was just no connection between Will and these damn johnny-cum-latelies — except that it was Will on the periphery of things.

I think I played Take the Brain once at the VRC. Aside from the games ambience it was also a



much better, lighter, airier pub. Hell I think it even did food. Sadly, when I passed it a few months back, it seemed to have become something else in the pushing up of the whole area. When did it cease to be the VRC?

PJB: Pubs change in London faster than you change your socks. The VRC was originally, I believe, a pub called The Golden Hind. It may have become that again for a short period when theme pubs were out of fashion.

Geoff (cont'd):

Willscon was my first weekender as well, having been to Pimlico 2 at Les's a few months previously. I think I must have been 17 at the time, with a zero interest in going down the pub. The rest of the 'Didsbury mob' came, albeit for different lengths of time.

Andrew Herd, chubby little argumentative oik and trainee Thatcherite, went off to Cambridge, I think, and then into proper accountancy. He's now the MD of Corporate Finance at Hambros. He and I would probably still not agree on a single thing.

Dermot Dwyer, a well-meaning if slightly bumptious bloke ended up being my Best Man, going off to Newcastle, and settling down to work for as some computer boffin in Manchester, whilst living (and sailing) in the Peak District.

Dave Pink, fellow would-be Maoist and degenerate revolutionary, went to one of the central London colleges of London Uni and smoked too much dope and more, got chucked out and then readmitted to complete degree. Got a job working for the DSS and ended up becoming a forms and systems designer. Now married, living in Leeds but not really in touch. Strangely, his little brother Andy (a real pain at 14) became an actor/ASM and a client of ours.

Not sure what became of the likes of Mike Sherrard.

JOHN HARRINGTON

I think I must take the blame for the relocation to the Vertical Refreshment Company (which was situated in

Central Street — cited by Birks earlier on as a candidate for "pub furthest from a tube station", though the VRC was not too badly located as it was at least on the corner of Central Street and Old Street).

PJB: It would be nice to know which pub in central London could lay claim to being "the pub furthest from the underground". Did I really say that? Several other candidates spring to mind, not least the pub opposite the Barbican Hotel (which is not in the Barbican, but placed in that no-man's land on Central Street between City Road and Old Street)

John (cont'd):

The place was indeed meant to be "games friendly" but it was probably a mistake to think that people would play games at a hobby meet. Then again, maybe the meet was dying on its arse and I thought moving to somewhere that allowed games playing might actually encourage more people to turn up. I seem to recall that the only "game" that ever got played was Trivial Pursuit.

PJB: I seem to recall some people laying out a game of Statis Pro once, in order to play three minutes of an American football game (this would take about an hour in real time).

John (cont'd):

My memories of the Lamb?

Thorby, obviously. Gareth Cook, definitely, along with Paul Kellett, his co-editor in the appositely named Supanova. One or possibly more Billenesseseseseseseses. Woody, occasionally. Not talking to Birks because I thought he'd be dis-

missive of Johnny Come Latelies to the hobby (he was, of course, but in an entertaining way). Brian bloody Dolton — probably a nice bloke but a bit of a pretentious prick in print, I thought. Pete Tamlyn arriving on his motorbike; the massive flares were probably unfurled to give him more speed when he had the wind behind him. Lee Paddon, who once sold us a tube of Gestetner ink. Matt Quartermain. Marc Gascoigne and the Dragonlords crew.

Did Gamble ever attend? It's likely that I would have expunged such a traumatic encounter from my memory.

Ordering your drinks through a tiny window or, in mine and Kevin's case, from underneath the window.

PJB: Gamble attended many times in the period 1980 to 1982, I think. The Drahonlords crew were the beginning of the end as far as I was concerned. It was like going to GamesDay and having to talk to people dressed up as Norsemen (which, I believe, Bryan Betts still does). Both Bryan and Lee Paddon are still writing for techno-nerd magazines, I think.

