

COMPANY WEBLOG

ARCHIVE 2005

By Steve Cole on Wednesday, January 05, 2005 - 01:01 pm

5 Jan: been longer than I intended, but the last two weeks have been very busy.

New banking regulations meant we had to physically destroy any record with a credit card number on it. That took a lot of work, but it's done, and while you are safer from identity theft, no longer can you say "use the credit card number I gave you before" because we don't know what it was.

Did a lot of year-end accounting and shuffling the warehouse. Things we had printed in Dallas in the past arrived on huge pallets, often two of them. At the end of each year (and some other times) we combine pallets, or move stuff for products that sold a lot off the pallet and onto a shelf. This frees up floor space for new pallets. While we won't have more pallets (due to the Kyocera) we must eventually clear space to build the new production room in the back corner of the warehouse.

Mostly worked on G2, GPD4e, and GK4e since Christmas, including work done on Christmas day and New Years day. We did most of the credit card destruction at home which added a mentally exhausting three hours to every single evening. I tried (and didn't always succeed) to devote an hour per day to several projects and then the bulk of my time to one big project (G2 or gurps). I did read the story that will probably be the CL31 lead.

By Steve Cole on Wednesday, January 05, 2005 - 01:06 pm

Looking at 2005, things should change a lot.

The big change is attitude, that we want the company to change. We've been moving along nicely as we were, but finally realized that the anchor holding the company back was that SPP, LMC, and SVC were spending what should have been "creative time" doing warehouse work, packing orders, handling phone calls, and so forth.

One example is the destruction of those documents. We had assumed we'd just sit down at the shredder and get it done, but quick calculations of the first few files showed that this was 12 hours of work for someone who should be being creative. We looked in the phone book and called a document destruction company and for \$30 the problem went away. Another example is doing the weatherstripping for the warehouse doors (why didn't we do this five years ago?) which involves buying some 2x4s, renting a stud gun, using the stud gun to nail the 2x4s to the concrete, painting the 2x4s, and nailing weather stripping to them. So much simpler to pay the guy four doors down the block (who runs a handyman business) \$200 to do it for us. I'm looking now at 40+ hours of printing and 8 hours of bookbinding for GPD4e, the same for GK4e, three time that for GR4e, the same as GPD4e for MRB-Retail. We're going to hire somebody out of a temp agency to do this.

By Steve Cole on Sunday, January 09, 2005 - 01:42 pm

We continue to get very excited over the future of the company. I'm not ready yet to tell you everything that has ME excited, but just know that I am excited and that Federation Commander won't be the only entirely new product line this year.

Status:

LSM is at the printers. We're told to expect a proof to be delivered Monday for final checks and they think we'll have the printed maps in two weeks.

Module G2 is nearly done but not done. Petrick added EW fighters. We have spent five days doing the one new warship status column. More about that in the G2 topic.

GPD4e is moving along. I finally nailed Chapter 2 yesterday which means we can make the final checks and changes to

chapters 3-4-5. Most of the rest is done except for things like the index which have to be done as the very last thing.

GK4e was done until SJG told us they wanted the RTs reformatted. Not sure about that but based on Chapter 2 of GPD4e its about two hours work. Processing reports are another hour or two.

GRoms promises to be easier.

I am aware we haven't done the playtest kits of F1, C5, F2, FC:KB and the battleforce cards but we haven't exactly been taking naps around here.

Which of course gets back to the traditional "SVC bit off more than he could chew". I never do this on purpose but some things take longer than expected (the warship status column in G2 is an example, it was budgeted ONE DAY) and new things get added (cooking up some deals that you won't believe when you see them). If Leanna goes through with her promise to hire a flunkee (or perhaps a flunkess) to do the stuff we three "creative" types get stuck with, things will seriously get better.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, January 15, 2005 - 02:56 pm

G2 is finished at last, although we could spend entire days tweeking it. I noticed a few minutes ago that most MSCs have at least one date which includes the letter Y and those really should be fixed, but to do that would take two hours (literally) to make the fixes, then re-PDF and re-assemble the book file. It's not worth the bother.

One deadly trap for small businesses is to think that anything that CAN be done SHOULD be or worse MUST be done. Could I produce an MSC with the ships of each hull type sorted by year? Sure, if I wanted to take an entire day to switch the files (I did one as an experiment and it took over an hour, and there are 18 such files, some smaller than others) I could do that, but I think 99% of you would agree it would be better if that day was spent on F1 or C5 or X1R or CL31 or FedCdr or just about anything else.

The Russian Army has an axiom that applies here, "better is the enemy of good enough". Sure, an entire day, or an entire week would make G2 better, but G2 is good enough and I do have other products and projects to work on.

Another problem is that "entrepreneur-class businesses" work many nights and weekends when the "real world" isn't working. Right now the Kyocera is broken (drum burned out after printing one copy of G2) and while it will take the repairman an hour to fix it, he won't even know he needs to come here until 9am Monday, and even then we're not sure if we'll be first on his list. So no G2s will get printed before sometime Monday. We will, given any luck at all, ship some of the first orders Monday, but entrepreneurs make up for lost time on the weekends and we just had that time taken away from us. This reminds me of the time my English final exam in 11th grade was at 8am Tuesday and I got home from school Monday night to realize I had left my English book in my locker, so I had to get to school at 7:30 and study VERY hard for the next 29 minutes.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, January 25, 2005 - 02:06 pm

25 Jan: The "new company attitude" moves forward. Before, it was kind of noble to save the company \$30 and do four hours of manual labor ourselves. Today when Kinkos said "do you want the large scale maps trimmed for \$1 each extra" we said YES so we could all get back to work making the company better.

In a sense, the LSM project was pretty stupid. We're barely making a profit, and it will shut down the entire company for two entire days to process, pack, and ship. But darn that thing is gorgeous.

Works continues on all three GURPS projects, despite the fact that two of them were already supposed to be finished and shipped. We got a late start because SJG was fixing the typos and errors in G4e and wanted us to work from the corrected files. GK is finished and at SJG for review. I don't lack much on GPD4e (a day if I can get away from packing maps). GRoms we have done 37 pages ready for Jackson to read and more are being done.

Petrick is working on the F1 fixes.

I'm still thinking through how I want to approach fixing C5.
Wish to heck I could get back to work on Fed commander.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, February 01, 2005 - 05:08 pm

1 Feb: How trainwrecks happen. Easy, trying to make too many constituencies happy with the same budget (of time). I've seen staffers in all the departments (within the last two weeks) muse out loud about new products for their departments like there were no other departments. I heard one F&E staff musing (to me) about doing the warbook for Origins (ignoring that we have other products), two staffers assuming that there will be a third CapLog this year (and arguing if the extra one will be Stellar Shadows or best of SFT), an SFB staffer harranging me for not sending him playtest kits of F1 and C5, and a GURPS staff telling people about some imaginary plan to release the Prime magazine this fall. It's easy to think about F&E or GPD or SFB and say "we could print this product, and then that one, and then those other ones" without realizing (even me) that with products for several other product lines also have to be done in that same period of time. It used to be horrifying to think of just SFB, CapLog, and F&E, but with new product lines, it's going to get a lot worse a lot faster.

Today is the second anniversary of the Columbia disaster. And in 34 hours it will be the time that my brother died two years ago. My brother is actually buried less than a hundred yards from Rick Husband. I miss the kid, if only because for three years (since he got sick) I had to do his job in the warehouse. That better change. Leanna has been promising progress on hiring some people and I haven't seen it.

Due to getting over the flu, I can barely speak. Leanna and Petrick like not having meetings all the time (I love meetings) but there are things I could do with the leftover hour if I could talk, like call the temp agency and make progress on hiring a warehouse guy.

GURPS is moving along. GK4e has been on Jackson's desk for 10 days which is a record. He's never taken this long to approve stuff and the whole book has only 8 pages of new material in it. I'm up to page 124 of GPD4e and up to page 37 of Gurps Roms. Until I get those off my back I can't work on Fed Commander.

A lot of what happens around here is never spoken of since it's mostly boring. Two days I spent handing LSMs are a comedy of errors but really not good copy for the web log. I've spent time talking to people about some other new products that I won't mention until they're in my hands as I have been burned too many times by outside designers.

