REVIEWS: Hero Quest, Space Hulk, Fire Team, Star Hero, Space Time, GURPS Auto, Eastern Front Solitaire.

CLASSICS: Caesar at Alesia, Korean War, Wizard’s Quest,

DESIGN: Hero Quest, Excalibur, Fantasy Air Forces.
Steve Baker is an unlikely hero. Quiet, muscles the size and shape of a badly fed credit card, happily married and living in suburban London; he doesn't even own a sword. Yet if Milton Bradley have got their sums right (and they usually do) SB's brainchild will bring more people into fantasy gaming than any other product bar Basic D&D and possibly Talisman.

Why so? After an exclusive interview with Steve and marketing manager Simon Bamford the GRM team came away convinced that MB's new mass market fantasy board game Hero Quest has what it takes to break the mould, in this case the mould of hobby gamers going one way and family gamers going another. Heroquest excites us as gamers almost as much as it will excite its non-gaming target market.

But back to Steve. How does a hobby gamer work his way into such a position that business people sit up and take note when he makes suggestions? Steve started adult life working as a bank clerk. Alright, give the lad a break, someone has to do it. But as a keen games player real money just didn't have the lure of creds or gold pieces and after a year or so he joined Games Workshop as a shop manager looking after their Hammersmith branch. Here he cut his commercial games design teeth on Judge Dredd, Warhammer and other Workshop products before being lured away to join Milton Bradley as a project manager.

As a friend of Steve's I thought he had got a good break at the time, but meeting him a few months after joining MB was not quite so sure, as he seemed to have been given children's games as projects and not the fantasy or adult products that he had hoped to be able to develop there. The discovery that the Games Master series was developed in the US and no more new ones were planned merely confirmed the diagnosis. It looked like a typical case of Bright Young Man turning into Grey Company Man without so much as a saving throw. But no-one who has fought their way past seven mountain trolls with nothing but a broken toothpick and a Conjure Shoelace spell lets mere managers put him down and in a text book example of how mild exteriors with burning interiors can change the world from the inside (look at Attila the Hun...OK, don't look at Attila the Hun) Steve was slowly working on the Grey Suits (new D&D character class here I think) and the result was Hero Quest, Milton Bradley's biggest new product this Christmas.

"It was a long battle," comments Steve wryly, "It took about a year to persuade the management that fantasy has a wide and enduring appeal. It was a help that the Vice President of R&D was interested in fantasy, but every new product here gets the go ahead solely on its mass market appeal. We must sell a lot of games to cover our development and marketing cost. The achievement is not so much developing a fantasy game but developing one that everyone else here thinks will meet those targets!"

Another persuasive voice in the project's progress was Simon Bamford who joined MB just before Steve.

"I had actually played some Avalon Hill games and had found the Fighting Fantasy book concept interesting. We were aware of the mass market possibilities of fantasy" says Simon" I'm now pretty sure we have a product that we can market to the average 8-15 year old boy".

But enough of the marketblather, what about the product ...er game.

"I wanted to create a board game with strong elements of role-playing", explains Steve," Not for missionary reasons, it's just that this format gives the designer more opportunity for varied scenarios. It also gives the players the feeling that they are taking part in an adventure and our play-testing has shown that this is a very important element in its appeal".
The story behind Hero Quest, MB’s new fantasy board game.

Over the period of development about thirty playtest sessions have been organised with boys just being given the game and told to get on with it. The results of these were crucial in judging the complexity level that the age group could sustain. "When I came back to a group after two hours and found them making up their own scenarios I knew we were pretty much there," comments Steve.

How has the final product changed from his starting ideas? "It’s much simpler and faster. The original was closer to classic role-playing with character generation instead of ready made heroes, step by step rules learning in graded scenarios and had much less visual appeal. Mass market pressure has simplified it, but in a perverse sort of way that fits in with my own role-playing nowadays. I’ve gone through the rules (tweak stage and want minimum rules but maximum scope for imagination. That sort of philosophy helped me to cope with the mass market restrictions. But it was our co-operation with Games Workshop that taught us the importance of the visual and component elements”.

And here we come to one of the most interesting aspects of the project, the involvement of GW. Simon Bamford explains.

"This is MB’s first step into fantasy and we didn’t want to make mistakes, so we went to the leaders in hobby fantasy and together we have created a project that both companies can develop in their own ways."

GW have done most of the work to make Hero Quest look like it does. The board was created by Gary Chalk, the figures are recognisably Citadel and the cover is by Les Edwards. Workshop are to take HQ into the hobby market with advanced rules etc. while MB plan another scenarios book plus extra bits to go through the toy shop route. If things go well with HQ an SF game, HQ in space, was hinted at, but anything more hobby?

At this stage the conversation got diverted to MB’s other hobby products, the Games Master series of games. Shogun and Axis & Allies will continue to be available in the UK, plus Fortress America from retailers that import it from the US direct. I commented on their marketing philosophy of generating fantasy and wargames not aimed at hobby players (despite the fact that many hobby gamers end up buying them). With a good range of entry level products should we expect MB to start publishing hard core hobby material?

"No", says Bamford quite firmly, "It’s simply not mass market enough. We don’t see role-playing products being suited to our distribution patterns", meaning large high street stores and toyshops, and at the end of the day it is the toyshop route, not the hobby shops, that will make or break Hero Quest.

"It’s our biggest advertising spend this Christmas", explains Simon. "Over half a million starting in September. We’re really excited by the 30 second commercial, it’s one of the best we have done."

