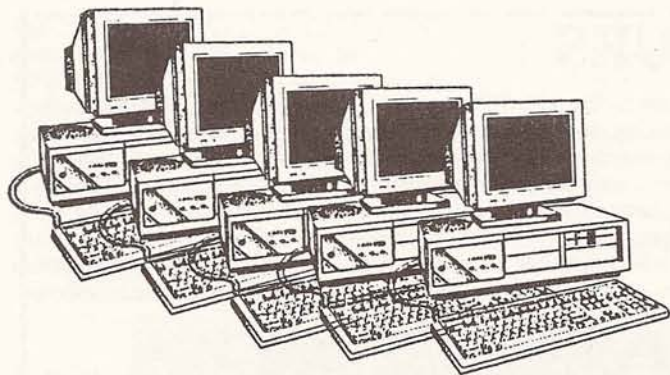




IN THE GAMEROOM, ALL ALONE

The Case for PBEM

By Russ Gifford

The following piece, reprinted from "At the Point" #7, is the product of the vivid imagination of Russ Gifford, godfather (in the original sense of the word) of the ASL topics on GENIE. With his permission, and that of Marc Hanna (editor of ATP, the best of the amateur ASL 'zines), we offer it here for those few readers who may as yet be unaware of all that online gaming has to offer the dedicated hobbyist.

It was late in the night, and it was raining when the cab dropped me at the corner of the Telephone Exchange building. I walked the last few steps to the club with the sound of thunder accompanying my footsteps on the deserted streets.

After I keyed in my personal code, the door opened and the doorman greeted me, taking my damp coat.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Gifford. I think it was last Thursday, wasn't it?"

He knew, from the tagged response to my door code and password, it was definitely last Thursday. But I knew he was only checking. If I hadn't been in on Thursday, then I'd also know someone else came in using my security code. Of course, it had never happened in six years - but that didn't stop the vigilant Jeeves from checking.

"Anyone else in, Jeeves?"

He checked his notes. "No, not at the moment; though Mr. O'Connor was here earlier, and has left you a message, and Mr. Martin is expected later this evening."

A note from O'Connor! That meant an ASL move! I nodded my thanks, and headed for the hall.

As I passed the Library, I could see eight to ten *DIPLOMACY* games, all at different stages of completion, waiting for their players to return. I could also see reams of negotiations scattered like leaves on the floor. (Hmmm . . . Must be a Fall turn!) I could almost overhear France and England deciding the fate of Germany, and debating whether the Russians were a threat. The Russians are *always* a threat, friend, especially if you're allied with them! I happened to know the Russian in question, better known around here as "Diplomacy-I". Poor fools, I thought. I'll be reading about their demise soon enough!

Any other night I might have stopped in to check out their situation. But this wasn't going to distract me tonight. Bob had left a message, and I couldn't wait to see if he'd fallen for the trap I'd set!

I took the stairs two at a time to Area 21. We used to be down the hall in #4, but we'd outgrown those rooms when Rex and Don started dropping in and telling their friends about it. Now Room #21 is devoted to just Avalon Hill games and the traffic is brisk, thanks to the PR bits in Don Burdick's "AREA News" column in *The GENERAL*.

As I topped the stairs, I heard a dull roar. I couldn't decide if it was the thunder, or the continuous Role-Playing party down in the dungeons. I never went near their lair, and they never bothered me; but we often said "hi" as we passed on the doorstep. What more could you ask of neighbors?

When I swung 'round the corner to "our" quarters, I still marveled at the "AVALON HILL" on the glass door. I'd been gaming here six years and boom, this happens six months after Rex Martin first stops by! Incredible!

Inside, there is a bulletin board in the anteroom. Here are the general notices, important changes, and other fun stuff for AH players. "CHECK IT OUT," proclaimed the big message . . . and I always do. Anything of interest to all the AH gamers could be found here. (When we were downstairs, they even posted letters from Evan during his tour of duty in the Gulf!)