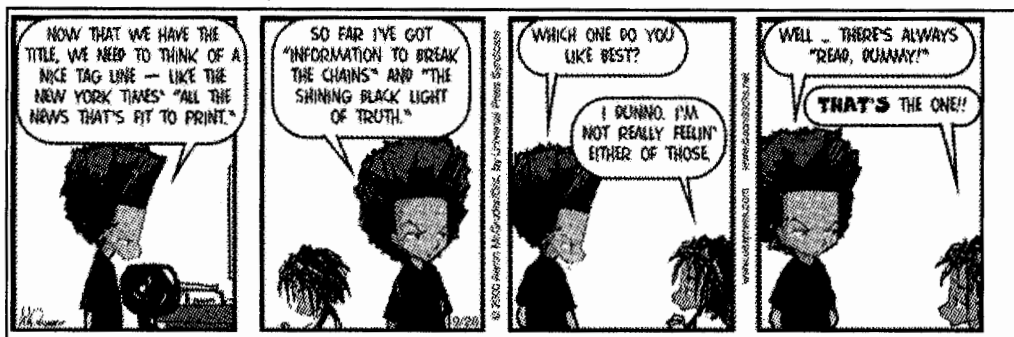
Chris Tringham

It seems probable that I will be starting a new full-time job in the foreseeable future (I'm trying to put it off, but I can't do so inevitably).

PJB: Did it happen, Chris?

Jonathan Palfrey

Your idea about "common culture" — I can see that it's nice when you can talk about common interests and everyone knows what you're talking about.



I've often tended to be excluded from that kind of thing, after living abroad in my youth without a television much of the time. On the other hand, I also think the availability of a wide range of entertainments is a good thing. I imagine two scenarios:

1. Only a few novels are available, so people either read those or go without fiction. If you talk about a novel, everyone who reads novels knows what you're talking about.

2. There are masses of novels available. When you want to talk about one, it's hard to find someone who's read it.

I think I prefer the second scenario. Even though it would be nice to have that common culture and to be able to talk to people about books, what I like above all is actually reading the books. And in scenario 1, few if any of my favourite books would be available — I'd never get the chance to read them.

PJB: Ahh, but if those books were not available, you would read the ones that were, wouldn't you, and you would be unaware that there was a whole universe out there of "books not written"? Indeed, that might be the case at the moment, with millions of unwritten works out there, each of which would blow your mind. I doubt that the well-read of the 19th century muttered to themselves "there just aren't enough novels being written....".

Jonathan (cont'd):

In the field of computer games, I suffer from lack of variety. Although lots are available, hardly anyone makes the sort of games I want to play. (Perhaps this is a good thing: if there were lots of games I wanted to play, I could waste a lot of time on them.) But the popular games that are available don't give me the benefit of any common culture, because I don't like them and I don't buy them. Restricting their numbers and variety wouldn't do any good: I still wouldn't buy them.

PJB: Yes, I see your point here, although with computer games I think that it's a bit unfair to lump the whole lot together. A shoot-em-up has about as much in common with a strategy game as does a Mills & Boon romance with a medical text-book. They both use the same medium, but the point is entirely different.

John Hopkins:

Like you, I was smacked sideways by the reported death of Loveys. I say reported, because I shall not believe it until I have failed to see him in all sorts of miscellaneous places about four or five times over the next year. For that is how I have seen him for every year of the past three decades.

I did not know him well. He was reserved and often — to me — seemed brusque. I had — I think — no more than three cogent conversations of any length with him in all of that time. But they sparkled like diamonds.

I met Loveys in Sarf London in the company of Eric Willis, Steve Plater and "the Other One", after I and Marcus Barbor drifted into "the Hobby" via Dungeons and Dragons. Although — yes — we had played Diplomacy face-to-face in the early 70s.

Meeting these worthies might well have been in 1975, at a housecon at Gary Porter's. They (Willis, Plater etc.) were living in appalling squalor in Lewisham/Catford/Norwood - with more library books than the local Public Library. Mostly because the local Library did not steal from them.