Mail orders continue to flood in to the extent Leanna can't get anything else done. Good to have tons of cash and most of what is selling is old stuff to new customers (that's bizarre, you'd have thought there couldn't be any 'new' SFB players since the total number of humanoids willing to play it is finite and most of them already do). She's more behind on mail orders than she ever has been (even coming back from vacation) and working overtime every day to get them out.

By Steve Cole on Thursday, February 03, 2005 - 04:14 pm

Dead Dragon Day: I've told you before about "the visitation of the great dragon". This is what happens when SOME project is so overwhelming that it eats up all available time and manpower and nothing gets done except that project. For the last few days it was GPD4e, which took a lot more doing that it should have. While it's not "finished" it is "complete" and as part of finishing it I have to go back through weeks of Email making sure that I didn't miss some odd note from some odd staffer about some odd typo that never got fixed. So as part of Dead Dragon Day it has been my pleasure to do a lot of other stuff that the Great Dragon shoved aside in his march to devour my lunch.

I've been sour on Module G2 because of its low sales. Given the "buzz" about this you'd have thought it would be a good seller, but it hasn't been. Given the buzz and what we expected in sales, we devoted a huge amount of time to doing a new and improved Master Ship Chart. Knowing the dismal sales, we could

have just left the MSC in the previous format and not spent entire days converting it from text into a database and then adding tons of new data to that database. (Update: G2 became a very steady seller, and more than paid for the time spent.)

It gets my goat when some well-intentioned know-it-all tries to tell me how to run the company (or worse, tells people that I'm incompetent) when he has no clue what is going on. Latest Know It All was insisting that I must be an incompetent boob because the MSC wasn't already in an easily updatable database. Well, it is now (although it wasn't worth the bother) even though that would not have helped the vast number of updates of old modules he somehow thinks we've been doing, and would not have reduced the time spent adding new data, and takes endless hours to get the database into the Kyocera in a format people would actually pay money for, and of course most of the work is "updating and checking" which Mr Know It All blithely dismisses as trivial when he has no clue what was done. I do appreciate suggested ways to do things better but not people with no knowledge of the project telling everyone else that I'm incompetent because I didn't do it his way (when I actually DID do it his way -- before he declared what his way was -- and it didn't help one *** bit).

By Steve Cole on Sunday, February 13, 2005 - 03:11 pm

To the guys on the dynaverse/SFC discussion board. Glad to see you all have the same enthusiasm. I'm all for anything that can be done for SFC, either another deal for another product -- or a fan-operated project. I'd like to see SFB remain part of it but I am not going to go jump off a bridge if some future deal/project doesn't include SFB. If a "deal" happens I'll be happy to sign on and cash the checks and politely ask if they'd do a Mac version. If a "fan project" happens (when this mythical source code is released), well, I've already posted that I won't stand in the way.

By Steve Cole on Sunday, February 20, 2005 - 11:54 am

20 February: Things are moving along, but not as fast as I'd like.

We spent a lot more time on G2 than we should have. The warship status column probably took an entire week of both Steves and we should have had the sense to dump it, but it's done and that's good. Sales were initially disappointing but finally picked up enough that G3 is now a "when we have time, a year or more from now" instead of "don't even ask".

The GURPS mess is annoying. We schedule the releases for Jan and Feb and then everything went wrong. SJG was in the middle of doing a second printing and held off sending us the files until that was done, which delayed everything by a month. What should have been relatively simple projects took much more time. Losing a week to the flu and several days to my father's death on the 17th didn't help. Jackson is reportedly burned out on excess work and trying to take time off to recharge his batteries, which means that GK4e (which has only eight pages he needs to check) has been on his desk for over a month without being reviewed. Presumably it's in a six-inch stack of non-GPD stuff that he's also never reviewed. We just sent GPD4e to him (200 pages) and were told today he won't even open the box for at least a week and (from the sound of things) maybe not until after the GAMA show (GTS) on 14-18 March. I've done half of Gurps Romulans but am wondering if I should bother doing the rest of it before GTS.

Petrick has been working on F1 but is at a point until he can have SVC time he can't go any farther. I don't know when/if we'll ever take another crack at fixing the fiasco Ken made of C5.

But there ARE bright spots. We've got several "secret projects" going on and may announce one or two of them at GTS. Sales have been incredible, and for "wow factor" you just can't touch the F&E LSM.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, February 22, 2005 - 11:29 am

Assorted lessons of print on demand....

1. You have never imagined buying paper in these quantities. The master rulebook, GPD4e, and GRoms will each

take over a cubic yard of paper. This paper cannot be stacked in the warehouse as it must be kept at the same temperature and humidity as the printer. The office was never designed to accommodate cubic-yard stacks of paper so we have it under desks and behind bookcases and stacked in the hallway. Even better, that much paper isn't something that is stocked locally and takes a week to get. We've cut a deal with the local supplier to sell us more paper than we have room for and store the remainder and bring it as needed.

2. Printing is SLOW. It takes 13 minutes to print a master rulebook. With reloading paper and clearing jams, a 16-hour day will print 64 MRBs. When your initial shipment is 475 copies, that amounts to over a week. GPD4e will take 7 minutes per book, so it's initial shipment of 800 books will take 93 hours or six 16-hour days. GRoms with 1500 initial copies (guess) vs 5 minutes each is 125 hours or 8 days. It's cool to think of "load full bin of paper, set it printing 10 books, go home for the evening" but 2/3 of the time it will NOT get to the end of a run of ten MRBs without having to have a human clear a jam.

3. The production rate in #2 is what you get if nothing goes wrong. Things will go wrong and you'll lose half a day to a broken part (average every 3 days) and 1/10 of the books to bad pages - which can be replaced but it's a hassle. [We have a box in the print shop. When we see that a book has a bunch of bad pages we just dump the whole book in the box. Later, Petrick goes through these books one page at a time, combines them as he can, and makes a list of replacement pages that need to be printed.] We lost 9 hours of printing on Sunday when the drum went bad. We lost 3 hours yesterday when the stacker got out of alignment.

4. Our plans basically including working on weekends and evenings, when you cannot get paper, toner, or the repair man. Which means you have to plan ahead and if something goes wrong, you cannot print or ship on schedule because you loose too many hours.

5. When the repairman says "Hey! Do NOT put your hand in ..." it means you're about to get a ugly burn on the back of your hand that will take a month to heal. Plus scraping the burned skin off of the fuser wire will take the repairman an hour or so.

6. SVC: "Leanna, I think we should start printing MRBs now." LMS: "Nah, we're not going to sell that many and I'm busy and I don't want the noise and we're not going to sell that many."

SVC: "I think we should...."

LMC: "Ain't gonna happen."

Two weeks later

SVC: "Sales are three times what you expected."

LMC: "Don't you dare say it....."

By Steve Cole on Thursday, March 03, 2005 - 11:18 pm

3 MARCH: What a couple of weeks. Dad's sudden and unexpected death is still a shock, and next week I'll have to take a couple of days off to drive Mom to the banks, brokers, accountants, and courthouses to put everything in her name. [Update: We got a power of attorney while we were at it, which simplified things when she was no longer able to do anything for herself.] It's tough to think that he's gone. Word to everyone. Take an hour and create a file on your home computer. List all your assets, bank accounts, insurance, debts, etc. Print a copy and put it someplace safe, encrypt or delete the file, update it at least once a year. My dad did this meticulously and everything was right there in one place. Saved me weeks of hunting down into but it's still going to take a few days over a period of weeks to settle things.

Spent a couple of days out with food poisoning. This happens to me two or three times a year. I have enough goofy allergies (onions, peppers, mushrooms, olives, and a few other things) that sooner or later I dumb luck into some fast food cook who got sloppy or creative. At least this trip didn't involve the hospital and a stomach pump but the high fever was pretty awful. Of course, I'm just guessing (so is what passes for medical science in this country) and it might have been a "random 48 hour stomach flu" so I spent most of today breathing heavily in

Petrick's direction. If he gets sick, I had the flu. If not, I had food poisoning. Except he is allergic to most of what I'm allergic too. It's funny when we try (and succeed) to pass ourselves off as brothers. I really love "Mom liked the name...."