The messages on this board are always aligned from oldest to newest, so it was easy to see what had been posted since my last visit. Hmmm . . . a new *B-17* squadron was heading out tonight . . . They're looking for more players in the online *STATIS-PRO BASEBALL* league . . . and . . . Oh ho! A Round-Table Conference was scheduled tonight with Don Greenwood in Conference Room #1! So that was the excitement! I could hear chairs shuffling as they prepared the room. I'll have to stop by - after I see Bob's move!

I entered the largest interior room and, though I had seen it many times, the sight of all these tables with ASL games in progress, all awaiting the return of their players, still awed me. It was an incredible collection of people and players; and, knowing there were still other rooms devoted to other AH games, it always seemed a little overwhelming to me. Why, the three *EMPIRES IN ARMS* campaign games alone filled an entire antechamber, and had been progressing steadily for several years since the first was started.

Some of the ASL boards were flagged, denoting their status as part of the "1991 ASL Online Championships". I looked over a few of those, noting the changes since my last visit. Hmmm, Ronald has finally given up the Death Trap in

his battle for "Guryev's Headquarters" with Phil. It looks like Lance is in trouble with Les "On the Kokoda Trail", too. Interesting . . . especially since Les would become my next opponent in the tourney, if he should win!

Continuing on toward my board, I stopped by my pigeon hole (also known as my mailbox) and pulled Bob's message. I hadn't opened it yet, but I noticed my hands were almost shaking in anticipation as I peeled the envelope off the letter. He could have fallen for my trap . . . or he could have just shot the hell out of my troops! Which would it be?

I stood there over my board, poised with tension, ready to translate from the paper to the mapboard. Would it be death, or glory? I started to move the pieces in accordance with Bob's instructions . . .

Maybe this isn't what it's *really* like online at GENIE. I mean, the doorman isn't really named "Jeeves", but he's there to greet me everytime I enter - or "sign on", as we call it. And of course, I can't "hear" things (like the wild D&D party or the *DIPLOMACY* conversations), but as I read through the different snippets and messages, it "feels" like I'm overhearing the words of other gamers.

Going online has always seemed to me like entering a huge building, filled with different rooms, on many different floors. Leaving the gaming area, which houses sections for role-playing, wargaming, computer games, PBM games and many, many others, there are various locations for almost any hobby. From short-wave radio DXers to comic-book collectors, sci-fi enthusiasts to military historians, there are "rooms" for all of them - and a multitude of others. But, of course, this is just the *hobby* section. There are also areas online for business, for research, and for communication. There are areas devoted to finance, and to fun. There are online shopping malls, college-level correspondence courses, and categories devoted to many other interests. There's something for everyone and, like Disneyland, too much for any one person to see or afford.

But for me, there is ASL. And that's what I'm here to talk to you readers about today.

Most wargamers are familiar with the acronyms "FTF" (face-to-face) and "PBM" (play-by-mail). Less familiar is "PBEM", meaning play-by-electronic-mail - or "Email", as it's commonly known. Electronic mail is the name given to text messages passed between computers, and PBEM is the acronym for using computer Email to play wargames.

The truth is, PBEM is really the same as PBM, only the method of exchange is different. But it does have one big advantage over regular postal play. In Email, your move is in your opponent's mailbox *as soon as you send it!* This single difference allows multi-phase games, like *ASL*, to become more accessible since you can play a full player-turn in a very short time, preserving the feel of FTF play. Also, since *ASL* by mail has to allow the attacker to send only part of his movement (to see what defensive fire he may draw), Email's speedy delivery means you're not waiting a week or more just to hear, "No Defensive Fire - go ahead!"

We make use of an honor system for resolving die and dice rolls. Worried about someone cheating? Sure, it would be easy. They can do so in most of the other systems I've tried too, so why work so hard to prevent the unpreventable? If you play with someone you think might be cheating, your option is simple: don't play with them again. It's a small price to pay to play *ASL* by mail. In all my PBEM *ASL* games, I've never felt I was being cheated, nor have I had any thoughts of cheating myself. Think about it: if I cheated and won, I could never tell myself I'd really "won" anyway; so what's the use? And if I cheated and still *lost*, what would that say about my ability to play this game? I'd be so embarrassed to know I couldn't even win by cheating that I'd have to quit!