I remember meeting Loveys on the platform of Edgware Road tube one afternoon in the mid/late eighties. He and I were — as it happens — playing in a game of postal En Garde! I attempted to negotiate some toadying opportunities (he was far better at En Garde than I — as well as at every other game that I have ever seen him play).

I was in a business suit and he was in fustian. The conversation was surreal, bizarre and portentous — but yet I

could not remember of what we spoke, even at the time. It was like a drug-induced experience. Seemingly of vast significance, but of which you can remember nothing.

As Keith Thomasson has said — he was always there.

Sadly missed. For me, even more so than Richard Sharp — whom I met far less frequently, but felt I knew better.

PJB: As I said, I had many conversations with Keith over the 20 years that I knew him. Hearing him talk about Bridge was like hearing a man from another planet. He was the only man who managed to show me "where the other 25% went" in the principle of restricted choice. (I knew that the principle worked, but, since all possible events have to add up to 1, I couldn't work out where some of the possible events 'disappeared' to. Keith explained it to me, but I've since forgotten. Perhaps I should just sit down with a piece of paper to work it out again. There is a similar puzzle that involves backing an unnamed favourite. If there are joint favourites and the two joint favourites finish in a dead heat, the punter is only on for half his stake. Explaining where the "lost" stake has gone is one of the hardest things in betting shop calculations, even though you know it is correct!

Oh, and "the other guy" was John Reardon, then a teacher in Clapham.

I remember the South Norwood abode. The landlord used to pop round every so often in despair.

John Webley

Sad news about Keith. I didn't know him well as a person (but did anyone?) but as a player and opponent his dying will leave a big gap in my gaming and in Serendipity. It must have been sudden, I have some



orders from him that arrived around when he died and they are just as normal.

Your observations on books and common interests are fascinating. As a compulsive re-reader of books that I like though, I'm not sure that you are spot on about the lack of ability to discuss books in depth. There must be well over 200 books in this house that I've read often enough to be able to discuss in almost any depth possible. OK, they are not all "good" books, a lot of them are either crime or fantasy/Sci Fi books, but I read and re-read them interminably, to the point where I nowadays find it hard to start a new book: it's always easier to go back to an old favourite.

Tricia has the useful trait of managing to forget who did it in crime books in a relatively short time, certainly within a year or two, which means that she can re-read something like an Agatha Christie and enjoy it just as much the second or third time round as she did the first. My reading life would be far easier if I could manage this trick: maybe a good memory isn't always an advantage.

As one of the people who used to provide Richard with foul smelling French tobacco in lieu of *Dolchstoss* subs, I have had a guilty twinge or two. I rationalised it at the time as that he would get hold of the stuff somehow whatever I did, and I was just making it cheaper for him, but then I never really expected that he would die of a smoking related cancer. I always pour scorn on smokers who use the "it won't happen to me" argument, now I find that I've been doing the same thing by proxy. Sobering.

Did I ever mention the odd coincidence that had Richard, John Piggot and I living within a hundred yards or so of each other in the early sixties? My walk to primary school took me past the door of Richard's digs in South Oxford, while John lived round the corner, and is probably responsible for my games playing career, having taught me chess and other games at a fairly early age (6? 7?, I'm not sure, I certainly left Oxford when I was 9, so it must have been earlier

than that). Odds against three members of such a small group as "The Hobby" all living so close to each other? Must be pretty large, even given that two of us knew and influenced each other.

That's about it. We are coming over to Britain on Friday, bringing Becca and all her stuff over ready to start in Sheffield next week. Doesn't seem any time ago that I was writing about her being born in the early *Serendipitys*. It's a bigger "life step" than I'd been anticipating, the first child leaving home. And of course, it brings the memories back like nothing else.