Got word from Jackson today on when we will get word on GPD4e which meant I actually spent most of today doing "planning". Shipping thousands of copies of three books over six weeks, with a trade show in the middle and oh by the way Petrick says F1 will ship 11 April. We're talking about three CUBIC YARDS of paper (special ordered paper), 18 toner cartridges, another 500,000-copy maintenance kit for the Kyocera (we will need it almost exactly two months after the first 500,000-copy overhaul, which took eight months), an electrician to rewire the building for two new pieces of equipment, another employee (finally), ordering more shrinkwrap, etc. This is going to be crazy. Until next time....

Richard S Cole died suddenly on 17 February at the age of 79. He was born on 8 August 1925 in Amarillo, and lived here his entire life. His parents were B. R. Cole and Lucille Cole. His brother, Jack Thomas Cole, and sister, Charlotte Cole Risley, pre-deceased him.

He was a combat veteran of World War II (14th Armored Division), and graduated from the University of Texas in 1950 with a degree in Business Administration. During the War, he was a headquarters radio operator. Impressed by the professionalism of the officers around him, he decided to become a career soldier in the reserves.

Richard married his high school sweetheart, Eleanor Ruth Van Valkenburg, on 5 September 1950 and the couple celebrated their 50th Anniversary a few years ago. The two grew up literally next door, their parent's houses separated by one vacant lot.

Richard joined his father in running B. R. Cole & Son Lumber Company. He spent his life as a building contractor, constructing hundreds of custom-built homes in Amarillo, Groom, Vega, and elsewhere in the Texas Panhandle during a career that spanned four decades.

An avid reader, he had read over a thousand books, as have his wife and children. His personal library is one of the largest private book collections in the state of Texas, over 6,000 books.

Active in the Army Reserve for 30 years, he retired as a Colonel in the Corps of Engineers. He commanded the US Army Reserve School in Amarillo for many years. He was a graduate of and later a Professor at the US Army's prestigious Command & General Staff College. Awarded numerous medals, honors, citations, and other decorations, Richard Cole had commanded a company and a battalion and had served as a battalion operations and executive officer.

Richard is survived by his wife, Eleanor Cole, and son, Stephen Van Valkenburg Cole, both of Amarillo. His son Christopher R. Cole passed away in 2003.

By Steve Cole on Monday, March 07, 2005 - 07:08 pm

Something of a crossroads....

GAMA Trade Show is next week and it's time to (after a moment of blind panic) rough out the schedule for the year.

Start with the basics.

CL31 in May, CL32 in Nov.

Some kind of SFB module in July, possibly a second in Oct.

Maybe some kind of F&E product.

GURPS: PD4e on 28 March, GK4e on 11 April, GR4e on 25 April, GFed in August.

Secret project: a series of eight major books in June-November. This is going to happen but we don't have clearance to discuss what it is yet.

I still want to do the swordfight books and star fleet aces books if Leonardi will ever send them in.

Some tough decisions to make, and things will get interesting.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, March 19, 2005 - 02:25 pm

March 19, 2005: Back from the GAMA Trade Show. The show is getting worse as the current staff of GAMA continues its meltdown. Attendance was way down due to the horrible new venue picked by the GAMA staff over the objections of most companies. The thing about the GAMA show is that it really accomplishes very little and if it just stopped being held nobody would notice, but if you don't show up everybody assumes you are out of business. Kind of like being blackmailed.

The second Kyocera (Kate) is due Monday. We will start printing GPD4e Monday and will be running both machines at high capacity for the next six-eight weeks.

Lots of deals were discussed at GAMA. Two outside designers came to us with games to publish and the upshot is when they find their own financing we will be happy to market the games for them. Another company (maybe two) plans to produce an SFU version of their game and market it under our license. One "deal" has caused Leanna to reprioritize my time to work on Fed Commander as a priority. [Not many of these ever happened.]

We plan to do D6 and D20 versions of our Prime Directive products. We may license other RPG engines as well.

Work on hiring some employees continues. I interviewed one prospective full time operations guy at GTS and hope I can convince Petrick to bring him on board sometime this summer.

By Steve Cole on Sunday, March 20, 2005 - 10:44 pm

Artists who want to work for us email me (design@starfleetgames.com). Include the url of a web site with samples. Don't send samples in the Email unless you don't have a web site or I tell you I can't read it. If good, I put them on the "all artists list".

Most of the time when I need art I pick out the artist I want to use and assign them the art. This never happens to artists we haven't used before and established a working relationship with.

Only when we have huge amounts needed (say, GURPS Romulans) do we do what I call "open call" which means we send an email to the artist list and everyone on it is invited to send in a picture with the understanding that if it's not awful it will be used somewhere. (If you send in more than one, the promise is only good for one, but in the case of GRomulans we used pretty much everything that came in with one exception that was well done but "too cartoony".) This open call allows artists we have never used, or rarely used, to take their best shot at "establishing a working relationship".

The concept of establishing a working relationship is important. It means can you understand our instructions, can you follow them, can you give us art the right size on the first (or second) try, do we somehow just piss each other off and would be better off not trying to work together, will you work for what we pay, and so forth.

Now, the other way to "establish a relationship" is to do some art for us (of course, you won't know what product it's for so you have to be kind of generically trekkish) and send it in. If we hate it, we'll let you know. If we like it, we'll let you know and put it in a file from which we may pull art if we can find a place for it. This way has the advantage that you don't have to wait for an open call (the next one is in July) but you may have to wait even longer until we use it, and it doesn't really establish the key elements of whether you can follow instructions.

In one case, I told an artist to do a piece 3.5x4 inches. He sent me one 3x4.5 inches, which of course didn't fit the hole.

In another case, an artist insisted on using a format we couldn't read (If photoshop won't open it, forget it) and became quite insulting when we told him to follow the instructions that specify tif or jpg only. His art didn't get used.

In another case, the artist just couldn't comprehend that we were not licensed to use a picture of James T Kirk, no matter how brilliantly it was done.

The fact that you did work for other companies is almost irrelevant. If you do good work that fits our style then we're going to use it even if you've never had a published piece. If we don't like your art we're not going to use it no matter how many magic

cards you have credit for painting.

All of the above applies to B&W interior art. Color covers are a whole different world, since they involve the artist doing a whole lot more work and they involve us being a whole lot more picky about whether it looks really good. We do not ever agree to deals in which we pay for art we have rejected, nor does an artist acquire a legal right to use our property or paramount's property if we reject the art it was used in. So if we have you do a cover of the B10 and we hate it, it's just a pity but you cannot ever publish it anywhere.

While we buy all rights to art, there are two exceptions.

If we use it again in a different product, we pay you half-price for the second use. Whether we pay for the third use and after just depends on our mood but we don't have to.

Any artist automatically has our permission to use anything he sold to us on his own web site (or in published brochures he uses to solicit work) or in a "bound collection of his lifetime works" so if you get famous and want to use your CL42 cover in a coffee table book we're only too thrilled to see you do well.

If you want to use it on refrigerator magnets we might agree but you do have to ask.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, March 22, 2005 - 06:52 pm

Printing of GPD4e began today (Tuesday, 22 March). We got the second Kyocera (Kate) yesterday and she's hard at work. We didn't start serious printing until 2pm since it takes a while to get the bugs out of a new book. Kate broke down after two hours but the repair guy was right on the scene and had her back to work in minutes. Turned out to be a minor thing (small piece of torn paper stuck in the gears after I cleared a paper jam rather sloppily). Right now at 5:51 we have about 15 books bound and about 40 more printed. Things are moving along well. I'm checking with wholesalers and getting unusually large orders.

By Steve Cole on Friday, March 25, 2005 - 11:07 am

NEW TALES OF THE KYOCERA

This was originally posted on 27 July 04.

Updates are from 25 March 05.

We needed to print about 90,000 pages for the initial shipments of a new product release. We ordered a huge pile of paper and had trouble getting deliveries. Update: We now have a much better grip on ordering paper in time and have a much better and more responsible source for that paper.