Now that we have the ground rules, let's look at where to play *ASL* via Email. There are many different BBS available, though CompuServe and GENIE are the best known. Both are fine services and offer many special features which set them apart. This article, though, will feature GENIE, since this is really "where the action is" at the moment!

GENIE (which stands for General Electric's Network for Information Exchange) is a little different than most Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). The heart of any BBS is the posting of public messages to fellow users. On most systems, these are placed on a "forum", or a board with room for a limited number of such messages (though that "limit" is usually VERY high!) When one more message than the limit is placed on the board, the oldest message is "pushed off" the board (or "scrolls off", as we say online). Most of these systems have general topic sections, such as "board wargames" or "PBM Games". (*DIPLOMACY* is usually one of the few boardgames to get a section all its own in most systems.) These sections are normally part of ten to 15 such topics all sharing a common theme, such as "Strategy Games".

But GENIE is different, and it's this difference that has allowed *ASL* and *DIPLOMACY* - and now other AH games - to come into their own. GENIE provides a category for boardgamers, and then it allows the users (that's you, me, anybody) to start a "topic" of discussion. If you gather enough people posting notes to your topic, it stays viable. The *ASL* topic languished for a month or so when it was originally started on GENIE, but it then began to attract the notice of a few other *ASL*ers. As the messages began to pile up, so did the interest. We slowly took a few steps forward, played a few games online and then, in 1990, we decided

to hold a tourney. This netted us a few more players, and some more attention, and we were off!

In any other system, it wouldn't have worked as well. The messages we posted would have "scrolled off" before the interest could ever have started to grow. With nothing there to catch their attention as they come in, potential players would have passed right on by. Sure, those who manage GENIE clean out our section when we hit 300+ messages; but they always leave a base of messages to catch the eye. (We now average about a hundred new messages a month.)

A key step in our efforts was the declaration of our initial online tournament as an AREA event. This meant the players had to join the AREA since all tournament games were to be reported for AREA rating. It caught Rex Martin and Don Burdick's attention, and they were nice enough to write us up in "AREA News" and the *ASL Annual*. The word started to spread, and our next tournament, again AREA-rated, drew 16 players. By then the second mention in "AREA News" was plugging the new event, and an explosion of talent followed!

Rex Martin began stopping by in July of '90, and now Avalon Hill has "officially" joined GENIE, and even have their own section. With this happening, we transferred our *ASL* topic into their new category, and we are now the flagship of the AH section! (But, if *ASL* isn't your cup of tea, there are Email ladders now for *RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN* and *TURNING POINT: STALINGRAD*; or you can start your own AREA-based competition.)

At this point, we have even eight players willing to be alternates should any of the 1991 tournament players drop out. I recently made a nose count of different people who have posted messages in the *ASL* section in a two-month period. Of the 200+ messages, there were 40 to 50 different people chiming in! And there are still more coming on!

In essence, we have created a nationwide "club", someplace to "talk *ASL*", to find new opponents, and to gather the hottest news on the system from the guys on the Hill themselves! Rules questions are posted and discussed, which is very handy. Sometimes they are even commented on or resolved by Mac (aka GOD) via Rex. It's like being "plugged in" to a nationwide network of dedicated *ASL* players . . . because that's exactly what it is!

Here's a sampling of what's happening online as of this writing. There's an experiment in "double-blind" multi-player *ASL* just beginning, with six players, using the "Last Bid" scenario from *RED BARRICADES*. We are in the second round of our second annual AREA *ASL* tourney, utilizing a four-round Swiss system. Two members have undertaken a PBEM game to be used as an *At the Point* series replay, offered as a separate topic in the AH category. Many more games are happening online than just those in the tournament, and many of them are AREA-rated. Players take part in rule discussions in the section #2 bulletins, and Rex drops by rather often with news. Of late, some other "name" players have started arriving, like Eric Baker, Raymond Woloszyn, Marc Hanna and others.