Jonathan Palfrey:

Here in the bustling metropolis of Sant Pere de Ribes, our son Marc is not quite three years old but has already started his first real term at a real school (no more kindergarten). He's going to a French school called Bel Air, and he seems to have settled into it quite happily so far, though he isn't speaking French yet (they told us that he should be speaking some French by Christmas). Most of the kids in his class are of course Spanish, but there are a few French and French/Spanish children, plus a Danish girl and an Asian-American boy.

Of course I'd have preferred to send him to an English school, but we visited the English school (ESCAAN) and didn't like the look of it. We're not really bothered whether he speaks French or not, but we both liked Bel Air best, and it's significantly cheaper than ESCAAN. Furthermore, it has its own large, heated, indoor swimming pool, and he's keen on water.

Ken Simpson

A pleasant day in some respects. Fine weather and minimal traffic (by M25 standards) to and from Watford. Keith's funeral was a simple affair, family, a lot of bridge players and half a dozen 18xx players. The chapel was full, which seemed to surprise the family. A short service., no hymns. He was one of nature's gentlemen and conventions will be the poorer for his going.

The last two funerals I've attended, the deceased was younger

than I am. Makes you think.

PJB: Yes, I remember when Ian Botham became captain of England, since he was the first to be younger than I was. Tony Blair nearly achieved the same feat as prime minister, but not quite, so I still await that milestone. But I have yet to reach the stage where the funerals I attend are of people younger than me. That's not to say that there aren't plenty of obituaries where this is the case. It sometimes comes as a jolt to recall that I have lived longer than Oscar Wilde, John Kennedy John Lennon or Elvis Presley managed.

John Wilman

I have a plumber in at the moment, installing a shower, so nothing better to do than to check share prices, watch "Working Lunch" and dash off a few letters.

Despite despatching my own obituary of Keith Loveys to John Marsden by the Sunday post, I see that you were once again the first editor to break the sad news of another hobby member of "our" era departing this earth. You aren't bumping them off just to give you a reason for publishing, are you — that bloke who plays all the TV detectives investigating serial killers would get another ulcer.

PJB: Well, given the present infrequency of GH, it might seem that I am merely awaiting deaths to give me a reason to publish, rather than causing them. I think that 13 deaths in a year might have a serious effect on the zine's circulation.

John Wilman (cont'd):

On same names and identities, do you happen to know if the Peter Large recently fingered in the financial press as a possibly fraudulent solicitor is the same Peter Large who used to play chess for Middlesex? Balding, spotty, dead ringer for ex-chancellor Tony Barber.

PJB: I don't know why you think I should know anything

about this. I just checked the FT database over the past 12 months and no "Peter Large" appears, well, not in a fraudulent solicitor sense. However, I am aware of Tony Barber, which probably sets me apart from 99% of the population. Indeed, if you had asked me 10 minutes ago "name the worst chancellor since the war" I would probably have said "Nigel Lawson" without much thought. But Tony Barber would certainly have given him a run for his money.

John Wilman (cont'd):

Books. I own about 1,000. There are maybe just half a dozen that we would have in common. One such is *The Nine Tailors*. Another one you should try is Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience".

Punctuation (or possibly style). Are you really meant to start so many paragraphs with "so".

PJB:

Probably not, but I'm afraid that **GH** doesn't get much stylistic re-honing these days. Just writing it is hard enough. After you have spent three hours poring over 16,000 words on the insurance industry, subbing your own copy for something that doesn't pay you comes pretty low on the list of priorities, I fear. You should be grateful that I even do a proof-read.

I fear that I have never read any Dorothy L Sayers and I am grateful to you for pointing it out. (And, while we are on the subject of style, note the counterbalance of "grateful" there in two sentences, creating an overall harmony between the two sentences and a sense of balance in the world. Alternatively, I couldn't think of another word to use.)

John Wilman (cont'd):

Is there any money/mileage to be had in putting out a share-tipping service, presumably on the Internet, for those who can access the bloody thing. Just an idea. I'm still hoping to run a sec-

ond-hand bookshop one day.