Printer speed is rated for doing the same page over and over, and it runs at 75% of that speed when doing collated duplex pages for entire books. Update: We now plan for this.

Random software problems. Update: These software problems have been solved.

The software to talk to the on-board hard disk wouldn't work since it had never been updated for Macs. We could print without it, but it was more aggravating. Update: This software has been fixed and we use the hard disk. It works great.

The hole puncher was set for European paper and parts had to be shipped in to convert it. Update: This has been fixed.

The vendor had never seen anybody print 90,000 pages in 4 days and ran out of toner cartridges as did his supplier. Update: he stocks plenty of them now. Also, we print only 13,000 pages per day per machine now (to keep the machines from breaking down so often).

The 9520 has 3 trays (1000, 1000, and 3000 sheets). It is supposed to automatically switch when one tray runs empty, but doesn't. Update: This has never worked, but given that 3,000 sheets of paper in the bottom tray is about 3 hours of printing, the fact that it won't switch to the other trays just isn't a capability we miss. My somewhat goofy theory had been to load 5,000 sheets (all three trays) and leave it running when we went home, but this was always stupid as the stacker will only hold 3,000 sheets anyway.

If we sent one run (two hours) to the top tray, then sent a second run to the #2 tray, the second run wouldn't run since the printer didn't answer the phone for two hours and the computer gave up. Update: Still true, but just not a concern. Also, we print

from the hard disk now so we can queue up more books than it has paper for without a problem.

Every time it prints anything from Pagemaker, it prints an extra blank page and counts it against the service contract. Nobody at Kyocera knows why it does this. Update: We solved this problem by printing high definition PDFs.

The 9520 jams a lot, meaning it won't print a full tray after humans leave the office. Update: We found the problem causing frequent jams (the humidity level needs to stay at 40%) and recently left both running when we went home and both of them printed a full bin of books unattended.

Bindery. Using the outside binderies was a bad idea. Update: We now use our in-house binder (which is superior to the saddle stitch books anyway) and avoid all of the problems with contract binders destroying 1/3 of the books.

By Steve Cole on Monday, April 04, 2005 - 01:32 pm

4 April: Things are moving along well, and I for one am in an upbeat mood. Steve Jackson cleared GURPS Romulans (except for the cover which isn't finished). I got an interesting phone call on Friday which promises an even more interesting call today. I have a secret meeting to go to which may have good news or not particularly bad news. The D20 and D6 projects are moving forward and the HERO guys and I are interviewing a writer for that project. Printing of GK is moving ahead; we'll have half-enough for next Monday's shipments in another hour or so.

Problem is the huge number of things not done. Minis for May release not sent to Bruce. Painting contest that never got posted. Artists for GRoms that need to be paid and staff copies of GK and GPD that need to be mailed. Much of that won't happen until Wednesday.

I plan to spend most of tomorrow finishing F1 so we can start printing it, since it ships Monday. I am spending most of today on a secret project. Either it will go well and you'll hear about it, or not so well and you never will. Nothing lost if it doesn't happen, very much gained if it does.

The Kyoceras are running great at 13,000 pages per day, which is about 90 GK books per day each. We've learned a lot. We screwed up 27 of the first 180 books but since Leanna reviewed the instructions and found the problem, we've only had one bad book out of the next 200.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, April 09, 2005 - 08:50 pm

Many people who don't understand the complexities of the situation often suggest that we "quickly and easily" reprint something, now that we have the Kyocera and can economically do short runs.

Case in point, Module F1. This was done under "the old software" (where we embedded postscript commands) back in 1995. Before we could even work on it, we had to get the one very old computer we have working so we could read the disks and delete these codes. (If you open the file in the new software, the codes are invisible, nothing will show them, but they won't allow the file to print of PDF.) It's not an easy process and takes most of a day. Nor is it perfect.

We finished rewriting F1 and then spent two entire days just getting it to print. Those days were spent dealing with the problems of a file converted from the old software to the new software.

The headers and footers have to be done over. So do the section breaks.

The graphics have to be done over. I spent over two hours today doing the scenario graphics over in Freehand since the PDF software just cannot deal with graphics originally done in MacPaint.

Oh, yes, we spent an entire day (both Leanna and myself) looking for one bad code that got missed in the very first step. The file wouldn't print because of that bad code, and the code couldn't be found. The only way you can find it is to start deleting stuff, see if it will print, if it will, you killed the code and can hand-rewrite the deleted part, but if not, you have to paste back in the deleted part and go delete another part and hope the code is

there. More than an entire day spent doing this and we never did find the code. So, I had to go set up another blank document, and copy the stuff one paragraph at a time and paste it into the new document and see if it would still print. Very tedious, very time consuming, and almost but not quite as much work as retyping the whole book from scratch.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, April 09, 2005 - 08:53 pm

Gearing up for a major release Monday, including three new miniatures blisterpacks (starbase, convoy, lyran battleship), module F1, GURPS Klingons 4, and oh by the way we're releasing G2 to the wholesalers and they're all jumping through hoops to add it to their orders. One of the Kyoceras is broken. Always happens just when the repair guy goes off duty. He'll fix it in an hour or two on Monday. One of the things about being an entrepreneur is that you have to count on working times when the real world support structure just isn't open for business. So we had to work out a prioritization plan to get enough F1s and G2s and GPD restocks and MRB restocks to make the Monday orders and hope that the guys get Samantha fixed before Lunch Monday so we can print the stuff for the Tuesday orders.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, April 12, 2005 - 10:10 am

The glories of print on demand! When somebody orders a book, you print it. (Well, actually, we keep a dozen or three of CL30, Planetary Ops, R9, GPD, G2, and MRB on hand.)

The problem comes when a lot of people demand a lot of copies of a book on the same day. Like a new product release. We spent an entire week printing enough MRBs and then enough GPDs for the releases.

The nightmare comes when you have two or three books being released at once, and then wholesalers start ordering more of previous books. This week for example, we're releasing two new books, F1 (which has two books) and GK4e. F1 is a nightmare because it only takes 1.5 minutes to print a book, and it takes 1 minute to bind a book no matter how big it is. With previous bound books (say GPD) it took 7 minutes to print a book and we could start the binding hours later. With F1, you almost have to start binding when you start printing, and since I get here an hour early and start printing and Patrick gets here on time and starts binding, he takes hours to catch up. OR can't catch up at all if both printers are working on F1 books.

Add to that, wholesalers were ordering extra copies of the GPD4e we shipped two weeks earlier. The first order wiped out our three-dozen book reserve, and the restock orders just kept coming in.

And of course, we just had to let ourselves get talked into releasing G2 to the stores at the same time. Which added more printing to do.

Getting a new employee in here is taking more trouble than we thought. Lots of government regulations to follow, signs to post, forms to fill out. So for now we're doing this all by ourselves and it's killing us. That has GOT to change.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 12 April 2005

Amarillo Design Bureau, Inc., has today been awarded an Enterprize Challenge Grant of \$50,000 by the Amarillo Economic Development Corporation.

The AEDC uses sales tax proceeds to provide grants and loans of various sizes to develop businesses in Amarillo, particularly those that sell their products outside of the city and create new jobs inside the city.

In this year's annual Enterprize Challenge, fifteen companies entered business plans to be judged by a panel of experts; three winners were selected to receive \$50,000 grants.

ADB's business plan, to launch new product lines (D6, d20, Hero, Federation Commander, and Prime Directive Character Figures) was developed with the expert help of West Texas A&M University's Small Business Development Center and the Amarillo Enterprise Network.

The grant is to be used for purposes specified in the plan, including the purchase of new equipment (our second printer and

an electric cutter), hiring new employees (warehouse and customer service), and promoting our existing and new product lines (advertising in industry journals and going to GenCon).

ADB Business Manager Leanna Cole said in an interview: "It sounds like a lot of money, but it is spread over two years. While it gives us money to do things we have long needed to do, it's not free money to throw away. Any equipment we buy must be needed, any new employees must perform, and any advertising we do must produce results rather than simply 'build brand awareness'. New product lines will take the company to new heights — but we will never abandon the product lines that brought us this far."

