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# Cyberspace Adventures

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**How to run a Play-By-E-Mail  
Role-Playing Game  
Campaigns**

# Cyberspace Adventures



Role - Playing by E-mail  
by  
Simon Burley

A set of Role-playing Game rules will be needed  
to make full use of this pack.  
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## Introduction

Welcome to a great new way to enjoy your favourite Role-playing game. Whether your taste is for Fantasy, Science Fiction, Gothic Horror or Superheroic games – or one of the many other genres available – you will find it full of useful and thought provoking advice.

Through this book you will discover how many Referees and Players have been able to have even more exciting and enjoyable adventures together.

You see, the great majority of role-playing games are “tabletop” games. Unlike – for example – computer role-playing games, it is played by a group of players sitting around a table with a Referee controlling the action. Campaign activity is acted out through verbal interactions and any conflict is usually resolved by using figures and some sort of map.

And it's FUN!

But if you've bought this book, you already know that.

However, sometimes it is not possible for players to meet together on a regular basis. That doesn't mean that the fun has to stop, however, there are loads of ways that you can keep having fun with the game – especially in the virtual worlds of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

From early times, chess players have often used whatever forms of correspondence they had – pony express, telegraph, radio, telephones etc. - to carry on long distance chess games. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century many board gamers would engage in “play by mail” versions of their games.

Even if you can't get together with a group of friends every week to play a face-to-face game, you can keep games going through:

- Play by mail
- Play by E-Mail
- Internet-based communications – web cams, chat, Skype™ etc.
- Dedicated internet gaming software – eg. Battlegrounds™
- Bulletin Boards
- Internet Forums
- Social Networking
- Virtual Worlds – eg. Second Life™



All of these offer their own attractions and disadvantages and they're NOT virtually exclusive.

Players and Referees will each have their own favourite method or combination of the above methods which will help them keep their game going.

In fact, even if you DO play face-to-face games on a regular basis, judicious use of the above communication methods can add a bit of spice to events.

Three uses for e-mail:

If an Heroic Dwarf gets a scrawled parchment slipped under the door of his room at the Taverna – the Referee could send its contents to the player secretly between games.

Captain Stennart of the Star Patrol Scoutship Pathfinder could receive her orders from Star Federation Command. She could brief all her Senior Officers before they meet for the next face-to-face session.

The Superhero Lionheart could set up an e-mail to receive information from the great British public and the Referee could actually send some messages to that e-mail.

Because of the many, many options and combinations of options available, this book sticks to one method of remote-playing role-playing games – that of using e-mail – so-called “play by e-mail” or PBEM games. (It also happens to be the method I'm most familiar with.)

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In a Play-by-Email game, the Referee sends their players e-mails describing what is happening in the game. The players then respond with e-mails describing what their characters are doing. The Referee amalgamates the players' responses. They use the rules to determine what happens as a result of the characters' actions and e-mails everyone with an update of events. A story unfolds episode by episode through your computer in which you can influence events through the actions of your player-character.

Put like this is sounds really simple and, in truth, it is. However - like role-playing games themselves – hearing about PBEM games is nothing like playing them. Like RPGs, PBEM games can be absolutely fascinating and extremely addictive.

Like table-top RPGs, refereeing these games is a lot of fun but requires a special kind of person. There is a lot of work involved and many Referees can leap into running this sort of game without understanding some of the pitfalls.

This book is intended to help anyone who hopes to run a PBEM Role-playing game – in any genre.

It will give you clear warning about some of the difficulties to might face, and suggest strategies which should make you life easier and running the game more enjoyable. This might be alternative ways of handling combat, advice about structuring the plot-lines, initial planning or myriad other things.