PJB:

Internet share-tipping service? Forget it. As for the second-hand bookstore, it seems an unavoidable fact that nearly everything is more efficient today if you run it online, and a second-hand bookshop is no exception. You run it from your house, list on AbeBooks, or auction via ebay, and cut down on costs. The downside is that you never meet anybody.

It occurred to me that I could do a partial imitation of Anthony Sher in JG Ballard's "Home" without much trouble. I quit work, order my food from Tesco, and play poker on the Internet. As an existence, this would be perfectly viable financially, but would entail no human interaction whatsoever, which might drive even hermit-like me over the edge. Similarly, running an e-bay type selling operation would be more cost-efficient than going out to car boot sales, but once again, you would never meet anyone.

I think that people underestimate this positive aspect of running a shop - you get to meet people.

John Wilman (cont'd):

A final thought on cordless phones. Is the limited range supposed to be a deterrent to burglars (you are the only person who can usefully use the thing)?

PJB: *Not really. Cordless phones have a handset and a base unit. I would assume that a burglar would have the sense to use both.*

I still haven't worked out how the phone is "registered" to the base unit and I occasionally wonder what would happen if a tech freak wandered outside my house with such a phone. Would it be possible to make a call from my base unit?

One drawback of the cordless phone is that it's virtually

impossible to hold it between shoulder and neck. It does have a loudspeaker function, but that isn't very satisfactory either. Fortunately, not many of my calls are of such a duration that holding the phone to my ear becomes a drag.

SWEEPS

The latest *Serendipity* contained the news that the zine was folding. John and Tricia have suffered from the changes to German health rules (a construct so labyrinthine that I have never really tried to understand them) in that Tricia's patient list has been slashed. This means that John has to do more work to make up. Apparently they looked at moving back to the UK, only to discover that their property was probably only worth what they paid for it 14 years ago. All a bit of a bummer.

Stephen Agar has moved to 4 Cedars Gardens, Brighton, BN1 6YD and has stopped producing *Armistice Day*. Basically the hobby is gradually imploding (if a gradual implosion is possible, which I somehow doubt) and, sad to say, I can't bring myself to worry about it too much. I note that Stephen has, once again, moved to an address that one would instinctively get wrong when addressing an envelope. Preston Drive was too easy to call Preston Drive, and Cedars Gardens cries out either to be in the singular or to have an apostrophe.

Steve's new house was built in 1935, making it the kind of place my mum would probably like. Oak panelling in the hallway and dining room (which still has a bell for the maid) creates an image of Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard. Its major plus is "not having neighbours". The downside appears to be that Stephen has, rather carelessly, lost a study and a broadband connection. Irritating!

Stephen recounts all the normal hassle associated with moving and once again makes me wonder about whether I can ever again face upping



sticks. Hell, just buying a new computer is frightening enough. Not only does the thought of communicating with all those horrible people like councils and electricity suppliers bring me out in a stress rash, but the idea of being without broadband, even for a day, is just beyond comprehension. And when I think of all the things that I have done to the flat to make it more "just so", the idea of starting again in a new place just doesn't seem too appealing.

Why do zines interest me less and less these days? Well, I have other interests in life, but when I read the following exchange in a letter column (sorry, The Cunning Plan 117 is the victim here), I think you will appreciate that the opportunity for me to bounce off the readers of other zines (or the editors) is becoming somewhat limited:

Richard Young: *I'd like to recommend a book called "The Man In The High Castle" by Philip K Dick. I picked it up because I knew the author was the writer of "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep" (the basis for Blade Runner).*

Neil Duncan: *....I may check some of these books out.*

Now, there's nothing wrong with this – indeed I'm glad that Dick's books are still appealing to new readers and that *The Man In The High Castle* in particular is being recommended. But it's hardly the kind of thing that I need to read. (Could I point out that there are snippets of *TCP* that I find interesting, along with most other zines ... it's just that a lot of the stuff seems to be material that I read 20 years ago).