By Steve Cole on Monday, April 25, 2005 - 04:36 pm

25 April: things seem to be getting better around here.

We're going to start printing GURPS Romulans tomorrow. Sales of GURPS Klingons and GURPS Prime Directive were good. Work is progressing on the next releases: GRoms, PD20, CL31, F2, and some miniatures.

I lost a lot of time in the last two or three weeks because my mother was very ill. She had a number of medical issues which were causing hallucinations and it was hard to tell how much of her "confusion" was shock from losing dad, early stage alzheimers, or the medical issues. (Hint; if an elderly relative is acting strange, have them tested for low sodium, infections, and make sure they're taking their medication properly as any of that can cause strange behavior.) Mother is much better today and will be moving from what amounts to a lockdown hospital room to an apartment building full of happily retired seasoned citizens. While I'm relieved that she's doing better, you guys should all be happy that I'll be back to work full time.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, April 26, 2005 - 05:22 pm

Thoughts on submissions and creativity.

What we look for in new ship designs is CREATIVITY. Did the designer think of something new?

Adding gatlings to a Fed ship that doesn't have them and isn't allowed to have them IS NOT BEING CREATIVE.

Sticking a couple of fighters into a ship (even one intended for raiding) IS NOT BEING CREATIVE.

Adding foreign technology to a ship IS NOT BEING CREATIVE.

Such things get rejected on sight. They don't even qualify for SSJ. As I said to one submitter just today, if we were willing to print fed ships with gatlings in SSJ, we could do a 144-page special issue of nothing but Fed ships with gatlings, and we wouldn't need a single submission to do it.

By Steve Cole on Sunday, May 01, 2005 - 12:12 pm

1 May, International Workers Day. We've been printing GURPS Romulans since Wednesday, and almost have enough for the initial shipments.

Annoyingly (or fortunately, both are true) the wholesalers are ordering more of GPD, GK, G2, F1, CL30, and even MRB. While busily doing a new product print run, we've had to take time off to print more GK and MRB since we can't even ship the orders without more of those. After all of the orders ship, we'll be facing single-digit inventory levels of almost all of the Kyocera products (MRB, G2, F1, R9, CL30, GPD, GK, GR), and will spend a week printing and binding and packaging more of those.

None of which should be surprising. Other than SFB BASIC SET, the best selling products are always the most recent ones. And the most recent ones (those since last July) are the ones done on the Kyocera.

We have a prospective employee coming in next Wednesday for an interview, and if he comes on board he'll spend most of his first two weeks packing and printing and binding products. We basically want two new employees, one to handle production and packing, the other to handle customer service (anything around the office that we think they can do, to give the three of us more time to do the things only we can do). We'll see what this first guy can do and then see about hiring a

college girl/boy for the other job.

By Steve Cole on Thursday, May 12, 2005 - 02:02 pm

12 May: Things just feel better around the office. Leanna, Petrick, and I all have a new feeling of energy, enthusiasm, and optimism. We're looking forward each day to the fun things to be done tomorrow.

We hired a college student, Mike Sparks, to be "the warehouse guy" and do the bookbinding. That has virtually eliminated my own time in the warehouse and cut Petrick's quite a bit.

We are in the process of hiring Ken Burnside to be the "customer service guy", although I'll believe that when I actually click the handcuffs around his left wrist and the ring bolt set into his new desk. Ken will be doing a number of things including sales, marketing, research, running the bookprinting equipment, proofreading, running the advertising campaign, converting of GURPS books into D6 and D20, store support, convention support, organized league play, managing the Rangers (recruitment, training, rewards), managing the apostles (recruitment, training, rewards), and other things. He'll also help Leanna with office tasks and Petrick+Mike with warehouse and bookbinding tasks. Ken brings new energy, new ideas, and new skills to the office.

We've been working on several new products (F2, CL31, PD20, PD6, FC) but the last two months have seen a lot of "heads slamming into brick walls" and not a lot of "finished pages in the respective ring binder". In the last three days, we've had breakthroughs on several fronts. F2 is nearly a finished draft and as soon as the playtesters do the final confirmations that the new energy ionization rule works we could even start printing it to release on schedule at Origins. We got the CL31 story done and I'm working on the second and third stories (the fourth one being just a one-pager I did quite some time ago).

We're going to expand the office square footage, although we're finding way too many options as to how (and even where) to do this. My original plan is still the best one but Leanna has come up with two plans which are much easier to do (just not as good a result). Ken will be working at a desk on the front porch until this is done so we are hoping it doesn't rain too much, but then, we have had the wettest year in Amarillo history.

With more help (particularly with Ken) a lot of things we didn't do very well, or didn't do at all, will get done. This doesn't mean 14 extra new products a year (although it does mean one or two) but it means more players and more sales. Ken will go hunting for conventions to run our ads in their programs rather than us waiting for conventions to find us and then begging them to run our ads.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, May 31, 2005 - 08:40 am

31 May: Ken and Mike are working out well for us, and many things are getting done around here. Origins is shaping up to be a great show for us and we're all excited about going to Gencon in August and Denver in September.

Ken got here just after the office closed on Monday, 23 May. We talked until very late about things that can be done, should be done, aren't being done, and could be done better. It's not that Ken is here to 'save' us, but that he's here to 'unleash' the company from the limits of insufficient manpower.

Much of his first week, not counting the time spent finding an apartment and moving in, Ken has been proofreading CL31 pages as Petrick and I finish them. This has seriously improved those pages. In a few hours, Ken and I are going to save each other \$200 by having the cover of CL31 printed at the same time as the cover of an Ad Astra product, since printing two covers together is more efficient than one.

Still working on the concept of making some more office space, but actual progress on that is waiting for CL31 to be finished. F2 is looking like a solid lock for Origins and PD20 shows every sign of being done on time. Bruce Graw says that the new minis are looking good and we should actually have the first prototypes by the end of next week.

A lot of things happen around the industry which we've never taken part in just because we didn't have time to manage them. We signed up for a "stock market game" at Origins. Buy something or sit through a demo or play in a tournament and you'll get a share of stock. The value of each company's stock will go up or down each day (companies that give out fewer stock certificates will have more value) and at the end of the convention fabulous prizes will go to those who have the best portfolio. We are also starting to run a lot of advertising for the RPG stuff and are "branding" prime directive (not gurps prime directive, not d20 prime directive, not prime directive heroes, not prime directive d6, but PRIME DIRECTIVE RPG UNIVERSE, as a major element of the game industry.

By Steve Cole on Friday, June 10, 2005 - 05:35 pm

10 June: Ken is settling in well and Mike is already to the point of "you mean he hasn't always been here?" Mike is "a natural" on the bookbinding machine (better than any of us) and has been able to almost take over ordering packing.

Ken has been trying to get us up to speed on advertising. Ken has a view of "spend lots of money on ads because, hey, you're supposed to" and I have an attitude of "please somebody show me something that says that all that ad money actually accomplished something." Seriously, the problem with ads is that they mean more work and nasty little deadlines that don't move. If CL31 isn't finished we just delay release a week. If the ad isn't finished, the magazines run one of your old ads and you don't get all the bang you should out of your buck.

Another thing Ken is trying to do is to encourage us to get the art ordered months ahead of time. Understand that a massive wholesaler called "alliance" (which is part of the comic book behemoth Diamond) pretty much calls the tune for the industry. They do a magazine called Game Trade which talks about products that will ship in 3 and 4 months time. (Every product gets listed twice, once when it's 4 months away and once when it's 3 months away.) If you don't have a picture (or at least a logo or some dummy graphic) your "notice of release" gets less attention. For six years, we've only rarely ordered the art far enough ahead to have it for these release notices. Ken is scrambling to get me to order all of the art through December so we can get on top of the catalog issue. There are several other magazines which have similar "notice of future release" systems and they all follow Alliance's tune.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, June 18, 2005 - 01:38 pm

18 June: Just a little over a week until we leave for Origins. Given my stress levels, Petrick is thinking about having me leave Monday and take a week to get there so I can calm down some. It's been a busy week. Most people don't understand just how intense, how busy, how stressful ADB is. We get more pages printed per employee than any other game company (and those pages have 50% more words than other companies) and we do this by running everything at full speed in crisis mode.