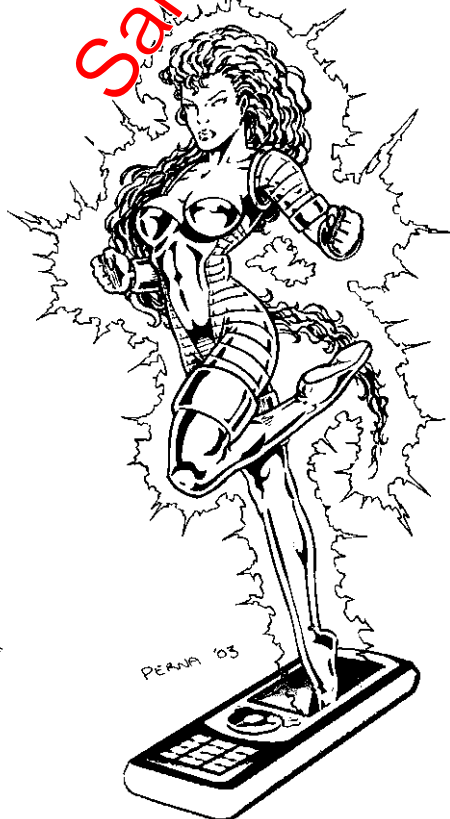
Much of the advice and many of the rule variations suggested in this book can apply just as readily to other methods of remote or, even, face-to-face play. So I hope it'll be useful even if you ultimately decide the playing by e-mail isn't something you want to try.

My recommendation is:

Have a read of this book.

Even if you decide playing by e-mail isn't for you, there's still loads here to spark your imagination.

And if you DO decide to run a Role-playing game in cyberspace, though e-mail ...welcome to the future!





## Chapter 1: Why P.B.E.M.?

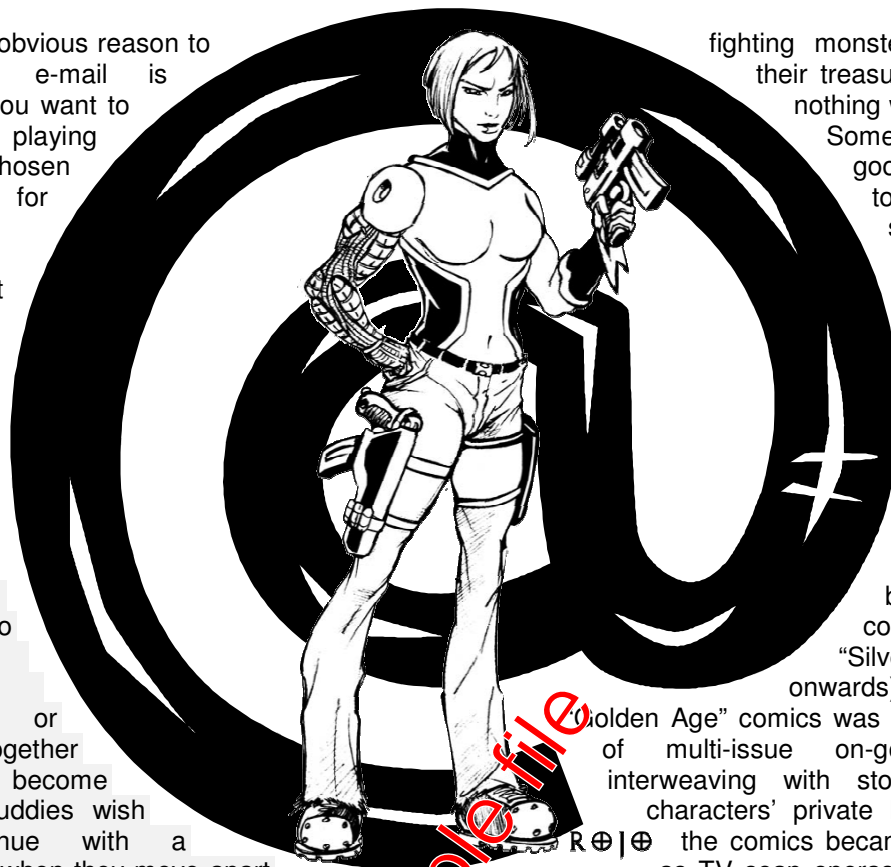
The most obvious reason to play by e-mail is because you want to continue playing your chosen RPG but, for some reason, can't meet together to play face-to-face as often as you would like.

Often people who have attended University or worked together and become gaming buddies wish to continue with a campaign when they move apart at the end of their courses or when promotions cause people to move.

Sometimes it allows people who live away from populated areas to take part in games which they would otherwise have no access to. PBEM gaming groups often consist of people who have only ever "met" through e-mail. Players can come from any part of the world as long as they all have access to e-mail and can speak a common language. In fact this can be the source of loads of fun – especially when the "common language" is shared – for example – between Americans and the English!

However, there are more than just practical considerations.

