Keeps are very useful, in that a leader need not be presented with the armies in a keep.

Middle Sea is a game that flows very smoothly. Five is the optimum number of players, and an average game will take six hours to complete. The rules can be learned in less than one hour if explained verbally by a member of the group who has read them beforehand. *Middle Sea* does suffer from incomplete playtesting, and a few games will probably result in certain adjustments to the rules. It is suggested that the naval system be modified by the ambitious, and that four-star leader be only able to "hold" fifteen armies, rather than eighteen. These changes serve to further enhance and balance an already eminently enjoyable power politics game.

The fantasy-oriented Chaosium presents us with *Raiders and Traders,* a game of conquest and intrigue in Bronze Age Greece. The design is by Donald Dupont, whose meticulous research and love for the period is apparent (he also designed *Troy,* based on the number one bestselling war epic by Homer, *The Iliad*). The Chaosium art staff has embellished the game-map with their usual superb craftsmanship, though here it interferes slightly with the ease of play. The zip-lock bag also contains thin die-cut counters representing the standard paraphernalia for a state against state diplomatic game, about fifty cards, and a rules plus extensive background booklet.

Raiders and Traders has a tremendous superficial resemblance to *Middle Sea,* though in play, it is slightly different. The game is fun, but not engrossingly so. Where *Middle Sea* relies on design mechanics, *Raiders and Traders* expects the player to appreciate the carefully laid-out lore of Greece. The designer and the Chaosium present a quick course in ancient Greece, and the game may be worth the price for the information contained.

Raiders and Traders does contain random events, which are true to the myths and beliefs of the period. A player can consult the Oracle at Delphi, or any of her poorer sisters elsewhere. Advanced rules allow for the introduction of the Hellenic gods, which this writer heartily applauds. The game even has a "personal" touch, in which princes can carry off princesses or force them into marriage, and players determine the fertility or lack thereof of their royalty. This facet of play should not get too personal, for a male opponent may resort to violence when he is called "an impotent old bugger" after a few bad die-rolls.

The combat systems for *Raiders and Traders* are worked out very nicely. The land and naval system are very similar, but provisions have been made for the obvious aberrations. The stated purpose of the game is not to fight it out (though invariably it comes down to just that), but to explore the other systems.

The diplomatic and commerce rules invest the game with a period flavor. Instead of just stomping on other states' armies when a player's army gets strong, negotiation can be conducted. Neutral countries can become signatories to treaties, which allows the allying player to move his units through that country and help in its defense against another player's forces. The commerce aspect of the game allows players to risk capital on trade, which will become necessary to support military forces.

Raiders and Traders is a worthy addition to the omnivorous or Grecophile gamer's collection, but will not hold up well to repeated playings. It seems to work best with four to five players, and can be played in about five hours. There are some good ideas in the design here that should be used with a stronger supporting cast of rules.

The Orient is currently in vogue, with particular emphasis on the land of Nippon (Japan to those of the Occident). So it should be no surprise that Heritage unveiled *Samurai* at the recent Origins. The game's antecedent is clearly *Kingmaker* all along the line. Designer Dan Campagna seems to have grafted feudal Japanese culture directly onto its predecessor. Unfortunately, aside from suffering from lack of originality (which is no great sin in itself), the design neglects to transplant two key aspects of *Kingmaker,* which results in a rather boring and predictable game.

One of the keys to *Kingmaker* is the card play amongst players. A tremendous number of options are available to someone with a large, hidden hand—indeed, that player will often prove to be the kingmaker of the title by playing a series of influential cards in rapid succession at a critical juncture. Another important element is the fluidity of play—an important noble in a player's entourage can be summoned away from the center of action to the boondocks of England. Players will risk this because the rewards of position (such as Warden of the Northern Marches) are worth the dangers involved. In *Samurai,* players are encouraged to play as safely as possible, and cards are not part of the package.

There is the obligatory period game mechanics, such as samurai ratings for the individual leaders and ninja (Japanese assassins). These touches would seem most appropriate in a good game, but seem frivolous and sometimes silly in a game destitute of play value. All of the games I have played or have watched have resulted in the strong player holing up at the virtually impregnable Yedo or Kyoto Castle, and then sallying out when the other players prevailed upon him to be a good sport. The only other choice is concession, as the game has a fixed time limit and a player need only have the title of Shogun for one of his lords to win. Do not be deceived by the good art and research; this game is definitely a loser.

The final entry in the Great Origins Diplomatic Game Derby is Creative Wargame Workshop's *Junta.* This is an intriguing and enjoyable game. Designer Vincent Tsao, who escaped SPI during a Friday night playtest session years ago, puts the player in the role of a conspirator hoping to become El Presidente for Life. The problem becomes preserving the life, not gaining the position. As I have only watched the game being played, and read the rules, I will be brief in my comments.

Almost everything one would expect in a Latin American revolution game is here. Assassinations are attempted regularly, but only succeed if the player's character is caught at the right location—his bank, party headquarters, his mistress' house (presumably *in flagrante delecto*). A generalissimo will attempt to pad his Swiss bank account, gain offices which are both a seat of power and unobtrusive (no mean feat!) and make the army loyal to him alone. This game is definitely best with five players, though there are provisions for "dummy" players if enough cannot be mustered. This may very well be the "sleeper" from the last convention.

The current outlook sees no sign of the slew of diplomatic games abating. I believe this is a good sign, as there is still much ground to be covered in this area. Since it is easier to design a diplomatic game than the usually much more complex wargames, this bodes well for the introduction of new design talent, and perhaps can teach some veteran designers that complexity does not necessarily make a better game. Future efforts need not be as simple as the current designs; Whitley Streiber's *1480* and SPI's *Hundred Years War* (should it ever see the light at the end of the tunnel) can provide a real challenge for the dedicated gamer. I hope I can report as much growth in this genre next year as I did this year.

Middle Sea, from Fantasy Games Unlimited Inc., P.O. Box 182, Roslyn, N.Y. 11576 $20.00
Raiders and Traders, from the Chaosium, P.O. Box 3602, Albany, CA 94706 $12.00 (?)
Samurai, from Heritage Models, Inc., 9840 Monroe Drive, Dallas, TX 75220 $13.95
Junta, from Creative Wargames Workshop, 330 E. 6th St., Suite 1 E, New York, N.Y. 10003 $9.95

Notes from the SPIRIT World

Important: When sending in a SPIRIT Profile, please print your Customer Code in the upper left hand corner on the form. If you don't have a Customer Code, please note that you don't on the form. This will aid us in processing your form. Thank you.

Eric Goldberg is still looking for blindtesters for *Against Four Worlds,* a new SF game, depicting an attack on Earth by four alien races. The game will utilize a revolutionary strategic movement system. Combat between individual ships will take place on a display, using a modified *BattleFleet Mars* system. Eric will be sending out blindtests in December.

Eric Smith is looking for Wargaming Groups to blindtest *Terrible Swift Sword* system games now being done by SPI. The games currently being done are *Cedar Mountain* and *Pea Ridge.*

We are currently compiling research data for *Battle Over Britain* (attention: John Butterfield) and *Naval War* (attention: Joe Balkoski). We are also compiling names of interested blindtesters for the Victory in the West (nee "Normandy to the Rhine") Quad series (attention: Ajax Buccini).

Joe Perez