I'd like to say that Ken has solved all of this by taking over part of my work, but what Ken is mostly doing is things I never had time to do (advertising and promotion). He's going to take over dealing with customer requests and suggestions. [I am a literalist, and when a customer writes in with a suggestion that isn't very practical I tend to tell him that in logical terms, which usually gets interpreted incorrectly as being mean to people. Ken will be sending out a nice form letter (we appreciate your suggestion and will give it the attention it deserves) to avoid offending anyone.

My mother isn't doing much better. Two months ago we thought she'd go to a retirement home but she lasted a day. Her behavior is so disconnected and erratic that she has to be kept in a controlled environment for her own safety. Thursday she suffered a serious fall (and since the one three weeks earlier broke a bone in her spine) she was rushed to the hospital for tests and evaluation. Which of course took me out of the office most of the day. Last night, Leanna's mother fell at her retirement home (second time in a week) and apparently broke something

and Leanna will be gone most of today (when she wanted to work on mail orders) sitting in the hospital waiting for the doctor to finish his second round of golf and look over the X-rays. With my brother gone and Leanna's brother a thousand miles away, it's pretty much a full time job taking care of the two ladies.

F2 is finished (waiting for the covers so we can shrinkwrap it) and will ship to wholesalers on 27 June and to mail orders on 5 July.

PD20 is nearly finished. We're finding out that these easy conversions aren't quite so easy as one might think. Ken took the first complete draft yesterday and went through it seeing if the skills and feats listed in chapter 3 were actually present in chapters 4 and 5 and some weren't so we had to get JT to send them to us. Like oh so many things, it's not the game design that kills you but laying out the pages and hunting down stupid nitpicky formatting stuff. At least we don't have to have this approved by somebody after we are satisfied with it. Oh, the glories of the OGL.

By Steve Cole on Friday, June 24, 2005 - 10:40 am

24 June: "Getting things done" is probably our biggest problem. We do more with fewer people than any other game company, but we still have some rather ridiculous inefficiencies which mess things up.

There should be a "ships computer" that recognizes when a Captain's Log is being printed and automatically generates the payment list (authors, artists) and which issues data (including ace cards and judge rewards). I have, of late, taken to telling people to "go order it from the shopping cart and tell Leanna it is free and to include your check". This defeats one of the big enemies of the process, we have to verify addresses every single time because, every single time, ONE of the ten or twenty people getting something moved and didn't tell us (or told us and we didn't get the address into every place it should get).

With Ken here, things should get better, although Ken has spent 90% of his time editing files for PD20 that should have been in better shape when they got here. I don't understand how the world works. When I send GURPS files to Jackson, they have to be PERFECT or I get yelled at, yet when people send me files that ignore instructions and style sheets, I'm the bad guy when I complain about having to fix a mess that the writer should have fixed before I saw it. Oh well.

Petrick and I were talking last night about one particularly annoying part of the warehouse, the bagged separate non-distribution miniatures (like the Kzinti Tug and the Klingon F5). We are nearly unique in the industry in offering to sell any ship as a separate element, but it's a logistical nightmare. The way we do it is that we print a mailing label listing the ship, stock number, and price, stick it on a bag, go find a ship in the bulk storage bins, put it in the bag, go find a stand in the bulk storage bins, put that in the bag, then put the bag into the retail ready bin for that ship. In theory, every single Saturday we're suppose to go count all of the bagged ships and if there are less than three we're supposed to do three more. This is an insane system, in that it takes up a lot of room (one bin per ship), a lot of time (counting each bin), and requires a custom label print job each time. Worse, we only remember to actually do it every 3-5 weeks, meaning somewhere along the line we have to stop in the middle of filling orders to go get one ship and pack it as a separate "production run". It's going to take some doing but we're going to whip this. We are going to have "Mike the Warehouse Guy" do it in future, providing him with bulk quantities of the labels (no more unique print jobs) and a directive to do it every week whether we tell him to do it or not. (Mike works part time on a "when we have something for him to do, he gets paid" basis and he's always looking for things he can do to get another hour's pay. His girlfriend is pushing him to work more hours so he will have more date money.

There are other things around the office which we have been doing repeatedly as "one time custom jobs" each requiring a unique set up instead of just a routine repeat cycle. We're slowly going to fix them. It's getting better but it is going to take a few weeks.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, July 16, 2005 - 06:18 pm

Origins went well, although we all arrived home too tired to move and had to finish PD20. Which, after many misadventures and far too much time, did get finished and we'll finish printing them tomorrow. Orders weren't great but were still strong compared to SFB. Go figure.

Ken is settling in well. He thought he was going to come in here and change the way we did things, and in some ways he did, but in many ways he had to adapt to our system. There are several ways of putting gray bars in the RPG charts and he (after some time in the agonizer booth) decided to do them my way so that I can edit them later. He has gotten us to do more advertising but it's anybody's guess if it actually accomplishes anything. I'm pretty much convinced that it's just a big joke and accomplishes little more than what a toilet could do by itself in making money disappear.

Mike is a really great guy and can stand in front of the bookbinder for hours. I have to take a Dr Pepper break every fourth book.

Health issues remain a concern. I put on a lot of weight after Dad died due to stress and that's going to have to be dealt with soon. Petrick has been stumbling and staggering around for two weeks moping "I am worn out and need a day off" and we told him to take today off (since we have to work tomorrow). My mother fell and broke her hip Friday and is waiting for surgery, but other health complications have (dangerously) delayed this surgery because, well, if they had operated today, she wouldn't have survived. They think they can stabilize those issues by tomorrow or Monday but every day they wait raises the danger of blood clots and infection. We're all on pins and needles about that.

By Steve Cole on Saturday, July 16, 2005 - 06:22 pm

Monday will be a very confusing day. We're shipping seven new items (PD20, the two cruiser boxes, and four blisters of miniatures) with a total of 80 parts. Right now, I have at least some of 79 parts. We won't get the last part until noon Monday which will let us pack the 20 of those items going out Monday and then have Monday night to pack the other 100. Problem is, by the end of Monday we'll be out of another part and the resupply of it is due noon Tuesday, just in time to ship the Tuesday orders. Gonna be wicked.

We're changing our miniatures packaging from blistercards to a small clamshell. It lets us pack them here without buying a blistercard machine. It also means we have to do the work of packing them. It is a neater, prettier, and better package, however.

By Steve Cole on Thursday, July 28, 2005 - 05:42 pm

One of the things I've always enjoyed doing for people who do things for me (in SFB and in the military) is giving people good references on job applications. I do this for members of the staff, judges at Origins, and for people who write entire products for us. I won't create a phony job history for somebody, but if you actually did something for us, I will be glad to give a good recommendation on your behalf. A few points about this....

1. It's a really great idea to let me know I am expecting such a phone call as it avoids the embarrassment of my fumbling to remember somebody who hasn't worked for me in six or seven years. It may also save you embarrassment if I really honestly cannot remember having ever heard of you before. (Astonishingly, prospective employers do call the references you list. I get a call or two every month from somebody I don't even know because when filling out the application he just put down any old name and phone number he could find.)

2. I won't "verify employment" so you can apply for a credit card unless I'm actually paying you money, and then only to the extent I pay you.

3. Please understand that my memory isn't perfect and I do not remember everybody who is listed as a playtester in one or two products, and sad to say, doing playtesting on a product or

two isn't enough working knowledge to give you a job recommendation. The longer, more recently, and more extensively we worked together, the more likely you qualify to get a good recommendation. Shaking hands at Origins once or twice isn't going to be enough for me to base a recommendation on.

By Steve Cole on Wednesday, August 31, 2005 - 03:38 pm

31 August: Hoo-boy, way too long since I posted anything. I'll try to catch up with some general notes.

Ken and Mike continue to work out very well. Glad I hired them both, even if Ken is getting a little toasty around the edges.

I'll report on Gencon separately but the show did convince me to INSIST that the world give me four hours per day every day to design games and let somebody else do the scutwork of running ADB.

We were just about to ship Klingons d20 on Monday when the bookbinder broke. We got a new part flown in and it's back in business, so we are shipping those items today.