PBEM games by their very nature develop different emphases than fact-to-face games. Many RPGs are based very heavily around combat. In a Superhero RPG, for example, a gaming session can be occupied entirely with a single battle between the characters and their dastardly opponents. Traditional fantasy RPGs involve lots of kicking down doors,



fighting monsters and taking their treasure. And there's nothing wrong with that! Sometimes it feels good to just go toe-to-toe with some bad guys and just kick their backsides.

But then there's the campaign.

Take comics, for example. One big difference between the comics of the "Silver Age" (1960's onwards) and earlier "Golden Age" comics was the introduction of multi-issue on-going plotlines interweaving with stories from the characters' private lives. Suddenly the comics became as addictive as TV soap operas with plot, sub-plots, cliff-hangers, running characters and running gags. Even when an individual story was resolved and planet Earth was saved from destruction, readers wanted to keep reading to find out what happened next to their favourite characters.

In recent years, the same thing has happened with most television Sci-Fi series. In the past, TV series were dominated by a "circular narrative". The situation at the end of each story was always returned to the way it was at the beginning. This allowed the shows to be shown in any order and meant that you could miss an episode without losing track of the storyline. It also meant that you knew none of the main characters were going to die. Even when you saw them wiped out on screen in front of your eyes, you knew they'd be back by the end of the story. Nowadays, most individual series of a television title have their own "story arcs" with the series as a whole building towards a climax – even if some individual stories are still "stand alone". Many series have become totally episodic – needing to be watched in order and often finishing each story with a cliffhanger ending.

Even fantasy films often exist as parts of an on-going “franchise”.

People like to see their favourite characters grow and change. They like to see them face real challenges with a real chance of death. (Births and Marriages are also popular.) They like the background world to develop and change, allegiances to shift and secret agendas to be revealed.

Most RPGs – whilst also having a fun and action packed combat system – allows players and Referees to enjoy this more immersive (and addictive) campaign aspect of the game.

In a PBEM game, battles and slugfests become less important as foci for game activity. You can enjoy a good battle face-to-face but they are not as engaging over the Internet. It’s fun planning and preparing for them and even more fun finding out what happens afterwards but – with all the options possessed by both the characters and their opposition – it would prove extremely tedious to play out every combat round-for-round by e-mail. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The Campaign aspect of the game, however, really comes into its own when played by e-mail.

Face-to-face games fit with the quick decision making and high octane actions. PBEM games are much slower and allow time for reflection. This gives players time to THINK about their characters. They develop a much deeper insight into how and why their characters act as they do. There’s time to deal with mundane matters “at home”. Detective work is carried out a lot more thoroughly.

Whilst it might be said that this is a lot less exciting than playing face-to-face – and there is certainly less adrenalin involved – the whole experience can seem a lot deeper and more involving. Less exciting but a lot more satisfying is one way to describe it. Possibly less like a blockbusting film and more like a high budget television series.

In fact because of this deepening of the campaign aspects of the game, some Referees actually use some PBEM elements even if they are able to have face-to-face sessions with their players. The face-to-face games are usually for resolving combats or other direct character interactions.

Character development, research and aspects of their characters’ private lives are handled through e-mail communication between sessions.

Playing by e-mail is also an extremely cheap way of running a game. As long as you’ve paid for your Internet connection and can cover your electricity bill the only additional cost is TIME. You don’t need figures, characters sheets, pencils, paper, maps or munchies to keep the players fed. All you need is a few spare hours per week.

## Game Systems

So which game system should you use to run your PBEM game?

Personally, I think this is a non-question. You should try to make the game system you like and your players are familiar with fit into the PBEM framework. This is what this book’s about, after all.

However, some people do wish to change systems:

- You might want to try something different
- You might think that the game you usually play won’t adapt well to PBEM
- Your players existing perspectives on the current game system might make them less flexible when adapting to PBEM

If any of these are the case, there are possibilities:

### 1) No rules

You can actually make things up as you go along in a PBEM game. You don’t need rules to decide what happens, you just use your common sense as Referee.

Some Referees like the freedom this offers. However, this does require Referees who are always scrupulously fair and imaginative. I think that having sooner or later, you are going reach a time when you’ve had hard week at work and don’t have the usual time or level of motivation to devote to the game. At those times having rules to fall back on is invaluable. Also, the rules act as a moderator of your actions. Sooner things are going to happen which the players aren’t going to like. This is a lot easier to swallow if it is as the result of some bad die-rolls rather than a decision on your part.