GETTING STARTED

Hooking up to any BBS (Bulletin Board System) is easy. Using a modem, the computers could be hooked directly to each other or they can be connected to a "network", which is a computer system designed to allow other computers to link up and gather or exchange information. This network may be a huge system, like GENIE, or it may simply be a small "bulletin board" service designed to accommodate one user at any given time.

What do you need to join? Very simply, a computer and a modem, the device which allows your computer to "send" messages via the phone lines. What kind of computer? That's up to you. It does not have to be the newest, or the largest, or the nicest for this purpose. I employ many high powered PCs in the course of my day, but I've been using the same \$100 Atari computer for Email since 1983. In fact, I recently bought a used "spare" one for \$25! Any computer that works with a modem will work to put you online! Your best option is to also have some sort of word-processor program, so you can create and save your moves "offline", saving time (and in some cases, money).

The modem is a more specific concern. Most bulletin boards accept 300, 1200 and 2400 baud transmissions. (Don't get hung up on the numbers; just realize this is the speed your computer uses for data exchange and that both computers have to be set at the same speed to share data.) The key point here is that 1200 baud is four times faster than 300, and 2400 is twice as fast as that. Most GENIE telephone access lines accept any of these speeds. Other systems might not, however.

Modems have specific settings. You'll want to check your manual, but the standard setting is "8 bits, no parity, and half duplex" for GENIE. If you see "double letters" anytime you type something online, change your duplex setting (from "half" to "whole", or vice-versa).

Again, don't get hung up on all this technical jargon. Do you care that your car ignition opens a switch from your battery to turn on your starting motor, which attaches to your flywheel to spin your pistons to create a vacuum which will pull a fuel and oxygen mixture into a cylinder, etc.? No - all you care is if the car gets you where you're going. The same principle applies here. Once you've set the modem, sit back and enjoy the system.

Signing up to GENIE itself is simple. First, you need to discover the closest GENIE access number (in many regions and large cities, they have a local trunk line that ties into the network). Do this by dialing information for the nearest to you. [GENIE now has an 800 number for sign-up as well: 1-800-638-8369.]

After you connect, type "H" three times (do not hit enter/return). Then, when "U#=" appears, enter "XJMI1999,GENIE" and hit enter/return. After you are connected, they will take the information they need to allow you to become an immediate GENIE member. You need to specify that GE applies the bill to either VISA, MasterCard, or your personal checking account. Whichever you decide to use, have that account number ready.

After you are actually online, you can find our section easily. Type "M805;1" at the first prompt, and then join the Gamers Round-Table. After that, type "SET 21", which places you in the primary Avalon Hill category. Then "REA 2 LAST" will give you the last message in the *ASL* section; "REA 2 #=" will allow you to read a span of messages in that same section. But a "REA 2 ALL" will take at least a half hour, so use it carefully; this command brings you all the postings in the *ASL* topic. "REA 1 ALL" should net you my online message for negotiating through the system, if you need help. A "TOP" command will show you a listing of all the topics in the Avalon Hill section, and the number of messages in each. And if you have any trouble, type "H" for help . . . or leave me a note on topic #2 (type "REP 2" and follow the directions). Or you can leave Email directly at my address: "SHANGRI".

One last point before I go back to the electronic age. Don't overlook small private BBS in your own home town for great gaming opportunities. For over a year, I used a local "free" BBS to teach and GM ten different *DIPLOMACY* games. It was great, and on the side a new friend and I played *TRC* and *ASL* by Email. Without that inexpensive introduction, I might never have discovered what PBEM had to offer the wargamer.

PBEM has many different forms, but it's all wonderful! For news of the hobby and the publishers, for games against skilled and responsible opponents completed in a reasonable span of time, for airing your own views, for reviews of new products, for the camaraderie that makes this hobby so special, there is nothing to compare with it (save perhaps, the major gaming conventions). Hope to see you online soon!