I personally can’t imagine that HQ will do anything but sell by the lorry load. With a price of around £20-25 on the high street, a brilliant ad and a mighty fine product I take my hat off to a major company who have taken the time to listen and learn about a genre before bailing it up. Er... let me re-phrase that. Had MB not done their homework and brought a fantasy Hungry Hippos to market they might well have put off a lot of potential recruits to the hobby. As it is, HQ looks set to fire the imagination of loads’ youngsters who hopefully will, in the due course of time, mature into responsible orc-slayers, demon slayers and Nazi trashers. Which is where we started..."
It’s not easy to overlook Hero Quest: the box is so large and has such an outstanding cover painting, but once in the hand, what then?

INSIDE

The good thing is that this box is heavier than you might expect, being packed to bursting point with components. It’s difficult to fit everything back in once you’ve opened it. Milton Bradley have a reputation for good value for money and this game does nothing to refute it.

The box contains a fold-out colour board, heavy cardboard counters and folding parts including a GM’s screen, two booklets, a pack of cards, six dice, a pad of character sheets and a number of sprues of plastic parts for furniture and thirty-five figures. Assembling these is quite a task but provides an excellent selection of 3D furniture and monsters for dungeons that any role-player would be pleased to own.

DUNGEON CRAWL

Each session is played as a typical early D&D dungeon crawl, a throwback to the days when role-playing consisted of kicking down the door, kill the monster, take the treasure. The board represents a dungeon, the secrets of which are known only to the Evil Wizard player (games-master) who has access to the Quest Book (scenarios booklet). Up to four other players each take one or more of the prepared characters, Wizard, Elf, Dwarf and Barbarian; and together they set off into the dungeon on some or other mission.

As they explore the GM lays out the rooms and monsters they encounter until the whole dungeon has been filled out, and all the monsters filled in! This leads to the gradual construction of a layout complete with doors, tables, weapon racks and treasure chests, all in glorious 3D.

Play passes to each player in turn. His character gets a move equal to the throw of two six-sided dice, followed by an action. The only possible actions are to fight if next to an enemy, or search for either traps, treasure or secret passages, if the room has no enemies left in it.

This makes it possible for a heroic fighter to charge in and kill off the denizen of a room, only for another player to move in after and take the treasure. Often games degenerate into Paranoia-style back-stabbing sessions as each player tries to get the largest portion of the loot. Once all the characters have moved the GM moves his active pieces the distance stated on the appropriate card and attacks with them.

COMBAT

The combat system is extraordinarily simple. Each character or enemy has four attributes: Attack Dice, Defence Dice, Body Points and Mind Points. Four special dice marked with three skulls, two Good shields and one Evil shield are included in the game.

In combat the attacker rolls his attack dice trying to get skulls to hit, then the defender rolls his defence dice trying to get the appropriate shields. Hits not stopped by the correct shield are counted against body points, when you reach zero body you are dead.

Almost all monsters only have one body point, as opposed to four for even the weakest player character, so it’s usually easy to kill them. This prevents fights from lasting too long and means that the GM must try and kill the player characters by a process of attrition. Mind points are used to defend against spells but are usually unimportant as there are so few monsters with magic.

MAGIC

Magic is just as simple. There are three spell cards for each of four schools of elemental magic. Each spell card allows its spell to be cast once, with the effect explained on the card. Spells are either offensive (Ball of Fire), defensive (Veil of Mist) or healing.

The characters have slightly differing capabilities. The Barbarian is your
archetypal fantasy thug, no brain but lots of muscle, he gets three dice in attack and eight body points.

The Wizard is the direct opposite, he only has one attack die and four body points but holds three sets of spell cards. The Dwarf is an average warrior, with two dice of attack and seven body, but has the special ability to remove traps. Finally the Elf is an all-rounder with two dice of attack, six body and one set of spell cards. All player characters have two dice of defence.

**EXPANSION**

This basic core is expanded by the inclusion of simple character advancement rules. You can use the gold won in combat to buy equipment, such as armour and weapons to improve your characters’ attack and defence rolls, and after completing three quests your character becomes a champion, meaning the King grants him a one-time award of five hundred gold pieces.

So we have a picture of a very simple (perhaps laughably so for many readers) role-playing game played on a board. So what’s so great about it? I’m not going to try and tell you it’s a fantastic set of rules, but of course it’s not meant to be. It’s intended for average 9-11 year olds. It’ll do for the occasional quick, fun game and especially when you want to play with non-gamers.

**NEW PLAYERS**

This makes it an excellent way to recruit non-gaming friends into the fantasy hobby. There are two great plusses though; firstly the components are great, excellent plastic figures and furniture, ideal for use in your own games; secondly, it’s so easy to adapt the system and add your own, more complex rules. Our GM has already started improving the magic system and experience rules after only a few games.

My only complaint about Hero Quest is that the standard dungeon board is rather limiting. Why not use a system with floorplans of separate rooms and corridors to enable much more varied dungeons to be built? But what’s this in July’s White Dwarf? Advanced Hero Quest, featuring exactly this type of system. We can expect a continuous series of expansion sets and add-packs for Hero Quest, from both MB and GW, over the next couple of years, which is no bad thing.

If you liked Talisman this is the next game you should buy. Even if you didn’t like Talisman, try and play Hero Quest at least once, it’s something every fantasy gamer probably should own.

**HERO QUEST**

*Publisher: Milton Bradley*  
*Designer: Steve Baker*  
*Price: £25*

**Complexity:** Introductory  
**Skill Ratio:** 30%  
**Interaction:** High  
**Playing Time:** 1 - 2 Hours  
**Number of Players:** 2-5-5

Reviewed by Graham Carr.

Editor’s note: I think this review reflects our view in the office quite nicely. Experienced gamers should see HQ as a gaming kit as much as a ready made game. The urge to add rules is irresistible and is as much fun as the game itself.