Also in the same issue, the George Bernard Shaw "ghoti" as "fish" story, which was combined with the "spoof" Cambridge research on how spelling doesn't matter so long as you get the first and last letters correct. What struck me as curious was that no editor who reprinted this (and no-one of the 20 or so people who sent it to me) spotted that it was an obvious fake. The words chosen were misleading, in that you can mix up many words, keeping the first and last letters the same, which become

incomprehensible, and no-one pointed out the obvious, that written language is designed to have a high degree of redundancy. Otherwise, the single transposition of a pair of letters could completely change the meaning of a sentence, with dire results. I'm afraid that when I saw the first e-mail containing this "research" my reaction was not "wow, isn't that amazing", but "why is anyone forwarding this"?

Alan Frost weighs in against non-standard accents at banks. He thought that a person was asking "does your mother use a pen", when in fact he was saying "does your mother use a PIN". I'll admit to suffering from this kind of incomprehension myself these days – possibly a sign of age. I thought that George Bush was referring to "The Marquisee in Iraq" the other day. I wondered what a French Marquess was doing in Iraq for a few minutes, before realizing that he was saying "Democracy" in Texan.

My standard strategy in this situation, when speaking to a call centre person whose accent is impenetrable, is to simply say "I'm sorry, but I cannot understand a single word that you are saying". This, if nothing else, gets the person to speak more slowly.

Speaking of which, I have discovered a superb tactic to use against cold callers. I simply ask for the name of the company and say "give me your number, I'll ring you straight back". The response to this is "oh, are you interested, we can call you back". "No, I'll call you, give me your number". This always results in silence, because, of course, they CAN'T give you a number to call back. They are just outbound call makers who can't receive calls. But, here you are, sounding interested! You might be a sale! This creates an incredible contradiction in the mind of the caller that can sometimes result in immediate gibbering insanity as they continue to ask you when it would be convenient to call back, while you keep saying, no, give me YOUR number, I'll call YOU back. Eventually they have to admit that they can't take calls, at which point you say in triumph, "well, I'm sorry, I don't do business with companies

that can't take inbound calls". End of conversation. It works, I guarantee it.

Congratulations are definitely due to John Marsden, who has reached 250 unbroken issues with *Ode*. As John (typically) says, "I have got nothing very special done", which is of course part of *Ode's* charm. No devastating drive to make issues "special", but a solid performance month-in, month-out. But John did do a retrospective on the previous 50 issues, since 1998. As he says, a lot has changed in the hobby in five years. John's grandson is now five years old – a frightening concept in that John is not that much older than me!

Many thanks once again to Keith Thomasson for his 2004 deadline diary. It is already on my desk at work. Any chance of a 2004 wallchart as well, Keith? (Oh, ok, only joking...). Keith gives his review of Essen, that place where all the games come out so that I don't get the chance to play the games that I learnt last year because no-one wants to play them any more. Sigh, perhaps I should give up work so that I have time to look at all these games when they come out. No, perhaps not, I'd probably just spend more time playing poker...

For Whom The Die Rolls recently celebrated its 100th issue with a free game, which I have to confess is still on a bookshelf, unopened. Keith revealed in issue 101 that the zine had run to more than 7,000 pages in its 100 issues, which I reckon runs to about 10 to 15 200-page novels.

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Whoops! Cont'd from Page 9!

LTCM, Wall Street left the door open for it happening again. And Meriwether? Meriwether is looking to form a new hedge fund and appears to have some backers. He remains unrepentant, claiming that the failure of the LTCM model was not his fault, or the fault of his mathematicians. Instead it was the fault of, and get this, the fault of the market in not acting 'correctly' and of other players in the market for kicking LTCM when it was down. What on earth did he expect?

You couldn't make it up