The d6 project got derailed after Scott Palter spend five months sick as a dog. He's better now but so far behind with his own projects that he had to bow out. A new writer is being "tested" even now.

Having gotten past the d20 project I am now working full time on Fed Commander and loving both the game and the design process. Watching Ken and Petrick fight over the DACs is even more fun!

Advertising programs are, as expected, an annoying drain on time and money. Nobody ever really knows if advertising does any good at all, but we're certainly giving it a test. Ken would love to spend all day all week doing ads but that is only a tiny part of his job.

Convention support policy has changed. Separate memo to follow.

I have preliminary plan on the SFBF expansions. After Fed Commander I will "design" the four expansions, and get production cost quotes, then lock in the prices and stock numbers. At that point, we will put them on the shopping cart for pre-orders and will send them to press when we get 100 orders. (This was the deal I made with Leanna to cover the huge cash flow hit of printing cards).

I actually bought a wargame at Gencon (a tank game I haven't played yet but am already rewriting the rules).

Friday, the boys (Ken, Petrick, and myself) will leave at 8am to go to Denver and the convention there. The first appearance by ADB at a "local convention". Could be the first (or last) such expedition. Petrick is loading the belts for the turret machinegun and Ken is rounding up the 70mm rockets for the pods. Going to be a fun trip.

By Steve Cole on Wednesday, August 31, 2005 - 03:41 pm

New convention policy....

1. No more star fleet bucks. Nobody uses them to buy stuff so we're just wasting paper.

2. If the person/convention/group buying the gift certificates has done it three years in a row, we no longer charge them money we just send them the certificates on request. At least, we send \$10 worth. If you want more you pay for those (up to another \$20 worth).

3. since I handle over the chore to Ken, we will actually be sending out the ads and boxes of stuff on time instead of after the conventions.

By Steve Cole on Sunday, September 04, 2005 - 01:53 pm

Gencon report. The drive was interesting with Leanna instead of Petrick. I got to do more of the driving, for one thing, since you can't get Petrick out of the driver's seat without tricking him with a phony bathroom stop. Leanna also wanted to stop on the way back for shopping, which Petrick never wanted to do.

The convention itself is exactly like Origins except for the things that make it different. The parking lot for dealer unloading is actually run at Gencon instead of just being a wild west free for all. The exhibit hall is so hot on set up day (both shows) that

Leanna couldn't stand it and I missed having Petrick to do the heavy lifting. Food and cokes are way more (and way too) expensive but nobody enforces the no outside food and drink rule.

The crowd is very different. They aren't just RPGers but into all kinds of games (but only simple games; if they cannot learn the rules in a five-minute demo they don't want to learn them). Lots of SFB players (sold way more SFB stuff than RPG stuff, in fact, RPG sales more than just sucked as too many people were selling too many RPGs to people who were tired of hearing about it. Also, the prevailing culture at Gencon tends to be "look now, buy at the local store or on-line discounter later" and we got a huge restock from our midwest wholesaler (who reported that virtually every store anywhere near Gencon sold every SFB and SFBF item they had in the two weeks after the show and wanted restocks).

As always, the hotels next to the convention center are designed (and priced) to cater to business people on expense accounts who don't care what anything costs. So the room is twice as much and you don't get a free breakfast out of the deal. The room is also smaller and while luxurious you don't spend any time there anyway. The walk from the hotel to the convention is like the Bataan Death March, as the convention center is three city blocks long and you're always at the other end from where you wanted to go. Ah, to be 20 again and not care how far I had to walk.

Sales were decent, paying expenses, meaning that the only benefit was "showing the flag" which is hard to put a dollar value on. I suspect we will go back but it's not decided yet.

By Steve Cole on Sunday, September 04, 2005 - 01:58 pm

Tacticon Report: The drive up wasn't bad (7.5 hours, Petrick driving 5 or 6 of them each way) but then 7.5 hours in a car might as well be 7.5 hours of root canal for me. It was a quirky male bonding thing to have Ken, Petrick, and myself in the car, although Ken had the back 2/3 of the van to himself and tended to sleep most of the way. He's also about as messy in a car as in the office and you get tired of tripping over his root beer cans.

The people at Tacticon really know how to run a show. Providing a lunch break for the dealers and free breakfast for them as well was astonishing.

I hadn't been to a local con in 20 years and it was a very different experience. The huge jump in gas prices meant that customers looked at all the merchandise then said "After what I paid for a tank of gas this morning, I'm going to have to wait for the next paycheck to buy this at the local store".

The gamers were very glad to see us and the SFB gang there runs a great tournament.

Federation Commander was a huge hit; we could have sold out of them no matter how many we took if it had been on the market yet. Petrick played full games with people in the tournament room while Ken did five-minute quickie demos in the dealer room. I mostly stumbled around half asleep since I didn't get any sleep Thursday night or Friday night for no apparent reason.

Sales probably covered the booth and hotel costs (not the \$300 in vehicle costs) but it was worth that much to get so much playtesting done on Fed Commander.

By Steve Cole on Monday, September 05, 2005 - 04:24 pm

Nimitz reports for duty. The latest addition to our burgeoning armory of printing equipment is an M2 bookletmaking machine. This turns 12 sheets of 11x17 paper into a 48 page booklet with the push of a button. As all of our equipment has names, Leanna picked "Nimitz" (the name of Honor Harrington's cat) for this one.

We will be buying our third Kyocera in about a week. This one is actually a lower-capacity machine than Kate and Sam, one of the older and slower models like Ken has up in Wisconsin. The dealer ordered it by mistake (typo, he wanted a 9520 and got a 9120) and can't send it back and offered it to us for his cost (one third of what Sam and Kate cost). While this new machine (no name yet) is only 2/3 of the speed, the real point is to use it as a

bypass. We print a lot of stuff on the kyoceras (catalogs, master rulebook updates, short runs of some books, special orders for unbound books) and if we're in the middle of printing a major print run (say, the Romulans d20 books I hear being printed down the hall) we have problems if Leanna needs something to go into a mail order. The third machine would allow Leanna to efficiently handle mail orders without waiting for the girls to finish a one-hour run of some new book. The third machine would also be a backup for the first two and a source of spare parts in a desperate emergency.

By Steve Cole on Monday, September 26, 2005 - 01:28 pm

Opt-out copyright is one of the later developments in cyberspace. Some companies (Google doing it for a lot of things, other companies for specialized fields) are grabbing up all kinds of "we think this is out of print" books and putting them on web sites in searchable databases or sometimes even for sale. This borders on copyright violation (depending on how they do it, it might sneak by as "fair use") but many such places have an "opt out" form where a publisher can go and say "do not put my books on your site". Of course, it is a little ridiculous to expect every publisher to check every site every day to see if they put one of his books there. So, if anybody ever sees an SFB product on a web site, with or without a claim of permission or an opt-out form or whatever, do let us know so we can tell them to stop.

By Steve Cole on Monday, September 26, 2005 - 01:54 pm

Web log update 26 Sept: Been a while but I can never really think of anything to say. Things tend to happen gradually around here instead of big event moments, and any one day's progress on something isn't much to talk about.

We haven't added any new equipment since Nimitz, so I can't talk about new equipment. We are about to (within a day or two) order [we never did this] an "in plant office" which is basically a little 10x15 building to go out in the warehouse and give us more office space. It will have its own heating, lights, air conditioning, and internet. We're calling it Mike's office as it will contain the bookbinding machine and the UPS computer (the two main things Mike is in charge of).

Ken is settling back in. He was "off duty" much of the time since mid-August due to Gencon, Tacticon, Alliance-Baltimore (trade show), and working on his Sandwich Islands rulebook. This has aggravated one of my biggest problems, thinking of things for Ken to do. This is more a mental problem than a real one. I have too many things on my plate and Ken's job is to do some of them so I can spend more time designing games. It's kind of hard to have spent six years doing X and then suddenly being asked "which part of X are you giving Ken?" It's kind of like being asked to name your top ten movies of all time. You can come up with ten but you'll forget many that should have been on the list because you don't really keep a "favorite movies list, continually updated" in either hard copy or mentally.

Today it was decided that Ken is going to take over two major tasks of mine.

One of these is Post-Production, which means when a product is finished/shipped there are copyrights to file, staff and review copies to mail, and other "tidying up" tasks.

Another of these is shopping cart maintenance. I just don't have time to do this perfectly, don't think about it most of the time since I don't actually go order my own products so if something isn't right I wouldn't know, and when somebody reminds me that the Fed CF still doesn't have a picture in place I get defensive about it. So now it is Ken's job. If you see something that needs fixing, tell Ken (support@starfleetgames.com) and if it's not fixed in 3 days tell him again and if not fixed in 3 more days tell me that Ken didn't do his job and needs to be inspired to get it done. What Ken is doing now is looking through the cart for products without pictures (Ken will go take a picture, then install it), products with release dates that are three years old (if a product says "release on 14 Nov" then every year starting 1 Oct we have people asking about it), and the one or two products that just do not have descriptions at all.

By Steve Cole on Friday, October 07, 2005 - 07:28 pm

October 7: I never know what to say. No earth-changing events but gradual progress on many issues and projects.

Still no new equipment, although Leanna did order a special cart to hold Nimitz so we can move him around. We should be signing the order on the new 10x18 building (it kept getting bigger until there was no move space) [but we never did]. The third Kyocera (to be called Paula) will be installed sometime soon, maybe next week, certainly by the time the new office is here.

Federation Commander moves forward. The check for the mounted mapboards is about twice what we paid for a Captain's Log back when we were buying those by the pallet. The counters go to press in a week, then the cover, then the ship cards in two weeks, and finally the rulebook about 1 Nov.

Mike continues to work out swell in the warehouse and Ken is slowly realizing that he's going to do more adapting to our culture than adapting us to his. He spent a whole week upgrading the shopping cart and will be setting up our review game system next week.

Well, not much more going on around here. As always, steady change is better than radical explosive change.

By Steve Cole on Friday, October 07, 2005 - 07:41 pm

A couple of further thoughts.

Looks like we finally have the Fed DN minis under control and will ship them on 7 November with Federation Commander.

We decided that the 16-ship expansion to Fed Commander Klingon Border would be called Fed Commander Klingon Attack.

The D6 project remains derailed. The original writer got sick, the replacement bailed, and his replacement produced a sample page that I am still trying to figure out.

Petrick continues working on CL32 and on Module C5. No selection yet of the next SFB modules but there will be more SFB modules. We are not shutting down SFB to do FC; the two games will sell right beside each other.

By Steve Cole on Thursday, October 13, 2005 - 07:46 pm

Ken Burnside's development plan for Federation Commander is bewildering but could be clever enough to work. The idea is this....

1. We do Fed Commander: Klingon Border. It has 16 ship cards in it.

2. We do three "squadron boxes" of miniatures which total one each of those 16 ships.

3. We do three "boosters" each including a fixed (non-random) set of 7-8 ship cards. Most are just extra copies of the ships in FCKB but one or two in each of the boosters is a new ship. If you buy all three boosters, you have one laminated full-color ship diagram for each of the 40 counters.

4. We do a "border box" with 24 minis in it. If you buy the three squadron boxes AND the border box (and the boosters), you have one miniature for each of the 40 color laminated ship diagrams.

The cycle repeats for Klingon attack, Romulan Border, Romulan attack, and for whatever we do with the Tholians.

I don't know how many people will want extra laminated ship diagrams. I don't know how many people will want miniatures. Doesn't cost much to offer such products and we can just use the parts in other products if the boosters and minis boxes don't sell. But Ken thinks they will sell and I'm starting to believe him.

By Steve Cole on Wednesday, November 16, 2005 - 06:53 pm

Been a month since I posted in the blog, so I'll take a moment to mention a few things and thoughts.

Federation Commander has shipped. At first I thought sales were pathetic but that was because I was looking at an incomplete sales sheet. When I finally got the real numbers I was stunned at how well things had sold. We have a saying around here that SVC designed the game but Ken Burnside designed the product line. Adding squadron boxes (using existing minis) to the release ratcheted up the sales.

The warehouse is jam packed again. We got all of that color stuff (maps, counters, ship cards, reference cards) which we cannot Kyocera and it was something like eight or nine pallets. You can barely walk out there and the crew knows that there are some gaps between pallets that I can't get through without a serious crash diet. I think that's where they're hiding stuff, behind the map pallets.

Petrick has been working on CL32 while the warehouse crew (his name is Mike) works like a dog to catch up with our biggest shipping week in years. The Kyoceras have kept busy despite the lack of work on "new" products to print because of the constant reprint of products released over the last 15 months.

We gotta get the minis thing better organized because Ken's clever marketing plan has doubled or tripled miniatures sales.

I got this note pad that is basically like a blank paperback book with no cardboard. I use it for the daily meetings. One side has the agenda for the meeting, the other side has the list of things people are supposed to do. I can use one page (of each side) for two or three days before I have to toss it and transfer the remaining items to the next sheet.

By Steve Cole on Tuesday, November 22, 2005 - 01:03 am

21 Nov: Today was, well, a strange day, but a good one. I got zero sleep last night (no idea why). Ken was out sick (could have used him), so I had to call the wholesalers for orders on the minis being released, and they were all bubbly about Fed Commander. The box of parts needed to finish the rest of the Fed Box 3s was delayed by a train problem. I didn't know UPS used trains. We got the first restocks of Fed Commander from wholesalers who we warned didn't buy enough. I had a relaxing day. We spent more money on Fed Commander than I spent on my house (ok, 28 years ago, but still) and we had a sales number that, if we didn't make that many dollars by 31 Dec, we'd be closing on 31 Jan. We made that many dollars today and will bill a couple of thousand more tomorrow. I did the first issue of the webzine for Fed Commander. We got the first review of Fed Commander from star ranger (glowing!) and it sparked an idea. If, tomorrow, Ken thinks its a good idea, we'll try to sell Leanna on FCOS. If Ken hates it then Leanna won't approve it so you'll never know what FCOS means. Film at 11.

By Steve Cole on Monday, December 05, 2005 - 10:15 pm

5 Dec 05: Business is booming. Leanna can't catch up on orders. Wholesalers are restocking and a couple of new wholesalers have come a knocking.

I really want to work on CL32 but Fed Commander is still consuming work. I have spent much of the last week in the warehouse, either packing games and miniatures or hand-inspecting 24,400 map panels to eliminate the 2,000 mis-cut ones.

We've also had problems getting in the "building in the warehouse". One dealer quoted \$4,000 for the building and \$3,000 for shipping (no, you can't come pick it up yourself) while another quoted \$5,000 for the building and \$1,000 for shipping. Too much money for what those things are. However, Leanna found a three-year-old version of the same thing (twice as big, less money, plus it includes a 576-square-foot steel deck to double warehouse space) for sale 450 miles away and I'm trying to figure out how to get the thing trucked up here if we buy it.

Mike continues to do well and Ken and I are learning to deal with each other. Ken loves to do advertising but after spending about \$6,000 on this in the last six months with ZERO results, we're not going to be buying ads in wargame trade journals that retailers apparently don't actually read. We'll continue with the banners on star ranger, board game geek, RPG net, and miniatures pages. So, we're trying to think of things for Ken to do. No doubt he will continue to absorb more and more of my grunt work and leave me time to design games.

I am getting tired of people who, after three entire days of playing FC, have decided (based on their vast experience) that I need to open up the box and insert the entire SFB rulebook.

By Steve Cole on Wednesday, December 14, 2005 - 08:43 pm

14 Dec: While I spent most of the day sick (or unconscious due to the dentist getting a little carried away with the gas; he tends to really turn up the valve when his patient is carrying a gun) two significant events happened.

One is that today we reached total sales equal to DOUBLE the amount of money we had to make between 11 Nov and 31 Dec to survive as a company. While long since survivable, reaching this level allows us to buy a huge warehouse "second floor" structure we want (which includes more office space).

The other is that we picked up a new wholesaler. Previously, the wholesalers had pretty much either taken or left us due to SFB. Those who thought SFB would still sell still sold it, those who thought it would not, didn't even try. Ken is working on three more new wholesalers in the US and six overseas wholesalers, and is finding "interest" due to Fed Commander.

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